

HOUND DAWG MAGAZINE

"I'M A HOUND DAWG!"

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MOVIE SPECIAL

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WISDOM TWINS BOOKS

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A movie special this festive month for all you curious readers! I know it's been a couple of months since the last issue but I have been busy here so I have compiled a cool December issue to mark over one year of the great Hound Dawg Magazine. One year eh? Well, one year and a month but you get the idea. Anyway, this issue I got the chance to interview a horror icon and childhood hero, Joe Pilato, who I loved as Captain Rhodes in Day of the Dead. There's some other cool articles as well, including a retrospective look at the career of Steve Buscemi. Hope you all enjoy it.





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CHRIS WADE'S TOP TEN HORROR FILMS

CHRIS WADE PICKS HIS FAVE SCARY FLICKS



1, DAY OF THE DEAD (1985)

The third instalment in George A Romero's zombie saga, and for 20 years the last of a trilogy (before the three subsequent flicks that followed), is a claustrophobic and haunting tale of isolation. The plot follows the struggle between science and the military, as a group of desperate survivors experiment on the living dead. The military are lead by the explosive Captain Rhodes, played excellently by Joe Pilato in a truly iconic and unforgettable performance. The gore is truly grimy and 25 years on the effects still stand up.

The acting is great too, unusually for a horror movie, and Pilato in particular is a stand out. The script is great too, even though it wasn't the original screenplay (the original had to be scrapped as Romero's budget was snipped from 7 million to 3) with infinitely quotable dialogue. I first saw this film when I was about 10 and it has remained a favourite of mine ever since. There's something about the flow of the film, the gruesomely chilling final 20 minutes and the great characterisation from the superb cast that just really hits the nail for me. As usual, Romero brings social issues in to his work via metaphors and the atmosphere of Day of the Dead hints at the state of America at the time and the paranoia of the Cold War. Mention must also go to Sherman Howard as Bub, the strangely touching zombie who loves a bit of Beethoven.

2, THE OMEN (1976)

Another film I saw at a young age and one I found very haunting and disturbing. The rather ridiculous and familiar plot of Damian the devil child could have wound up a rather laughable film, especially as Charles Bronson was originally cast as Robert Thorn the American Ambassador. But thank god director Richard Donner managed to get a hold of Gregory Peck, who plays it straight to great power. In fact, as Mark Gatiss said on his recent History of Horror series, it is the straight faced acting which gives The Omen much of its power. As a child I was always very affected

by the gruesome deaths of Patrick Troughton and David Warner, as well as the chilling presence of the Nanny, Damian's protector, played by Billie Whitelaw. The most haunting moment for me is when Peck finds the grave of his adopted son's real mother, and the moment when Troughton shouts out *'HIS MOTHER WAS A JACKAL.'* The whole thing is a slow burning chiller, more about what you don't see than what you do. They don't make horror films like this anymore.

3, THE EXORCIST (1973)

When the film was rereleased after a 25 year ban in the late 90s, I was still too scared to see it (being only 14 or so). To me, it was this terrifying film that no one was meant to see, one my parents had seen back in the day when it was first unleashed and had proclaimed to be the scariest film ever made. But some members of modern audiences started belittling the film, some even known to laugh out loud in cinemas. When I finally saw it, I couldn't understand why anyone could think this wasn't a scary film. It's a film about a 13 year old girl who gets possessed by a demon for fuck's sake!!! It terrified me, everything about it; William Friedkin's perfect direction, Linda Blair's outstanding performance and the many iconic moments that have entered modern culture. Admittedly, some bits are a bit funny, even though they really shouldn't be, but for the most part this is pure terror. Let's just say I have never watched it on my own.

4, THE SHINING (1980)

Another obvious choice but quite simply a masterpiece. They say Kubrick triumphed in every genre and this is certainly true with *The Shining*. Adapted from Stephen King's novel, it tells the story of a man who goes mad with the isolation of being stuck in the Overlook Hotel as a winter caretaker. One of the most iconic horror films of all time, it is full of classic scenes; Jack Nicholson's unforgettable HEEEEERE'S JOHNNY!!! moment, the Red Rum sequence and the ghostly twins in the

corridor to name but three. Not much happens admittedly, but Jack's slow spiral into madness, along with the chilling score and Kubrick's floating direction, make this a genuinely frightening and unsettling shocker.



5, NOSFERATU (1922)

The first ever vampire film, although creaky and ancient in parts, is still a very creepy experience almost 90 years on. The directorial flare of German film maker FW Murnau made it the most stylish film of its day and it's his perfect framing of images that makes this film stand out today. Also, the haunting performance from Max Schreck as Count Orlock is one of the weirdest and scariest performances in horror history. It's worth a watch for him alone, an actor of otherworldly appearance. Of course it is totally

silent, and this makes it all the more unsettling. As it was based on Bram Stoker's Dracula, and the film studio hadn't got the rights to use the story, they were sued (by Stoker's widow) and all prints of the film were to be destroyed. Thankfully, a few survived and we still have this horror great to enjoy. Great stuff.

