Hollywood, Etc.: In the director's chair at the helm of 'Interview'

by Dave Elliott

"I could have chosen somebody else, but it was too good to pass up," says Steve Buscemi of acting reporter Pierre in "Interview." Later, he admits, "Of course, if I had chosen someone else that might have helped us get the financing faster!"

'INTERVIEW' - At the helm of 'Interview,' Steve Buscemi tried for a 'character study of two damaged souls working off each other.' Here he is in a scene with Sienna Miller. CNS Photo courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics. Shot over nine days, mostly in a New York loft on a pittance, not far from where Buscemi is making this interview call, "Interview" puts Pierre into the personal space of sexpot starlet and blond crack-user Katya (Sienna Miller). The task is "fluff" to him and a mere celebrity perk for her, but being jaded in sync allows them to gouge open some insides, humanly.

For Buscemi, 49, the chance to perform and direct is one more vivid peg in a prolific career as cult-niche star and sometimes director ("Trees Lounge"). For Miller, 25, it is a ripe rise (like her Edie Sedgwick in "Factory Girl") in a career that was defined by beauty and TV.

"Sienna was on our short list and was our first choice," says Buscemi, "and though we shot with no frills, she never complained. I think she had someone in mind she based Katya on, but she put a lot of herself into it. She is not really like that character, per se, but she builds a lot of sympathy for her, and Katya is likable though she can do very dislikable things."

He could be talking about himself, having achieved a firm fan base despite often playing callous, creepy or cringing figures ("Reservoir Dogs," "Con Air," "Fargo") or wanly suffering dorks ("Ghost World," "The Big Lebowski"). He always nails a Major Buscemi Moment, like his fugitive's desperately grinning response to a cop who stops his car in "Fargo":

"Funny story about that. We shot it, and Peter (Stormare) blew away the cop. The next morning he and I went for breakfast, I was driving and we got stopped. Fortunately, I talked us out of the ticket. With no violence! I always wonder if that female officer later saw the movie and remembered us."

'INTERVIEW' - At the helm of 'Interview,' Steve Buscemi tried for a 'character study of two damaged souls working off each other.' Here he is in a scene with Sienna Miller. CNS Photo courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics. While "Fargo" felt Upper Midwestern Nordic, "Interview" is a Dutch transplant. It was first filmed by activist Dutch director Theo Van Gogh, killed in 2004 by an Islamic fanatic. He had wanted to remake three of his actor-driven films in English, so his producers brought the dream to New York, where Buscemi signed on, with Stanley Tucci and John Turturro set to direct the others.

"I knew of Theo," Buscemi relates, "but never met him and hadn't seen his films when I was approached on this. Short of being directed by Theo himself, sadly no longer possible, I loved the story and wanted to work with his cinematographer, Thomas Kist."

Kist "kept the techniques he and Theo developed, constantly using three hand-held digital cameras. So the loft became really important, big enough not to feel claustrophobic, but its own world, with little worlds inside."

"I wasn't interested in making a comment on media or celebrity, but more a character study of two damaged souls working off each other. They have moments where they really do connect, but there is a lot of suspense. They both win and lose something."

This is Buscemi's basic take, that "the world is not black and white, so movie characters shouldn't be either. You can like a character but be appalled by what they do. I love that when I see it. Here, you don't know who to root for, so you just respond."

He is a star, though less on Brad Pitt's plane than Paul Giamatti's. Call him a star, and Buscemi offers a humble chuckle: "If that were true, I'd love to capitalize on it! You can come with me to my next meeting, and help me convince people to give me money. It is still a great struggle. 'Trees Lounge' took years to finance. But playing a lot of sick guys lets me do these other projects."

He adds, "When people know you for something, they want you to keep doing it. If I had gone to people who know me for 'The Sopranos' and said I wanted to do a film about two people in a loft, well ... I am lucky to make a living as an actor."

Born in Brooklyn, nested in Manhattan (with his wife, Jo, and teen son, Lucian), the Irish-Italian Buscemi was lifted to eccentric film fame by the Coen brothers after early jobs as an ice-cream truck driver, bartender, model, club comic and, most important to him, as NYC (Little Italy) fireman. He went back into his fire team for weeks after 9/11, and still volunteers. So why doesn't he act a firefighter?

"I've never been up for the part! I get the pyromaniac roles."

True, but he burns in a very cool way.

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