

THE THIN MAN

How Steve Buscemi became an indie icon.

BY JOHN LAHR

Steve Buscemi doesn't loom into view. He's not a looming kind of guy. On an overcast day in June, as I waited on the designated corner of Union Square to meet him for the first time, I called his assistant. "He's late," I said. "Where is he?" Buscemi, it turned out, was standing thirty feet away from me. Round-shouldered and wafer-thin, in a gray work shirt, black chinos, and a weathered denim jacket, with a baseball cap pulled tightly over his forehead, he was virtually invisible in the crowd.

Five feet nine and forty-seven years old, Buscemi could be almost anybody—or everybody. Give him some tattoos and a mane of shaggy hair, and he's the squirt-gun-toting heavy-metal doofus in "Airheads" (1994); put him in a blue sequined dress, a red pageboy wig, and high heels, and he's the world-weary transvestite taxi-dancer in "Somebody to Love" (1994); slick back his hair and give him a pair of brown loafers, like the ones he wore as Tony Blundetto in "The Sopranos," and he has the gaunt, retro lounge-lizard look of the director John Waters. (In fact, the likeness is so uncanny that Waters used Buscemi's image on his Christmas card one year.)

Nothing about Buscemi's physical presence suggests the poetic lineaments of masculine film glamour. He is pale, almost pallid—as if he'd been reared in a mushroom cellar. In a certain light, he can look cadaverous. His eyes are large and bulgy, with a hint of melancholy. When he smiles, his mouth displays a shantytown of uneven, uncapped teeth. And yet that unprepossessing ordinariness is what makes Buscemi captivating as a performer. It gives him the unmistakable stamp of the authentic, and it helps to explain his emergence over the past two decades as an icon of independent films. (Buscemi himself understands the value of his rumpled looks. When his dentist suggested fixing his teeth, he told her, "You're going to kill

my livelihood if you do that.") "Steve is the little guy," says the director Jim Jarmusch, who cast Buscemi in his 1989 film "Mystery Train." "In the characters he plays and in his own life, he's representing that part of us all that's not on top of the world."

When Buscemi and I finally found each other in Union Square, I raised the issue of lunch. There are more than twenty restaurants on Union Square, many of them excellent. Buscemi pondered for a moment, then chose the coffee shop in front of us ("bad food and worse service," one review says). "Appetite" is not a word that comes to mind in relation to Buscemi. His boniness carries with it a hint of negativity, a kind of rejection of the world. (In the course of our two-hour lunch, he didn't manage to finish a grilled cheese sandwich.) Likewise, although Buscemi has one of the most famous faces in modern cinema, he's not afflicted with a star's self-consciousness. He talks, but he also listens; he's not watching himself go by, and he doesn't carry himself with the expectation of being seen. As a result, he often isn't. He sat in a booth at the busy coffee shop for close to an hour before someone spotted him. ("You were great in 'Desperado'—one of my favorite movies of all time." "Thank you," Buscemi said. "Appreciate it.")

Onscreen or off, Buscemi is never ostentatious. Still, with his simplicity and restraint—an emotional as well as a physical minimalism—he manufactures a truthfulness that always surprises. At lunch, as he tentatively told the story of his working-class upbringing (his father was a sanitation worker, his mother a hostess at Howard Johnson's), he cast an unexpected light on his own edgy inhibition. We were talking about the terror he'd felt at nineteen, when he first thought of moving from Long Island to Manhattan to try to be an actor. What held him back, he said, was "this feeling

that you don't deserve to be heard, that you don't really have anything to say or a point of view that's interesting, because you haven't been properly educated. I was very intimidated, basically feeling culturally inferior."

When Buscemi acts, his thinness and his slouch—which seem a product of that original shame—only heighten his odd presence, which is a topic of conversation in many of the seventy-eight movies he's made since his first major role, in "Parting Glances," in 1986. In Joel and Ethan Coen's "Fargo" (1996), the other characters repeatedly make fun of Buscemi's Carl Showalter, a dopey kidnapper turned killer. When Frances McDormand's beady-eyed, homespun policewoman presses a hooker for a detailed description of Showalter, whom she has recently bedded, all the girl can say is "The little guy was kinda funny-lookin'... He wasn't circumcised... Funny-lookin' more than most people, even."

Buscemi's persona is understated, opaque, bewildered, ironical. "You seem a little stoned. What are you on?" someone says to his character in Terry Zwigoff's "Ghost World" (2000). He is in the hospital after having been betrayed, humiliated, and wrestled to the ground in a grocery store. "High on life," he replies. "Steve's a visitor in the world," the director Alexandre Rockwell, who has worked with Buscemi on five films, said. "His body, his face—everything around him is whirling, but you always feel in Steve a stillness, almost a calm." This stillness plays variously as anxiety, disconnection, and threat. Sometimes, a single character draws all three into a sort of trifecta of tension, like the silent hit man Mr. Shhh, in "Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead" (1995). Buscemi's look is deadbeat; his sense of humor is downbeat. He can play loss for laughs—in "The Impostors" (1998) he was



All Buscemi's characters are stuck in a purgatory from which they may or may not escape. Photograph by Martin Schoeller.

Happy Franks, a suicidal cabaret singer sobbing his way through “The Nearness of You”—or he can play it for real.