6, AMERICAN WEREWOLF IN LONDON (1981)

If there is one thing about this top ten that is recurring, then it's the fact that all these movies shit me up when I was a kid. This is no exception. John Landis, previously known for comedies like The Blues Brothers, turned his talent to horror and the results are fantastic. Combining subtle humour with terrifying horror works, a fusion which can come to disastrous results, is pulled off with style here. The film contains a great cast (including Jenny Agattur, Brian Glover, David Naughton and a young Rik Mayall) and the single greatest werewolf transformation scene EVER! But my favourite scene is in the cinema, before the finale, when our hero encounters the zombie versions of his unlucky victims.

7, DAWN OF THE DEAD (1978)

I had to put this in. The second part in Romero's zombie saga is a metaphor for mass consumerism, as a team of survivors seek safety in a shopping mall, surrounded by the plodding puss buckets who roam the stores exactly as they did when they were alive. Quite possibly the most loved zombie movie ever, it is actually a very funny film, despite the mass gore, and stands today as more of a witty look at America's flaws than a genuine horror film. Trust Romero to make us think as we lap up the blood and guts on display!

8, THE LOST BOYS (1987)

Ok it isn't as scary as the other films in this list, but it is a classic and these guys could teach those Twilight fuck nuts a thing or two. Keifer



Sutherland leads the gang of teenage blood suckers terrorising small town America, while Jason Patrick comes to terms with the downsides of his newly garnered vampiric tendencies. The great and late Corey Haim plays his younger brother but the film is stolen by Corey Feldman, one half of the wannabe vampire slaying Frog Brothers. It is just one of those infinitely quotable films that summed up the MTV generation. So cool!

9, ALIEN (1979)

Sci fi horror at its most frightening, as the crew of the Nostromo space craft find themselves wiped out one by one, as a blood thirsty alien being lingers. Ridley Scott, one of the greatest film makers of all time, really sets the rule book here and this film is like a lesson in how to make a scary, suspenseful movie masterpiece. Of course, the cast is fantastic too, and Sigourney Weaver entered celluloid history as the sassy Ellen Ripley. Most frightening moment comes when Captain Dallas *Tom Skerritt) meets his demise in the tunnel. SCRRRREEECCCCCHHHH!!!!!!!

10, SCREAM (1997)

Another one that scared me when I was a kid. It wasn't the suspense, the shocks, the deep voice on those phone calls saying 'Do you like scary movies' that shat me up; it was that fucking mask! Yikes. That aside, Wes Craven is a master of the genre and while he is basically spoofing the much flogged slasher genre, he creates one of the best of its kind in the process.



AN INTERVIEW WITH JOE PILATO

CAPTAIN RHODES FROM DAY OF THE DEAD SPEAKS ABOUT HIS VARIED CAREER

Joe Pilato is best known for his iconic role as Captain Rhodes in George A Romero's classic zombie film Day of the Dead. But he's done a whole lot more in his 30 odd years as a movie actor, as Chris Wade, that's me, finds out.

Let's start with Day of the Dead. 25 years on do you think the film is finally getting the credit it deserved?

Yes, I do. We were side blasted by Dawn of the Dead – Everybody wanted the shopping mall and we gave them the cave under some

budgetary restrictions. George keeps saying it's one of his favourite films. It had a very claustrophobic situation and you had characters coming from a complete point of view. So, it stands and it will always stand because, not only is it horrific, not only does it make you 'stay scared,' it's also intellectually complete and George took what he had – his budget was cut in half – and he chose to go into the world of isolation. What he couldn't do visually he did "literally." He had points of view in collision: Logan, the mad scientist; Laura, the buffer; Rhodes, the military man whose job was just to exterminate. So, it was a sense of confinement and ideas. People



were not stupid. George took a sense of confinement, which was opposed to his original script. He took a sense of confinement and claustrophobia where we met mindlessness. I personally think we were originally dismissed by the press for not repeating the shopping mall scenario but instead we continued with the evolution of the story.

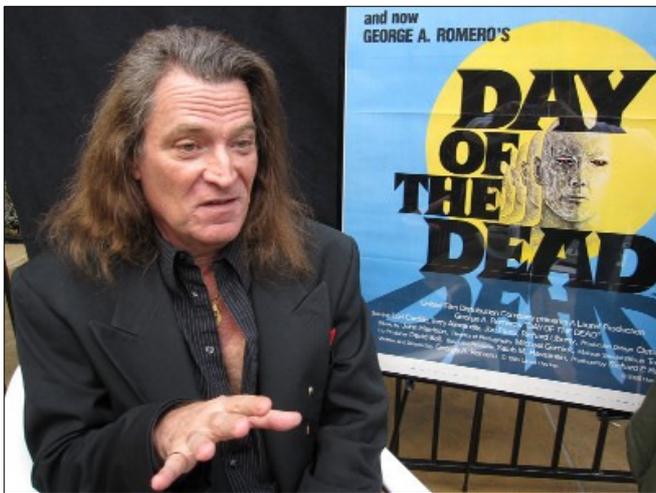
Why do you think it was not as well received when it was released?