In his screenwriting and directorial feature debut, “Trees Lounge” (1996), Buscemi starred as Tommy, a fictionalized version of himself. Tommy, Buscemi said, “is truly directionless.” (“A story about one man’s search . . . for who knows what” was the movie’s promotional slug.) “Any true passions he has—anything artistic—are buried so deep he would never allow himself that.” The movie was shot on the bland suburban streets of Valley Stream, Long Island, where Buscemi lived as a teen-ager. (It takes its name from one of the bars that were the hub of his existence after he graduated from high school.) At one point in the film, Tommy, after a dalliance with his friend’s seventeen-year-old daughter, is chased around a softball diamond by the irate father wielding a baseball bat. He clammers up the backstop. For a moment, terrified, exhausted, hanging by his fingertips, he is splayed against the fence like a monkey in a cage—a perfect visual metaphor for the suspended

animation of Buscemi’s hapless, love-lorn youth. (“I remember kissing a girl at a party and she threw up on my shoes,” Buscemi said of his teen-age years.)

For an actor, the challenge is to make the ordinary look interesting. Buscemi is a master at this sleight of hand. “I sort of get this intuitive feeling about what the character is, or how he talks, or how he says his lines,” he explained. “I feel that my impulses are really all I have.” In the penultimate scene of “Trees Lounge,” after finally being throttled by his furious friend, Tommy ends up at the hospital, where his ex-girlfriend has just given birth to a child that may or may not be his. His face is discolored from his beating and his lip is split. He starts out with some friendly teasing about the baby—“He’s a little old man. Could they take some of the wrinkles out?”—and builds to a painful revelation of his own confused desires. “I don’t know what I’m doin’,” he tells his ex-girlfriend. “I just feel like . . . I don’t know what I feel. I don’t feel anything. Except lost.” Tommy is looking for salvation. “Look, I don’t care if the baby’s not mine,” he

says, finally. The moment is at once droll and desperate. Buscemi plays it entirely with his eyes, which are pleading at first, and then, when he is rebuffed, fill with sadness. “Would you mind if I just sit here for a while?” Tommy asks. As he sits, Buscemi allows himself to do nothing but live in the mournful bewilderment of the character, whom he understands all too well.

These days, Buscemi lives with his wife, the artist Jo Andres, and their fourteen-year-old son, Lucian, in a three-story brownstone in Park Slope, Brooklyn. One bright morning last fall, Buscemi and I climbed into his gray Volkswagen station wagon and drove five miles, to East New York, where he spent his early years. “We’re going to a different neighborhood,” he said, with characteristic understatement. Buscemi is a slow driver—a point of some contention in his family and the subject of much amusement among his friends—but in only a few minutes the landscape around us changed dramatically. “This is one of the more



“Relax, Ashwell. We don’t say ‘Ka-ching’ until the deal is signed.”

neglected neighborhoods,” he said as we rolled up Liberty Avenue, where he used to play punchball and which was now littered with glass and garbage. As we got out of the car, a posse of tattooed Latino girls in toreador pants passed by. There were iron grates on the doors of fenced-in one-story houses, yapping dogs patrolling the small swards of green, and barbed wire around St. Michael’s Church, where the jug-eared and crewcut young Buscemi had sung in the choir and taken his First Communion. “Tough kids, tough women,” Buscemi said of his old stomping ground. “There’s a toughness that I admire, even though I don’t feel like a tough guy.” He added, “I was a timid kid. I was not getting into scrapes. I lived in fear of either being beaten up by tougher kids or yelled at by the nuns.” The church was locked; part of the playground where Buscemi had flipped cards was now a parking lot. But his first home stood more or less as it had been when he was growing up. “This is it,” he said, pointing to a modest tan building on Liberty Avenue.

The house had been owned by Buscemi’s grandmother and occupied by her five children and their families. Buscemi’s family lived in an attached apartment. His parents, John and Dorothy, slept on a foldout sofa in the living room; Steve and his brothers—Jon, Michael, and Ken—slept in the only bedroom, and played with their cousins in the enclosed back yard. “I wasn’t allowed to cross the street, except when I went to school,” Buscemi said. Still, he wasn’t entirely protected. At the age of four, he was hit by a bus and fractured his skull. At eight, he was knocked down by a car. He had a persistent nightmare: “My fingers are in a chain-link fence and a dog on the other side is coming at me. I can’t free my fingers in time, and the dog always gets my hand.” It was his parents’ constant arguments, however, that haunted his waking life. “The Honey-mooners”—when I was a kid, that was a documentary to me,” he says. (He keeps a still photograph from the show on his kitchen counter.) “Me and her, we used to go at it,” Buscemi’s father said of himself and his wife, explaining that he has what he calls “the Buscemi temper.” “When Steven plays a psychopath, he’s drawing from my brother and my-

self. Sometimes you just snap. Then you don’t care about nothing.” “I was really a Catholic,” Buscemi said. “A good boy. I thought ‘shut up’ was a bad word. Whenever my parents would curse, I’d make the sign of the cross, because I thought they would go to Hell. I was concerned for their souls.”

As a child, Buscemi was always able to keep himself entertained. “I used to draw a lot, keep a journal, make up cartoons,” he said. “For a while, I wanted to be a ventriloquist. For my sixth birthday, I remember asking for a Jerry Mahoney doll—the best birthday present I ever got, hands down.” Buscemi took the dummy to school and used it “to make fun of the teacher and get away with it.” “That was my first taste of standup,” he said. Most of his performing, however, was done for his family—telling jokes and improvising sketches and magic tricks. Both of Buscemi’s parents were interested in show business. (John’s father, Giuseppe, had been a singing waiter in Coney Island; Dorothy’s father, Harry Wilson, had been a projectionist, and reputedly worked the spotlight for the Dolly Sisters, a famous vaudeville act.) And entertaining was Buscemi’s way of winning his father’s respect. “I pushed him,” John said. “I’d say, ‘Hey, Steve, come here.’ He would tell jokes. . . . I’d put him right in the center of the table. As soon as I put him up, everybody would laugh.”