For Dawn, the concept of the shopping mall at that point in time was so ingenious. But, nobody concentrated on the shopping mall. They concentrated on the characters. The concept of the shopping mall was brand new at the time and a sociological statement. When you look at Land of the Dead, it's about timeshares. And, I don't think George starts with these concepts. You look at Dawn and it's the shopping mall and if you look at Land, it's either about assisted living or timeshares. I don't think any great writer or director starts

with a concept. I think George had a story to tell and the zombies had to evolve. If you create a species like George did, and you want to continue the story, there's an evolution. Look at Dawn of the Dead then look at Land of the Dead and you traverse between the shopping mall and you see the journey to timeshare. With Day, I think at the time the claustrophobic concept was lost on audience's expectations for another Dawn.

How does it feel to be part of horror history?

It really feels great. Not because of any sort of infatuation of always being accessible on DVD and other formats. The thing is the genre fans. I have never met a genre fan I didn't like. Genre fans ask great questions. In so many ways, a family has developed, and without that family, I'm just a piece of celluloid. I have the great fortune, as well as many of my colleagues do, of having an astute and knowledgeable film family. Because of the film, I'll be around for a long time. But, it's the genre fans that have been a



big part of the experience. They are the people that make this thing tick, and I love them to death. With them, we are an ongoing experience and I sincerely believe that.

Do you ever see any of the rest of Day of the Dead's cast?

Yes, absolutely. I stay in contact with all of them. I'm really close with everyone. We meet up at conventions. It's always a great celebration. Geographically, we live in very different locations. Gary, Lori, Tim and Jarlath are on the East coast, I'm on the West coast

so we meet at conventions and when we do it's a wonderful thing. I speak with them by phone at least once or twice a month. It's funny because not until – let's see the movie was made in 1984 - Until Fangoria did a reunion years later, I hadn't seen Gary or Lori since we made the movie but have stayed in touch with them ever since. They have been a great resource in my life and I believe I've been a great resource in their lives and that doesn't happen very often in film. We spent a lot of time underground and got close. And, we're still close.

You have been doing a lot of fan fairs and festivals lately. Do you enjoy meeting fans and does it put a real perspective on your craft?

The conventions are a chance to meet my extended family. Everybody that comes to my table I consider to be a member of my extended family.

Do you ever get tired of being tied to Romero's films or is this a stupid question?

Absolutely not. I had the opportunity to work with one of the greatest directors whose work is in the archives of the New York Museum of Modern Art.

When do we expect the release of Night of the Living Dead Origins? Also, what are fans of horror to expect from this project?

The release date is supposedly around March. This whole CG world is very new to me. I was honoured to play Mr. Cooper – I knew Carl and I know his daughter. I know the Director's vision is epic and expect we'll be seeing something on a grand scale.

So who is the best director you have worked with? Who else aside Romero was fun to work with?

George, Quentin, and a guy named Charlie Peters. I did a picture with Charlie and Jude Law called, 'Music From Another room.' I think Charlie is probably the most underrated American director and storyteller. Under George's direction, I had major characters to play. And, working under Quentin's direction was a wonderful experience.

Who would you love to work with. Alive or dead?

I would have loved to work with Elia Kazan and Jerzy Grotowski. I would love to work with Quentin Tarantino and Charlie Peters again. Also Robert Rodriguez.

You have some varied projects coming up. Which ones are you most excited about?

I'm certainly excited about the remake of Night of the Living Dead since I'm still attached to the post production and it's foremost on my mind now.

What are your favourite horror movies of all time?

I'm an old animal. It's the Universal classic horror films. Frankenstein, Bride of Frankenstein, Son of Frankenstein with Basil Rathbone, Dracula, the Wolfman, and films such as the original Howard Hawk's The Thing and The Day the Earth Stood still with Michael Rennie. I'm a black and white kind of guy. I love shadows and gothic imagery. There's a real difference between being scared and being terrorized. If we scare people, we've

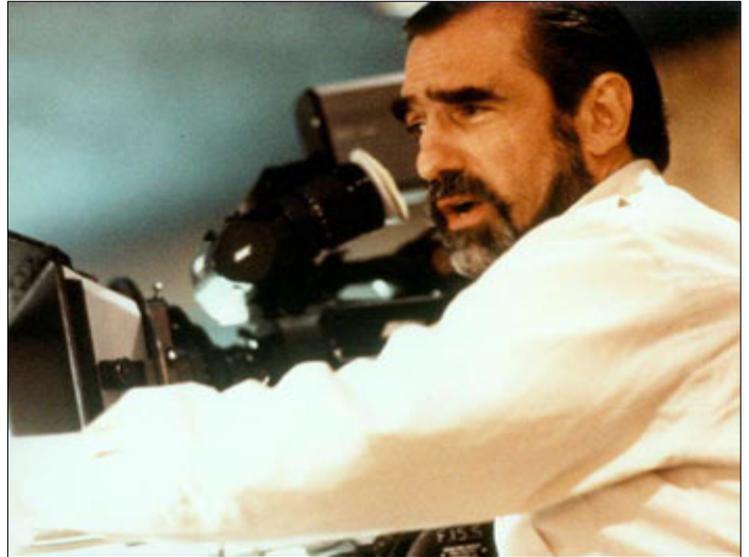


done 80% of our job and that's what's mostly out there. But, to terrorize that is the goal. And the movies that I like are old, but they terrorize me.