After serving in Korea, John had taken advantage of the G.I. Bill to study to be a TV cameraman and lighting technician. Television was in its infancy then; stations were starting up across the country, and John got a job offer in Virginia, but Dorothy didn’t want to leave Brooklyn. He gave up the opportunity, and then he floundered. “By the time I was thirty-one, I found myself going nowhere in life,” he says. All that he retained of his former ambition was a Super 8 camera, which he used to record his family life. Buscemi recalls appearing as the bad guy in a home-movie version of “Superman” when he was seven. “I loved performing in front of the camera,” he says. “I remember when my dad developed the film and projected it for the first time. It was so exciting for me to see that, to get his approval. I remember asking my dad—this is embarrassing to admit—I was the best, right?”

In 1966, when Buscemi was eight, the

family moved from East New York to a handyman’s special, a two-story house that looked like a farmhouse, in Valley Stream. “Valley Stream was like Hollywood,” Buscemi’s father said. “Everything was serene. This was coming home to Heaven.” His son disagreed. Nowadays, the house—where John and Dorothy still live—feels spruce and bright; in the years when Buscemi was living there and sharing the attic with his brother Jon, visiting friends found the place cramped and oppressive. Buscemi lay in bed at night longing to escape. “I remember feeling like if I don’t figure out a way to become an actor I don’t know how I’ll be able to live,” he said. “At the same time, it seemed utterly impossible.” Until he saw “Grease” on Broadway as part of his high-school prom weekend, Buscemi had never been to the theatre. (He was in his twenties when he saw his first serious play—the Wooster Group’s version of Arthur Miller’s “The Crucible.”) He participated in a few high-school productions, but his awareness of his own talent came from his ability to entertain his friends. A member of the varsity soccer and wrestling teams, as well as the jock fraternity Alpha Omega Theta, Buscemi was, by his own account, “a bit of a wise-ass, a troublemaker.” He and his friends threw eggs at the neighborhood auxiliary police, and once he put his skin-iness to use by slipping through the back window of a bar to hand out cases of beer.

After he graduated from high school, however, Buscemi lost his focus. “It was like the end of the world,” his father said. “I never seen a kid who didn’t want to see school come to an end.” The idea of going to college was not encouraged in the Buscemi household, but Steve had nothing else to hope for. He was weighed down by the stultifying sense that “this is it—there’s not much gonna go on in my life.” John counselled his boys to take the civil-service exam, which could lead to a lifetime of steady paychecks. They did as they were told. (Jon now works for a cable company, and Ken is a track worker for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority; Michael is an actor.) While he was waiting for his name to come up on the civil-service roster, Buscemi pumped gas at the local Getty station and drove an ice-cream truck. These were the days when he spent six or seven

hours a night in bars. With Peter Frampton, Pink Floyd, and Led Zeppelin on the jukebox, and a beer or a tequila sunrise in his hand, Buscemi tuned out. "It was just a feeling of nothingness, a void," he said. That void applied to women as well. "I was not lucky at all—like zero," he said, making a circle with his tapered thumb and forefinger. "I got along very well with women. I was a good listener. They saw me more as a brother, somebody they could confide in. I was really shy sexually. I just couldn't get to a place where I felt comfortable enough, where performance anxiety wasn't a big issue."

Eighteen months after finishing high school, Buscemi began talking about buying a van and driving to Hollywood. His father, wanting to keep him closer to home, reminded him that the city owed him six thousand dollars, from a settlement after his childhood bus accident. "You can use that money before you're twenty-one, as long as you use it for school," John said. "What are you getting at?" Buscemi asked. "You ever think to go to acting school?" John replied. Buscemi was stunned. "Steve, I don't want you to *become* an actor," his father explained. "But at least it'll give you some kind of direction. It'll be like finishing school. They'll polish you down." Buscemi didn't hesitate for long. In 1977, he interviewed at the Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute.

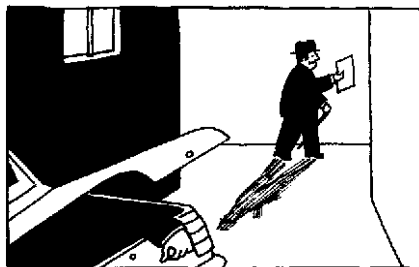
Buscemi had no artistic vocabulary, no knowledge of dramatic literature, no confidence, and no experience. Show business, as he told me, was a mystery to him. He also had nothing to lose. "The alternative was worse," he said. "Existing instead of living." "He was one of those people that when he walks in you wonder, Why does he want to be an actor?" Buscemi's teacher John Strasberg said of his student. "He looked very sweet. He was extremely quiet. For the longest time, I didn't know what he wanted to do, because his work was relatively inexpressive. In the beginning, if anything was going on, I couldn't see it."

For a year, Buscemi commuted the fifteen miles to Manhattan. Then he found a hundred-dollar-a-month walkup on Avenue A, where a wooden panel on top of the bathtub served as his

dining-room table. "I thought, What am I doing? I'm fooling myself. I'm going to be eaten alive by this city," he said. "I remember one Valley Stream friend of mine saying, 'How can you live there? It's filthy, it's full of faggots.' I started to feel really cut off from some of my friends. . . . And then I just developed an attitude: See what happens. You have to get over the fear of whether or not you belong." Eventually, the burgeoning East Village art scene became Buscemi's university. "I felt so ignorant for so long," he said. "I had a lot of catching up to do."

By day, Buscemi moved furniture and took acting lessons; by night, he tried his hand at standup comedy, telling self-deprecating jokes about his looks and his day job. In those days, Buscemi's greatest ambition was to be in a sitcom. He was working hard, but, he confessed, not "burning up the comedy scene." Nonetheless, he got laughs—enough to pass the audition at New York's biggest comedy venue, the Improv, where he worked the same room, though not the same time slots, as Larry David, Jerry Seinfeld, and Gilbert Gottfried. ("By the time I got on, there were only a couple of people in the audience," he said.) Buscemi discovered that he liked the attention but not the competitive isolation of the comic. "When you're doing standup, you can't share that with anybody," he says. "When you're acting, you're sharing it with an audience, but also with the people onstage. That's very important to me." His problem, he said, was "I didn't have my own thing. I was not defined as a comedian or as a person. . . . When I was playing a character, I felt more comfortable within myself."

The challenges of comedy and of characterization came together for Buscemi around 1982, in the form of Mark Boone, Jr., who was working as a bartender at the Red Bar in the East Vil-



lage. In eight years of collaboration as the surreal performance duo Steve and Mark, Buscemi and Boone gained an avid following. Their form of humor was, according to Jarmusch, "somewhere between avant-garde theatre and comedy." Buscemi was nervous and mild-mannered, with, according to Boone, "an insane desire not to be beat"; Boone, despite his surly and forthright swagger, was more laid-back. Boone was inspired but wayward; Buscemi was all business. Their comic chemistry made use of their differences. "A lot of our pieces were about miscommunication or envy," Buscemi says.

Their artistic battles were usually fought at Veselka, a Ukrainian coffee shop on Second Avenue, where they met to work up material for their sketches, which dealt with situations such as competing panhandlers and bickering Hare Krishnas. "A lot of things in the beginning came from eavesdropping on something that somebody in the next booth would be saying," Boone says. In "Yap Thaw," their finest performance piece, Steve and Mark, dressed in gray and wearing socks on their hands, came onstage as dogs—waking, drinking, digging, barking, biting, fighting—then mutated into men. The scene exploited the concentration, aggression, and uncertainty out of which the two performers made drama. It won them their first notice in the *Times*: "An intellectual East Village variant of the classic male comedy teams. . . . A satisfyingly Beckettian comic turn."

Communication between the two actors, though, was often difficult. "I was always getting my aggression out on Boone," Buscemi said. "His timing was so different from mine. I would be upset with him for not coming in sooner with his line. He'd get upset with me for anticipating it." Nonetheless, at Folk City, a popular music venue in the Village, their act went over so well that they were allowed to write, cast, and stage forty minutes of material every week for fifteen weeks. "We were sick to death of each other at the end," Boone says. "The last three things we did were just about fighting." Still, the act was a laboratory from which Buscemi emerged with newfound cunning and concentration. "I really learned so much from Mark about timing and about how not to go

for the obvious laugh," Buscemi said. "It's O.K. to leave the audience in the dark for a little bit and let it unfold—let the audience do some work."

Buscemi met Jo Andres at about the same time he met Boone. Andres had known about him months before he spotted her, on the block of East Tenth Street between Avenue A and First, where they both lived. One night in late 1983, Andres had been walking through the East Village with her friend Tom Murrin, who called himself the Alien Comic. (Buscemi subsequently made a short film about him, "Luna Macaroni.") They spotted a poster for Steve and Mark. "See that guy?" Andres said, pointing to Buscemi. "Someday I'm gonna find that guy and snag him."

Nowadays, because of Buscemi's fame, Andres jokingly refers to herself as "the president of the Chopped Liver Club." When the couple first met, however, she was the one with the reputation. She was nearly thirty; he was twenty-six. She was an innovative choreographer in the flourishing downtown art scene, and she had made experimental movies, toured Europe, earned grants, and got reviews. "I was totally fascinated by her—the way she looked, the way she smiled," Buscemi said. "Then to find out that she was this talented person. . . . Her work was mysterious and fascinating to me."

With Andres as his companion and his guide, Buscemi found himself at the center of one of the golden periods of American experimental performance. He appeared in a few of Andres's dance pieces and in the avant-garde plays of John Jesurun, including a thirty-six-episode cult hit, "Chang in a Void Moon," at the Pyramid Club. He acted with the Wooster Group at the Performing Garage, in SoHo. The Limbo Lounge, the Pyramid Club, King Tut's Wah Wah Hut, Club 57, Darinka, and the Red Bar were the landmarks of his new life. Buscemi's circle of acquaintances included the directors Jarmusch, Rockwell, Eric Mitchell, Elizabeth LeCompte, Tom DiCillo, and Sara Driver; the actors Spalding Gray, Willem Dafoe, Richard Edson, Eszter Balint, Ron Vawter, and Black-Eyed Susan; the performance artists Rockets Redglare, John Kelly, and Frank Maya; the visual artists Julian



"If he can't get Yard of the Month, he'd rather just burn it."

Schnabel and George Condo; the dancers Anne Iobst, Lucy Sexton, and Mimi Goese; and the musical act They Might Be Giants.

One night in 1984, an eleven-o'clock show at the Limbo Lounge featuring Tom Murrin and Iobst and Sexton's post-punk feminist dancing duo, Dance-noise, was cancelled because of complaints from the neighbors about a heavy-metal band that had played earlier. The performers and the audience were milling around outside the club, wondering what to do, when Buscemi said, "Why don't you do the show at my apartment?" "Thirty or more people, and all our props, walked to Steve's house," Murrin says. "Dancenoise and I performed right there in Steve's front room. Dancenoise's shows often ended in a cascade of blood, and my shows were pretty messy, too." Murrin continues, "I remember telling him how generous I thought he was. He said, 'Heck, I wanted to see the shows.' Later, at his apartment, I noticed a splotch of red on the wall. I said, 'What's this?' He said,

'Dancenoise blood.' It was a memorable night, and he didn't want to clean it off."