Finally, what is your view on Rhodes as a character and do you really think he was such a bad guy?

Rhodes was not a bad guy. You go to the airport today you either get put in a chamber or strip searched or hand searched. This is the beauty of George. Rhodes is the military point of view. Sarah and Logan were the medical point of view. It's a tough choice, we live in a tough time. I think Rhodes was like, 'shoot 'em in the head,' and that's always going to be the military point of view. Unfortunately, Major Cooper died, Rhodes would have been second in command but when Cooper died, Rhodes had to take over and it was 'Alright. Kill 'em. Don't domesticate them.' In the small circle of isolation, we had the scientific point of view, voodoo point of view – which came from Terry's character, and of course the military point of view. And, that was the job I was given. I'm not so sure I believe it today AND I'm not so sure I don't believe it today. Strip search me at the airport - I'd rather do that than go through the box because of the radiation - but protect me. George was always a visionary.

DAVE GRAHAM'S MARTIN SCORSESE COUNTDOWN



20) BOXCAR BERTHA

Roger Corman produced exploitation piece featuring Barbara Hershey and a rambling David Carradine. Notable to see Marty weave some religious imagery into a low rent premise, and definitely a precursor for some of the directorial flair to follow.

19) THE DEPARTED

A very solid film, but one that disappointed me and the least Scorsese-esque film I've seen. Hard to judge because I am such a HUGE fan of the original INFERNAL AFFAIRS trilogy. Di Caprio's best performance to date, but Jack Nicholson is far too self-indulgent.



18) CASINO

Loved this the first time. Great use of music and an understated performance from De Niro. Brilliantly constructed and I love the scenes where it explains the workings of the casino - almost documentary style in the detail. But it recycles too much thematically from Goodfellas

towards the end, and it's a rare Scorsese film that doesn't improve with repeat viewings.

17) CAPE FEAR

Great to see Marty have some fun with the Amblin box of tricks for the first time. This is Marty playing with special effects and great big buckets of movie blood and a marvellously OTT performance from Bobby De Niro. The best scenes are the more intimate exchanges between De Niro and the precocious Juliette Lewis, as well as the family back-story that is added - this isn't a good v evil battle, as the family are just as flawed, if not more so than Max Cady.

16) WHO'S THAT KNOCKING AT MY DOOR?

Great early film to revisit when you have some love for Mean Streets. Filled with movie references and religious guilt, this is probably Marty's most personal film, and the rawness brings to mind John Cassavetes.

15) BRINGING OUT THE DEAD

It doesn't hold together all the way through, and there are one too many Taxi Driver references. But apart from the atrocious use of "What's The Frequency Kenneth?" the use of music is stunning in this film. I nearly leapt out of my set when The Clash scored the frenetic ambulance scenes. Cage's last real empathic performance and the supporting cast are all terrific. There is much to admire in the spiritual redemption of the last

scene, where Cage falls asleep with Patricia Arquette as a holy white light pours through the window and whites the scene out.

14) ALICE DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE

A forgotten Marty film in many respects, and more of a vehicle for the fantastic Ellen Burstyn. But I still get a shiver when I see the fast camera pan near the start of the film, which has become such a Marty signature. I know that camera move anywhere. There are lots of little camera flourishes throughout the film.

13) THE COLOR OF MONEY

Not being a Tom Cruise fan, I used to loathe this film. It was on TV lots when I was younger, and then after I became a Marty fan, I decided to revisit and I was blown away by how good it was. No one has ever shot pool as cool as this. It's a smooth cool stylish eighties Hollywood picture that eschews many of the Hollywood conventions of the time. There's no big Hollywood ending, no big win at the pool tournament. It's more of a slow-burning character study than a sports picture. Robbie Robertson puts together a great smoky jazzy midnight score and Paul Newman is pure class. A very enjoyable film to watch.

12) THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST

Okay so some of the Bronx accents talking Jesus jar a bit, but this is actually quite a faithful religious film, with about fifteen minutes of controversy thrown in at the end. I like how the film makes Jesus human. Dafoe's Jesus is a young mortal man haunted by doubt and almost schizophrenic voices in his head. It's a Jesus that is more appealing than the super entity that is normally represented. The ending is both beautiful and haunting : Jesus has a dream on the cross about how his life as an ordinary mortal could have been, and then it emphatically jars back to him accepting his fate on the cross. Then the film actually runs out and Marty left that in – which I found really haunting and it used to

disturb me for some reason. Peter Gabriel's score is used to great effect.