In 1980, after his name came up on the civil-service list, Buscemi accepted a job as a probationer with Engine Company 55, in Little Italy. For fear of becoming the butt of his fellow-firemen's wisecracks, he said nothing about his acting. "I thought they would think it was less than a manly thing to do," he says. Once the other firefighters figured out his secret passion, however, they supported it. "They forced me to perform at parties," Buscemi said. They also attended his shows. His avant-garde friends thought his regular job and paycheck were similarly glamorous.

Buscemi's schedule of performing and firefighting was exhausting. He wanted to go into show business full time, but he worried that it was too much of a risk. He had no agent, no connections to mainstream entertainment, and no conventional good looks. "Steve's face originally was a face that nobody wanted to

look at,” Jesurun said. “Back then, it was Rob Lowe all the way. People would say to me, ‘You gotta get somebody technically handsome up there.’” Finally, in the fall of 1984, Buscemi took a three-month leave of absence from the Fire Department, which soon extended to a year. He was into his second year of leave, waiting tables at King Tut’s Wah Wah Hut, when a friend from the firehouse came in and asked him how he was doing. “I said, ‘I’ve got a film coming out, I’m gonna be doing a play,’” Buscemi said. “He went back and told everybody I was miserable and was just putting up a front.” The men of Engine Company 55 took it upon themselves to prepare the paperwork for Buscemi to rejoin them. “Guys, I love that you did this for me,” Buscemi said. “But I’m not coming back.”

In 1986, Buscemi appeared as a rock singer dying of AIDS in Bill Sherwood’s “Parting Glances.” The low-budget independent film, which now feels creaky and caricatured, was one of the first movies to deal with the AIDS crisis. “He took that part at a time when a lot of straight actors would never take a gay part,” Jesurun said. When “Parting Glances” was released, the *Times* dismissed it as “a parade of homosexual stereotypes” but singled out Buscemi’s “powerfully anarchic presence.” With the review in hand, Murrin rushed into King Tut’s Wah Wah Hut. “I was telling Jo

how I thought this would be a big break for Steve—a lot of other directors would be noticing him, he was going to get more movie roles,” Murrin said. “She said, ‘Well, good, because he’s a better actor than he is a waiter.’”

In the next three years, Buscemi made fourteen movies; by the mid-nineties, the number had risen to forty-two. “All of a sudden, it was like there was a Steve Buscemi tax in Hollywood,” Jarmusch said. “It was like, ‘You want to make a film? You must have Steve.’”

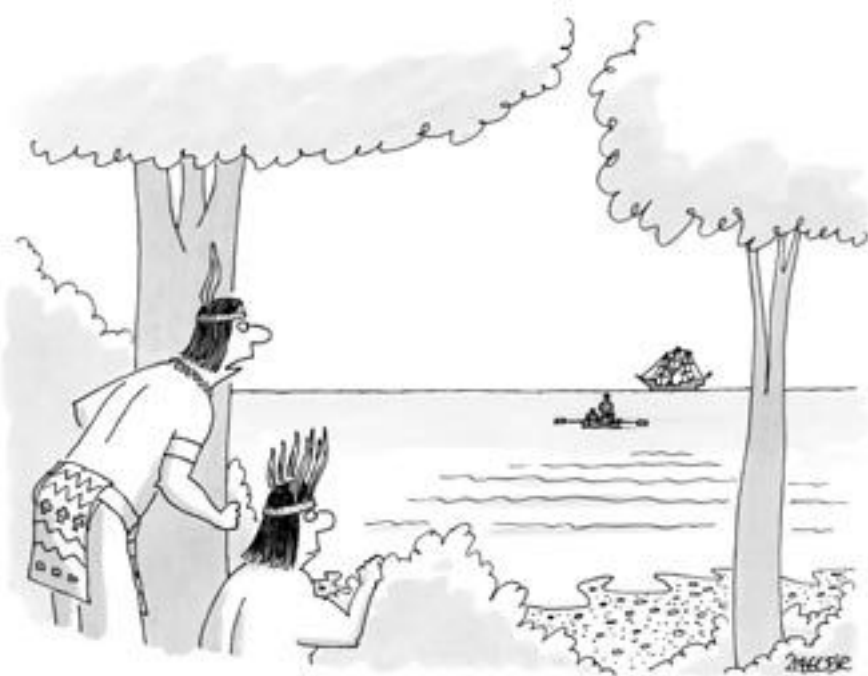
It wasn’t Buscemi’s bug-eyed stare or his sallow face or his threatening concentration that got him the part of Mr. Pink, the most lethal bad tipper in film history, in Quentin Tarantino’s “Reservoir Dogs” (1992); it was his slick black hair on an audition tape for a Neil Simon comedy. According to Buscemi, Tarantino hired him because he thought he looked like a criminal. Mr. Pink was Buscemi’s calling card to the mainstream. “It was the first time the West Coast knew who I was,” he said.

The complexity that Buscemi brings to his bad guys has as much to do with the humanity he exudes as with the hatred he acts out. (Although the tipping scene in “Reservoir Dogs” was the prologue to a bloodbath, when the movie’s action figures were marketed Buscemi refused to license his image unless the Mr. Pink doll

was issued without a gun.) “You always like him in a movie,” John Waters said. “Even if he’s a villain, you’re in on it with him.” Buscemi is almost never just a cold-blooded killer; he is also a hilarious victim. In “Fargo,” for instance, Buscemi’s character is first shot in the face, then fed into a wood-chipper. In Martin Scorsese’s segment of “New York Stories” (1989), Nick Nolte literally wipes the floor with Buscemi. And at the finale of “Mystery Train” Buscemi, after being accidentally shot in the leg, is dumped into a flatbed truck.