11) GANGS OF NEW YORK

There are so many things wrong with this film – the Diaz-Dicaprio romance is awful, the use of U2 at the end is desperately jarring, Di Caprio doesn't have the ability at this time in his career to convince in the role and compete with Day Lewis' Bill the Butcher. The story is unconvincing. Despite all that, there is still enough left in the film to thrill and marvel at, and enough to give you a glimpse of what might have been in Marty's head all those years – ever since he first wanted to make this in the late seventies. The fight scenes are brutal and the sets and design are impressive. Just look at all the details and the amount of research that went into portraying this little known period of New York's bloody beginnings. The rival fire services, the names and customs of the different gangs. The nod to Kurosawa when Day Lewis and Di Caprio fight at the end, only to realise that their rivalry is nothing compared to the bigger American drama that suddenly explodes all around them. The racial tensions, the poverty, the political corruption, and the use of the military to end the uprising. Marty stages it as a civil war era Tiananmen Square, or similar modern day struggle. And in the middle of all these cannons firing, and shoddy buildings reduced to rubble, one of P.T Barnum's elephants is running through the streets. Deeply deeply flawed and overblown, but there's enough genius in here to fill a whole career for other directors.

10) AFTER HOURS

A real eighties gem. Dark, paranoid and full of weird characters and arty references. Marty sticks to a tight script on a low budget and directs one of the most compelling dark comedies of the eighties. Essential midnight viewing.

9) THE KING OF COMEDY

De Niro as Rupert Pupkin, who is obsessed with getting his own fifteen minutes of comedic fame, whilst stalking Jerry Lewis- the presenter of his favourite TV show. Hilarious black comedy.

8) THE AVIATOR

A very restrained Marty picture visually. This is Marty's most mature late career studio picture. Di Caprio is excellent as Howard Hughes. It doesn't focus too much on the OCD or the more mysterious sides of Hughes's life, but there are just enough moments to hint at the darkness and troubles to come in his life. Because these moments are only skilfully hinted at, and are not the real focus of the film, it makes them even more compelling and unsettling. There's a Raging Bull moment here too, in the way that Marty shoots the flashbulbs of the paparazzi, the crush of the glass and the intrusive glare of the spotlight.

7) NEW YORK NEW YORK

I love this film, and it's arguably De Niro's funniest performance (equal with Midnight Run). De Niro plays saxophonist Jimmy Doyle, who cannot express himself very well with words. This is brilliantly conveyed in the opening twenty minutes. He's at a party to celebrate the end of the war, and he hits on Liza Minelli's Francine. His attempts to flirt with her are all physical, sometimes forcefully. There is a lot of physical comedy from De Niro throughout this dark but funny musical drama. The scene where he asks her to marry him is priceless – she practically says yes, only because he lies down behind a taxi and asks the driver to reverse! The contrast between

De Niro's method and Minelli's conventional acting styles is exhilarating, as is the constant conflict between realistic locations and obvious studio sets – as Marty deconstructs the big studio musicals of the forties and fifties. Artifice versus the reality of human relationships. I adore the big Minelli musical number at the end – the ironic "Happy Endings", which Marty goes against at the end in deliberate Marty style.

6) KUNDUN

Seen as a minor Scorsese picture, but to me this is one of his best. There are two sequences in particular that just stun me every time. They truly put me on the edge of my seat – I guarantee I just sit up straight and I am captivated by the stunning imagery on screen. The first is the depiction of China's invasion of Tibet – not shown through tanks and soldier, but largely by metaphor. The key image is a pool of fish and the water turning red, as Philip Glass' amazing score mounts. This sequence also shows the mass of dead monks at the Dalai Lama's feet as his voiceover explains his guilt. The other stunning sequence is the virtually wordless 12 minute climax depicting the Dalai Lama's escape into exile in India. The Glass score is perfectly married to the images on screen.

5) THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

This is Marty's Barry Lyndon. The depiction of repressed passion in upper class New York society is so artfully done and heartbreaking. The domineering families of this society are the equivalent of the gangs in Goodfellas and Scorsese's violent films. Only they rule by manners and morals instead of knives and guns. The anti-climatic ending is a denial of passion, understated and skilful. Pfeiffer and Day Lewis are so amazing in this film, and Winona Ryder's performance is deft. She's the innocent flake who Day Lewis marries but Pfeiffer is the woman he desires, but society won't allow. You think Ryder is this weak gullible wife who doesn't know a thing, and then at the end when she's dying, she

shows she is far stronger and more clued up than you realise - she knew all along that Day Lewis loved another woman. What's more she practically endorses Day Lewis pursuing his heart when she's gone.

4) GOODFELLAS

Quite simply a masterclass in directing. It's a cinematic dictionary from The Great Train Robbery to The Great Rock N Roll Swindle. The music, the acting, the directorial flair. Just brilliant. One of those films when it all comes together.