After a while, however, Buscemi got tired of being cast as what he calls “sleazy psycho types.” “So I thought, Why not write an interesting part for myself and my friends?” he said. “I also missed the creative control I enjoyed when I was working with Boone. I thought, If we could create our own work in theatre, why not in a film?”

Making the decision was easy; writing the script was hard. Buscemi enrolled in a weekend screenwriting course. Among the wide-eyed notes in his black-and-white-marbled composition book are “Make your writing visual”; “Don’t pitch in detail but know it in detail. . . 2-3 minutes. Take notes”; “Know [the producers’] agenda—what they want from you? Never write a spec script from their idea. Never talk money.” The instructor preached the gospel of structure; he taught his students never to write dialogue or scenes until the whole story was mapped out. “I tried making an outline,” Buscemi said. “It always frustrated me. I could feel my body resisting.” Then, quite by chance, he found himself at a John Cassavetes retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. “The films were so unpredictable,” he said. “They went in directions that were surprising and not conventional. At the end of the film, I felt like I’d lived through an experience.” In a period of ten days, Buscemi watched all of Cassavetes’s films. Then, instead of trying to know everything about the structure and the characters of his movie before sitting down to write, Buscemi allowed himself to get lost. “Trees Lounge” is remarkable proof of the method, a complex film in which the apparent aimlessness of the narrative becomes a metaphor for the stalled lives it tracks. The movie was on about a half-dozen ten-best lists in 1996, and it has continued to have an influence in American culture.



“Dude! I am so not prepared for this!”

"It was very well written and very simple," David Chase, the creator of "The Sopranos," says. "I really liked the way it was cast." He briefly considered Buscemi for the role of Tony Soprano, and also admired the performance that Buscemi had drawn out of the twenty-one-year-old Chloë Sevigny. Chase hired Buscemi's casting directors for "The Sopranos," and he invited Buscemi to direct an episode. (The episode Buscemi directed, "Pine Barrens," was nominated for an Emmy in 2001, and is generally considered one of the series' best.) Buscemi directed two more episodes, in the show's fourth and fifth seasons. Last year, he was in front of the cameras, playing Tony Blundetto, an ex-con and erstwhile masseur, who gets whacked in the finale by his cousin Tony Soprano. And this summer he returned for his fourth directorial outing.

On a sweltering day in early August, the mass maneuver that is the cast and crew of "The Sopranos" took over the parking lot of Leonard's La Dolce Vita—a deluxe baronial folly that sits next to a Mobil station on Northern Boulevard in Great Neck. The restaurant's monumental façade features six Corinthian columns and a pair of lions spewing water into sea-shells; the décor of its chandeliered interior seems to come entirely from those Fifth Avenue kitsch emporiums that are permanently "Going Out of Business." Buscemi was directing Episode No. 70, "Mr. and Mrs. Sacrimoni Request," in which the mobster Johnny Sack, awaiting trial in prison, is allowed out for six hours to attend his daughter's wedding. It was the most strategically complicated episode he'd taken on—nine trucks, four trailers, a hundred and one actors, two hundred and fifty extras.

Buscemi arrived on the set at 3 P.M., in his usual gray-and-black mufti and sandals. Among the beefy crew members and the Italian-American cast, he was easily the thinnest male, a strand of spaghetti amid meatballs. Even on the set, he moved in his own circle of solitude. He didn't hold court or make scenes or give line readings or dress anyone down. Buscemi was a general who almost never signalled his command. "Some directors are very authoritative, and with that maybe a little condescending," the episode's director of photography, Phil Abraham, told me. "Steve's got a very light touch."

Buscemi surveyed the hubbub of the day's first rehearsal on the restaurant's garish second floor. Abraham was arranging the stand-ins, each with his character's name on a strip of masking tape above his lapel, into a semicircle, for a shot of Tony and his posse gossiping to another crew of wiseguys about Johnny Sack's emotional behavior—he breaks down when the feds take him back to prison. At three-thirty, the "Sopranos" regulars arrived to take up their positions. Buscemi began moving them around and mixing some extras into the swaggering scrum. "I just didn't want it to look like the Jets against the Sharks," he said.

Buscemi's directing style, Chase says, "is clear and unpretentious. There's none of that tortured artist. He doesn't act out." In directing, as well as in acting, Buscemi leaves room for accidents; he doesn't overplan. He trusts the craft of his collaborators, and his confidence shows itself in his readiness to take a good idea from anyone. "There's something about being naïve," he said. "Really interesting things come because you don't know what the rules are, what you can and can't do. I have to be careful I don't fall into a place where you take fewer risks." "To be indecisive is not a possibility for a lot of guys," Abraham said. "Steve's not that way at all. Steve's like, 'Let's figure it out together.'" After huddling for a while with Abraham, Buscemi rearranged the grouping, then returned to look at the new formation through the camera lens. "He's not very visual," Abraham continued. "I think he'll respond to visual things when he's sort of led down that way. I don't think he thinks through visual transitions between scenes."

Buscemi's focus is primarily on character. "This episode is about appearances, people's perceptions of each other," he said. "Tony is coming out of the hospital and needs to reestablish himself. Johnny Sack loses face. Phil Leotardo sees his opening." At one point in the scene, after Leotardo bad-mouths Johnny Sack for crying in public, Tony says, "Comes to daughters, all bets are off. I seen tougher guys than John cry at weddings." Buscemi sidled up to the episode's writer and producer, Terence Winter. "Does Tony be-

lieve what he's saying?" he asked. No, Winter said; Tony was being diplomatic. After six years, the "Sopranos" stars know their characters intimately, but they don't necessarily understand their internal responses to each beat of dialogue. Buscemi's suggestions—like the one he whispered to James Gandolfini for this scene—were like punctuation marks in a well-turned sentence: rhythmical notations that made for tempo, nuance, and surprise.