3) TAXI DRIVER

I think most young males can relate to Travis Bickle at some point in their lives. The loneliness of the male in the city. My favourite scene is the lonely corridor when Bickle tries to call Betsy. The camera pans to the right and remains still on the empty corridor, while Bickle talks off screen. Another great scene would be the now clichéd shot of the alka seltzer fizzing away, a metaphor for the commotion inside of Bickle. It's such a multi-layered psychological film, loaded with iconic references and an amazing score. It's also one of two films (the other being The Last Picture Show) in which Cybil Shepherd looks truly stunning and Marty's cameo as the cheated husband Bickle picks up for a fare is hilarious and disturbing at the same time.

2) RAGING BULL

Two hours of stunning direction and performance. I love the black and white. I really love the soundtrack – and I don't just mean the music. I love the sounds of the neighbourhood, which you can hear in many of the quieter scenes. The way that the water sounds in the slo-mo shot where Jake watches Vicky moving her legs in the water. The awkwardness of the date, where Jake shows inarticulate he is, the croquet, and where he shows her the bedroom. Boxing scenes have never been done as well as this – but it's about more than boxing. It's about gladiators

in the ring, and it's loaded with meaning about religion and masculinity. The bloody crucifixion on the ropes, the camera slowly panning to the blood dripping. It's a brutal and yet beautiful film. And the colour home video sequence intercut with the details of La Motta's bouts, is the best and most creative sporting success montage I have ever witnessed.



1) MEAN STREETS

For me this is where cinema begins in the New Hollywood. It's the Citizen Kane of the New Hollywood. I see the influence of this film every day, from movies to adverts. The camera work and shooting style is just brilliant, and no film has ever been scored to contemporary music as well as this. The opening scene is one of my favourites of all time. You know you are watching greatness from the first few frames and Charlie's head hits the pillow in a nouvelle vague three shot to the beat of "Be My Baby". Then there's Johnny Boy's entrance to "Jumpin' Jack Flash". The birth of the iconic pop video. I love the accidental camaraderie of the characters too and even the slightly pretentious bedroom scenes between Charlie and Teresa. This film lives in my mind and I can watch it over and over again. I lament that Marty will never make another film like this, and at the same time, I celebrate it because it makes this such a treasure. It's the film that made me want to direct and there are directors the world over who owe it all to Mean Streets. If you haven't seen it yet, then go see it now – who needs film school when you can watch it all here. "You don't make up for your sins in church, you do it on the streets"



STEVE BUSCEMI

MOST PEOPLE KNOW NEW YORK BORN ACTOR STEVE BUSCEMI FOR HIS BIT PART ROLES IN FILMS LIKE THE WEDDING SINGER, CON AIR AND ARMAGEDDON. HE IS ALSO THE KING OF INDEPENDENT CINEMA, STAR OF COUNTLESS CLASSICS SUCH AS RESERVOIR DOGS AND LIVING IN OBLIVION, DIRECTOR AND STAR OF UNDER RATED GEMS LIKE TREES LOUNGE, INTERVIEW AND ANIMAL FACTORY. HERE IS A GUIDE TO ESSENTIAL BUSCEMI.

WORDS: CHRIS WADE

“I don't tend to think of these characters as losers. I like the struggles that people have, people who are feeling like they don't fit into society, because I still sort of feel that way.”

“Funny lookin'” is how the girl at the bar in the Coen Brothers' classic *FARGO* describes the character played by Steve Buscemi. I know it is something of a cliché to instantly mention the oddness of Steve's appearance and frankly it's annoying that it is ever an issue. Going through the internet when searching for any fan sites on the actor, I was bombarded with comments on his strange features. Admittedly, Buscemi does not have a conventionally “handsome” movie star face, but then again Steve Buscemi is not a movie star. In truth he is one of America's greatest living movie actors, brilliant in any role he takes and a

frequent scene stealer, no matter who he is sharing a scene with. Part of this of course is that unique face of his and those precise and infectious movements. He is one of those guys who hovers around in movies, often in tiny roles. But he has slowly and subtly become one of the most fascinating people in movies today.

From time to time, I really get into a certain actor. As a teenager it was De Niro. Later it was Malcolm McDowell. For the past month or so I simply cannot stop watching Steve Buscemi movies. It's odd that he seems incapable of being bad in a movie, when even the greatest actors like De Niro have given poor performances at least once. While a lot of people know Buscemi primarily for *RESERVOIR DOGS*, his small roles in Adam Sandler movies and his recent cartoon voice appearances (*THE SIMPSONS*, *G FORCE*, *MONSTERS INC*), more people should seek out his starring roles and his brilliant directorial efforts. Here is a guide to his career....

One of Steve's earliest movies is *PARTING GLANCES* (1986); this minor cult

classic follows a gay couple in New York as one is leaving for a month to Africa. While it was and is rare for a film to deal with homosexual life, *Parting Glances* does so in the most ordinary yet not patronising fashion, to the point that the gay theme ceases to be an issue early on in the film. Buscemi plays a brave part as Nick, a young man dealing with AIDS. The sad part of this is that Bill Sherwood, the film's director, died of AIDS in 1990, this being his only film. Buscemi was also in *NEW YORK STORIES* (1989), a three part drama based in New York, with each segment tackled by a different director. Part 1, *Life Lessons* is a dark and compelling tale directed by Martin Scorsese (2 and 3 are by Woody Allen and



Francis Ford Coppola) and it follows Nick Nolte as an artist dealing with the fact his girlfriend has left him for a young comic, played by Steve Buscemi. Steve's part is small but very notable. As the stand up comic, Buscemi is fantastic, somewhat ironic given the fact that he was once a stand up comedian himself, albeit a very bad one according to the man himself. This film is well worth watching, but I suggest you skip Coppola's appalling instalment.

In between these roles and his iconic breakthrough performance in *RESERVOIR DOGS* (1992), Steve made notable yet small appearances in *THE KING OF NEW YORK* (1989) and alongside Dustin Hoffman in *BILLY BATHGATE* (1991), playing gangsters in both movies. In these roles, Buscemi has a distinct air of quirky menace and is creepy as hell. Of course, most will instantly know his outstanding,

Independent Spirit Award winning role as Mr Pink in Quentin Tarrantino's gruesome classic *RESERVOIR DOGS*, and rightly so, as it is an excellent performance; a motor mouthed, quite nasty but clever criminal who memorably refuses to tip waitresses. It is perhaps his strongest role up to that point, although more avid viewers would argue that his performances in Jim Jarmusch's *MYSTERY TRAIN* (1989), the Coen Brothers' *BARTON FINK* (1990) – as the fast talking Chet – and the weird and wonderful *IN THE SOUP* (1991) where he played a wannabe but down on his luck film maker, were equally as impressive as his role in the landmark crime thriller.

After *RESERVOIR DOGS*, Buscemi was instantly bankable as a bit part character actor in Hollywood and in the world of Independent cinema. His performance in *TWENTY BUCKS* (1993), although a largely unknown film, is a great little effort. He plays a small time thief that teams up with a professional criminal played by Christopher Lloyd and finds himself out of his depth. There is an air of desperate sleaze in Buscemi's presence, another side to his acting talent which would reappear again in other great films. Anyone who likes a weird 90s film should seek out *TWENTY BUCKS*, as well as giving *AIRHEADS* (1994) a try, where Buscemi stars alongside Brendan Fraser and Adam Sandler as an ill fated rock band who take a radio station under siege in order for the world to hear their song! Buscemi showed his comic side as Rex, the hot headed and foul mouthed bassist, who supplied the band's weaponry, which turn out to be water pistols he attained from the toy store he works in.

His second role for the Coen Brothers, in *FARGO* (1996) is an obvious stand out, where Buscemi takes an iconic role as a criminal hired by William H Macy to kidnap his wife in order to go halves on the cash being put up by the woman's rich father. Buscemi is at once frightening, intense and slightly pathetic. Rarely can an actor embody so many facets in a mere nuance, a mere glance. His gruesome demise is also noteworthy.

Going through his filmography is basically like listing some of the key films of the era. Though small, his performances in *THE BIG LEBOWSKI* (1997) and *CON AIR* (1997) are brilliant. In the latter, Steve plays a cannibalistic serial killer, but he plays it down brilliantly and makes the maniac seem like the sanest looking man in the movie. Brilliant!

In 1996, Buscemi managed to get together his semi autobiographical project *TREES LOUNGE* (1996), which he directed, wrote and starred in as Tommy, an unemployed mechanic who spends his days hanging in his favourite bar, the Trees Lounge. For me, this is Buscemi's finest hour. His embodiment of the pitiful alcoholic comes to life with a believable and moving performance. What makes the film more powerful is the fact that this is Buscemi's vision of what his life could have turned out like. He said himself: "I tried to imagine what my life would be like if I had never moved to Manhattan and pursued acting and had just stayed in Valley Stream." It really is quite down beat, but at the same time it is darkly hilarious, especially when the sleazy Tommy takes over as the neighbourhood ice cream man. The fact that Buscemi's father and brother Michael appeared in the movie made the lines between true life and fiction very blurred indeed. "I was shooting this scene with Victor Arnold, who was playing my father and my real father was standing right next to him playing his brother. That was a little weird. But I have to say that my father took direction really well -my brother did, too. I didn't really know what to expect from that situation because this was the first time Mike and I worked together. There were certain scenes, like our fight scene at the bar, which completely took me back to the old days. We were really into it, to the point where it didn't feel like acting anymore. Mark Boone and I had collaborated on a screenplay before with someone who wanted to direct the piece and had tried to gear it towards this guy's notes and what he thought would be commercial. That took us about seven months and we ended up with a screenplay that was okay but basically a jumble. So I wanted to write something totally on my own, make it personal and not worry about any prospects of it being commercial.