Later in the scene, Buscemi watched as a heavysset wedding guest crossed in front of the wiseguys and added his own opinion of Johnny Sack's collapse—"Terrible out there, huh? Poor guy." The actor threw his line into the circle like a Scotsman tossing the caber; the scene suddenly stopped flowing. "Take your time coming in. You're waltzing by," Buscemi told the actor, but to no avail. Frank Vincent, who plays Phil Leotardo, kept forgetting his lines; Buscemi broke the tension by asking, "Anything else you have to say?" "It was just very funny," Abraham said. "We were all suppressing a laugh, and Steve vocalized everyone's feelings. It made the actor feel good about it. Everyone sort of enjoyed it."

When Buscemi is directing, his reputation as an actor gives him a certain authority with the cast. "It's a special event," Abraham said. "I was very impressed, on 'Pine Barrens,' with the way he worked with the actors. I think he was getting performances out of Tony Sirico and Michael Imperioli that I hadn't seen before. Their senses were heightened." Imperioli, recalling a scene in which his character was enjoying a lap dance when he was called away by some drug dealers, said, "He'll come over and say, 'Don't skim over this moment—play this moment. You should do it like you're a little disappointed to have to do business.' I'm like, 'How can I have missed that?' He constantly makes me feel I'm not doing my job properly."

In the course of fifteen setups in a twelve-hour day, Buscemi chipped away at five pages of script. In one scene, he cut a character's exit lines and instead let the camera play silently on his tortured face. For a scene in which Johnny Sack's



daughter leaves her party, Buscemi coaxed Vince Curatola, who plays Johnny, to be a noisier presence: “Try to get contrast—the higher the happiness, the bigger the impact of the tears.” Then he took Curatola aside to talk him into the mood for his emotional breakdown. “He wanted everything to go right for his daughter,” Buscemi told him. “It’s all being ruined. It could be his last six hours.” Buscemi walked over to the fountain in the middle of the restaurant’s driveway and watched Curatola work. “The more I direct—even though I get frustrated—I don’t take it as personally as I used to,” he said. “I used to think I wasn’t fast enough or smart enough. I’m enjoying myself a lot more. I’m getting closer to what I always wanted: to enjoy directing as much as acting.”

Later that evening, Buscemi and Winter made their way to the makeup trailer to inspect the scars being designed for Tony Soprano. “This is where Jimmy would be now,” the makeup artist, Kymbra Callaghan-Kelley, said, referring to Gandolfini and holding out a reddish scar that looked like a sutured anchovy. “From the time he was sewn up, he was in the hospital two weeks,” Buscemi said. “I thought what a plastic surgeon does is more refined than this.” Callaghan-Kelley insisted that the scar was elegant; for comparison, she offered to show him the abdominal scar from her fibroid operation. “I had a plastic surgeon do this,” Buscemi said, pointing to an almost invisible long white mark on his jawline. “When I had that knifing thing.” (In 2001, on location in North Carolina for “Domestic Disturbance,” Buscemi broke up a bar fight between the actor Vince Vaughn and a local who claimed that Vaughn was flirting with his girlfriend; afterward, Buscemi got into a scuffle with another hothead, who pulled a hunting knife out of his boot.) On the way back to the set, I asked Buscemi how Tony Soprano had got his scar. “If we told you,” he said, “you wouldn’t get out of here alive.”

All the characters whose stories Buscemi chooses to tell in his films share the same predicament: they are stuck in a purgatory from which they may or may not escape. The narratives compulsively return Buscemi to the unhappiness of his blue-collar youth; at

THE LOST SISTER

I let go the hands of the one I slept with,
the wind called, come quick, come quick,
the days are loosening like sticks in the water.

I slept the way the lonely sleep,
uncomfortable, walking through rooms of stone.
I did not come for days. In fact, they had to roll up

their white choirboy sleeves and come after me,
with a lunge of the thumb and a snap of the wrist.
My skin capitulated to the air, it became skin,

my bones fell into their dusty length,
I dropped onto surfaces shinier than I.
Nothing needs me here.

—*Meghan O'Rourke*

the same time, they are a reminder of his triumph over it.

Last April, I sat with Buscemi in a borrowed room at the Chelsea office of InDigEnt, a production company that specializes in low-budget digital filmmaking. Buscemi was there to edit his latest feature-length directing project, “Lonesome Jim,” a movie written by the first-time screenwriter James C. Strouse and starring Casey Affleck and Liv Tyler. Shot in the course of eighteen days in Goshen, Indiana, where Strouse grew up, the movie tells the story of Jim, a failed writer who is forced to move back in with his parents and work at the family factory. “The main character’s very down, and things go from bad to worse,” Buscemi said. “The humor is dark, deadpan.” He added, “It’s very hard to sustain that. We have to find out how much is too much. By taking things out, are you losing any information in the story?”

He showed me a scene in which Jim’s brother Tim is coaching a basketball team of inept ten-year-old girls. At halftime, with the girls down 16–0, the brothers lean against the lockers and talk. After Jim has bemoaned his own situation for a while, Tim joins in. “I’m really unhappy. I get these feelings. Dark. Hopeless,” he says. Jim commiserates. “If I were you, I’m not sure I could . . . go on,” he says. “I mean, look at how far away you are from everything you’d hoped to be. Living with

Mom and Dad just to cover child support, making a dollar over minimum wage at thirty-two years old. I mean, I’m a fuckup, but you’re a goddam tragedy.” Tim bolts from the gym, crashes his car into a tree, and ends up in the hospital. “I want it to be real,” Buscemi said. “I don’t want to make fun of the situation, but, at the same time, it is sort of funny to me that this guy doesn’t realize that what he’s saying to his brother is just horrible.” He continued, “If in the script the brother had killed himself, I wouldn’t have been interested in doing the movie.”