Boone was the one who said, why not do something on Long Island? That really threw me



because I thought, Long Island? There is nothing interesting there! I was in denial about where I was from and what that whole experience was. So he really gave me that idea and the more I thought about it, the only way I could think about writing about it was, what if I hadn't left? What would I be doing? In that way I could use stuff from my own life while I was living there. Driving an ice-cream truck is something that I did, working in a gas station, and of course, hanging out in the bars I did a lot. So that was the genesis of the idea"

Although the ending seems grim, where a bruised Tommy sits in the bar, right on the seat of the old regular at Trees Lounge who has 'just stopped breathing' due to his non stop alcohol abuse, Buscemi hopes his character might make a move and sort his life out. "You don't know what's going to happen to him. But in my mind, the character I play, Tommy Basilio, is for the first time thinking about his position in life, his actions, his future. He is thinking about what he has done in the past, and what may happen in his future. Granted he's not talking about it. He's just sitting there, thinking about it. But it's the first time you see him in the bar where he is actually thinking. Every other scene of him in the bar, he is oblivious to what's going on. That's his place to forget, not to deal with his life. So it's the first time you can see on his face that hopefully he is dealing with something. Whether he will do anything about it - I didn't know."

Perhaps this is what makes TREES LOUNGE such a magical moment in 90s cinema, that fact that it was all so sincere and honest, like all good art is. Often labelled as a kind of updated Cassavettes, Steve directs in a way only an actor can. On set, he encouraged improvisation and all the cast insisted it was a laid back and collaborative project.

An interesting film which needs noting is LIVING IN OBLIVION (1993) where Buscemi plays a film director on the set of a low budget movie. Having already directed a short film, Buscemi claims he knew just how to play a director. "By the second time I played a director, in Living in Oblivion, I was able to draw on my



own experiences as a director. That's a question I get asked a lot for Living in Oblivion: did I base that character on any director that I worked with? Yeah, myself ..."

One of Buscemi's more recent directorial movies is INTERVIEW (2007), an intense drama which chronicles a rather strange meeting between an interviewer (Buscemi) and a world famous film star, played by Sienna Miller. It's a wonderfully acted face off between two very different talents, a kind of mind game where each constantly attempts to outsmart, baffle and put down the other. The results are compelling. Playing the journalist, Buscemi appears as a very honest trustworthy man, sincere in his hopes for Miller's troubled star. But of course, all is not as it seems. Steve viewed the film as a showdown of sorts: "And it does get claustrophobic at times, as which it should. And, for the few hours they are with each other they really do connect and they really go at it, almost as if they are a couple that is breaking up. I think there is also this whole father-daughter thing going on. He's lost his daughter and she's never known her father, and I think that is something definitely underneath the narrative.

And there is also that sexual tension, as well, and who knows how real that is or who is playing who. And, it is also a bit of a cat and mouse game, and I think she's enjoying how far she can take this guy."

One of Buscemi's finest performances to date was in *GHOST WORLD* (2000), where he played the rather strange Seymour, the object of social outsider Thora Birch's fascination. Based on the US comic book, the film was set in a dull suburban town, inhabited by odd balls and weirdoes according to Birch's friend, played by Scarlet Johansen. Buscemi plays a lonely record collecting middle aged loner. It's a very moving and affecting part which Steve embodies to an almost scary level. The way he stands, the way he shifts awkwardly, the way his hair is combed over and his trousers are way too high; it all results in a well rounded, sublime, perfect characterization. He rightfully won a second Independent Spirit Award for his efforts. This is a real stand out in his career.



A lesser known and equally great performance is in *DELIRIOUS* (2006), where he plays a sleazy paparazzi photographer living in a run down apartment in New York. He takes in a young homeless man (Michael Pitt) and hires him as his unpaid personal assistant in return for a cupboard he has adapted into a bedroom for him. The unfolding story, where Buscemi's character slowly unravels to reveal a slightly tragic no hoper is very moving, and the relationship between the two men is somewhat reminiscent of the union formed by Ratso and Joe Buck in *MIDNIGHT COWBOY*. There is a needy desperation in Buscemi, as he realizes his homeless chum might

be going places. It is this sad element to Buscemi's character which really tugs on the heart strings and he subtly makes this a strong element throughout the movie. There is even a slight hint that Buscemi's character could well be gay and in love with Pitt's character. We never really find out, but as the ending seems sad and downbeat for Steve's character, speeding past the credits reveals a more positive outcome for the seedy photographer. This film is highly recommended.



Seeing Buscemi in a lead role is something of a rarity, so savor the chance in *ST. JOHN OF LAS VEGAS* (2009) where he plays an ex gambling addict who's run out of luck and now works for insurance fraud. An investigation leads him to his old town, Las Vegas and he finds himself tempted by his former addiction, all the while finding himself in a shady case where his colleague is hardly a man to rely on. Although the film is flawed. Buscemi is great in his role; constantly trying his luck on scratch cards while trying to keep up a rather odd relationship with an unstable girlfriend (Sarah Silverman).

Buscemi is now a big star in the NBC series *Boardwalk Empire* and has many varied and interesting projects on the way. No matter what the movie, one thing is for sure; Steve is going to be good in it!