On a balmy autumn afternoon, Buscemi and I took a cab to Engine Company 55, on Broome Street. Buscemi strolled around the firehouse, pointing out the Guastavino tiled ceiling and the company’s motto, “Second to None,” which was emblazoned on the side of a glistening fire rig. The job of an engine company, which works in tandem with a hook-and-ladder company, is specifically to put out the fire—to “put the wet stuff on the red stuff,” as firefighters say. Buscemi’s first fire was in a sweatshop on Canal Street. In his years on the job, he worked three of the four positions on the engine—hose, nozzle, and backup. By the time he quit, he was next in line to learn to drive the rig. At the back of the three-story firehouse was the living room, where the captain and the five firefighters who make up the

company watch TV and eat. A few of the men stood around talking to Buscemi; one of them mentioned “The Sopranos” and complimented Buscemi on how effectively he’d died on the show—blown away, with bags of groceries in both hands, by Tony Soprano’s shotgun blast. “I’ve been doing it for twenty years now,” Buscemi said, of dying onscreen. “It’s what I do best.”

Real death, however, is a different thing. Engine Company 55 lost five men on September 11, 2001. When Buscemi talks about that day, his eyes still well up with tears. That morning, he was at the airport, intending to fly out to the Toronto Film Festival. The next day, he went down to the firehouse, where an off-duty firefighter ferrying volunteers to the Trade Center offered to drop him at the site. “I had my helmet and my old gear,” Buscemi says. “He was driving me through and a cop looked at me, sort of recognized me, and just went, ‘All right.’ Once I was in, I was free to go anywhere I wanted.” Buscemi walked around for about an hour and a half before he found his company, close to the site of the collapsed north tower. “Do you mind if I come and work with you guys?” he asked. For the next five days, working ten-hour shifts, Buscemi was part of the bucket brigade passing rubble down the line. “He’d come home covered in ash,” Andres says. “The smell was so intense on him he’d take everything off at the door and try to go right in the shower.” “It was like being on another planet. You had no reference for it, except for the movies,” Buscemi says. “In fact, guys would come up and say, ‘Is this like a movie set?’ I’d say, ‘Like no movie set I’ve ever been on.’ While I was there working, I actually felt O.K. Although I hated the reason, I loved being with those guys, being on that truck, being in my gear again. I even felt guilty about it. I would say, ‘Why do I feel this good?’ It was because I was with them.”

Afterward, however, Buscemi’s emotions dipped into “uncharted territory.” “I never knew when it would hit,” he says. “Sometimes I’d get short with Jo or Lucian.” Since then, he has become more politically active: he has fought to save firehouses and support firefighters, and before the last Presidential election, with his wife and some of his acting cohorts, he worked to register voters in a number of swing states. In 2002, when Alexandre

Rockwell asked him for help getting in touch with Hollywood stars to raise money for his new film, Buscemi was uncharacteristically brusque. “You know, with all the funerals I’ve gone to and the things I’ve seen, I really don’t give a shit about all this Hollywood stuff,” he said.

Still, Buscemi’s celebrity has earned him a certain amount of commercial and social clout. Over the years, he has gone target-shooting with William S. Burroughs (a framed bull’s-eye hangs in his office, with the author’s inscription: “.45 Long Colt, S & W. The gun you can’t miss with”); he has attended Paul McCartney’s and Elvis Costello’s weddings. At the 2003 I.F.P. Gotham Awards, where he was honored for his contribution to New York’s filmmaking community, Buscemi thanked Jerry Bruckheimer, the producer of Hollywood blockbusters. Bruckheimer “has made it possible for me to do so many independent films,” Buscemi said, rubbing his fingers together. (The paycheck for his role in Bruckheimer’s 1998 movie “Armageddon” also made it possible for Buscemi to buy a retreat in upstate New York.)

Buscemi lives a modest life in an immodest business. To protect his privacy, he has his mail delivered to another address. Since Andres discovered fans rooting through their garbage, he has shredded all his sensitive correspondence. The

cordons sanitaires is sometimes breached, however. Not long ago, a young girl left a note on his door that read, “I saw Adam Sandler in L.A. riding a bicycle with no helmet. Please tell Adam to wear a helmet.”

Most nights, Buscemi and Andres like to play Scrabble at the round kitchen table. And Buscemi spends as much time with his tall, frizzy-haired son as the fourteen-year-old will allow. The long living room of the Buscemi home has been ceded mostly to Lucian’s guitars and computer. (Lucian plays bass in his band, STUNGUN.) Many of the images on the walls were found in thrift shops; a Victrola sits in the dining room, with the theme music for “Juliet of the Spirits” permanently on its turntable. At the other end of the living room is a television with a purple parasol—a friend’s art work—hung above it. Across from the TV, under a doe-eyed photograph of Lucian as a little boy, there is a green sofa. Here father and son have contests to see who can throw the other onto the floor first. “He’s tough, but I hold my own pretty well,” Buscemi says. “When he was little, I used to let him win, but now he can kick my ass.” According to Andres, sometimes, out of the blue, from the middle of the room, Buscemi and Lucian will “just dive onto the couch.” “Nothing too fancy or daring,” Buscemi insists, but, like so much of his life, it’s a leap nonetheless. ♦



“He’s fine as long as I take my medication.”