

Left to right: Jake LaBotz, Mark Engelhardt, Danny Trejo and Willem Dafoe in *Animal Factory*. Photo by Thomas Roma.

# CRIMINAL MINDS

INTERVIEW BY TRISTAN PATTERSON

**Steve Buscemi travels far away from the Staten Island slackers of his debut, *Trees Lounge*, with his second feature, an adaptation of Edward Bunker's novel *Animal Factory*. Tristan Patterson talks with Buscemi and actor/producer Danny Trejo.**

**A**s much as writers and directors from the '90s independent scene claimed to have loved the films of John Cassavetes, his work was often more of a hindrance to their conception of drama and filmmaking than a worthwhile source of emulation. Whereas Cassavetes put his faith in drama and the idea that meaning might be found through performance, many of his adherents appeared to believe that performances, if they went on for long enough and seemed aimless enough, would be sufficient to imbue a film with dramatic realism.

Steve Buscemi's first feature, *Trees Lounge*, was an exception to this rule.

Both lead actor and director, Buscemi wisely steered clear of self-indulgence and instead delivered a moving portrait of one man's inability to find a place in the world. As a director, Buscemi seemed to have the right sense of when to let the camera linger and when to just get on with things. And as an actor, he understood the potential excitement to be had from even the tiniest revelations of character.

Four years later and after a series of acting gigs, Buscemi is now back with his follow-up, *Animal Factory*, based on writer (and ex-con) Edward Bunker's novel about prison life in the late '60s. Initially it might seem that Bunker's work is an odd choice for

the actor/director, whose script for *Trees Lounge* stayed far away from the violent confrontation at the heart of Bunker's work. In fact, though, Bunker's story turns out to be a natural for Buscemi, who continues what he started in *Trees Lounge* by crafting a film that finds transcendence in the quiet shared moments between two people at very different stations in life.

*Animal Factory* tells the story of Ron Decker (Edward Furlong), a middle-class kid who happens to have been caught with an extraordinary amount of weed and cocaine in his garage. Entering a penitentiary to serve a five- to 10-year sentence, he finds himself a total outsider to the hardened-criminal world contained within its walls. He's also considered "pretty." Focusing on the relationship that forms between Ron and Earl Copen (Willem Dafoe), a man who has seen more time on the inside than on the outside, *Animal Factory* concerns itself with both survival and the human need for redemption through friendship and love.

The film's realistic depiction of prison life was undoubtedly aided by the participation of co-star and co-producer Danny Trejo. Although best known for playing villains, and sharing screen time with Buscemi in Hollywood popcorn fare such as *Con Air* and *From Dusk Till Dawn*, Trejo was perhaps most aptly cast as a member of Robert DeNiro's gang in Michael Mann's *Heat*. Having spent much of his early years pursuing criminal activity, Trejo backs up this prison tale with real-world experience.

Due to the oddities of today's theatrical distribution world, after its Sundance premiere *Animal Factory* was sold to the Starz Network as a fall cable premiere and will then receive a limited release to theaters.

**FILMMAKER:** How did you both become aware of Edward Bunker?

**STEVE BUSCEMI:** I met him on *Reservoir Dogs*, but I knew of his work from the movie *Straight Time*. We got to know each other a little bit, but then I kind of fell out of touch with him. When Danny and I worked together on *Con Air*, he told me that Eddie had a film script from his book *Animal Factory*. He got me the script and the book, I read them both and signed on.

**DANNY TREJO:** I knew Eddie from prison in the late '60s. Later he brought me onto the set of *Runaway Train* to teach Eric Roberts how to box, and he got me a part. I loved the script of *Animal Factory*; I took it to Steve, and the rest is history. All of sudden, you know, I'm co-producing . . .

**BUSCEMI:** It wasn't so all of a sudden!

**FILMMAKER:** Of all of Edward Bunker's books, *Animal Factory*, on the surface at least, seems the least obvious adaptation. It's not a shoot-'em-up.

**BUSCEMI:** Well, *Dog Eat Dog* was already being made. With *Animal Factory* I just really

liked the relationship, and it was a good opportunity to direct something that was a good character piece. I don't view it as a prison movie. At its heart, it's a love story between this older convict and this younger convict. Their relationship may not be sexual, but that's basically what it is.

**FILMMAKER:** What, specifically about that relationship appealed to you?

**BUSCEMI:** Willem Dafoe's character, Earle — he just needs to have this relationship with this kid. I liked that he needs this kid's friendship and that it's not sexual. On the outside, [the feelings he has] would be for a girl. But on the inside, they're for this kid. He admits his attraction for him, but he also sees something else in the kid that he sees in himself. Maybe this kid reminds him of something in himself that he thinks is worth saving. Because otherwise, the kid would have been raped repeatedly. Prison is one place where being "pretty," or handsome, is not an asset.

**TREJO:** Yeah, it's definitely not an asset. In this film, I'm part of this guy Earle's gang, and we're not even sure what he's doing with this kid. It's like, "Wait a minute, what's up



Above: Edward Furlong in *Animal Factory*. Opposite: Director Steve Buscemi.  
Photos by Thomas Roma.

with this? Is his mother sending you money, or are you booking him, or what?" And the real scary part is that in every scene, Eddie could literally lean over and French kiss Ron. Steve talks about Earle's need to be needed. But nobody needs anybody more than Ron needs Earle, because otherwise, Ron is lunch. I mean, we saw it in San Quentin when we were there. They'll take a kid and it's just — right to the wolves.

**FILMMAKER:** With *Trees Lounge* you talked

draws you to this type of story?

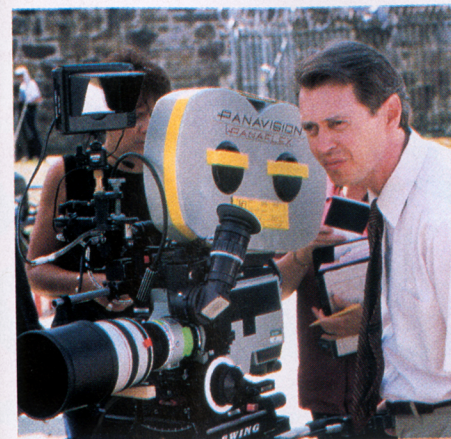
**BUSCEMI:** You know, they're both stories about character. The character in *Trees Lounge* was more isolated, and it was harder for him to make connections. I just respond to a story about a person being in a place that's dehumanizing. Earle's been in prison for 20 years, and if he can make a connection with this kid, there will still be hope for him as a person.

**FILMMAKER:** You mixed convicts with actors

about Cassavetes being a big influence. What films did you go back to for *Animal Factory*?

**BUSCEMI:** *The Battle of Algiers* was one, just for its sense of immediate reality. But the film that I always refer to is *Fat City*. I just love the pacing of the drama. We didn't look at a lot of prison films.

**FILMMAKER:** It's interesting that you bring up *Fat City*, because in many ways *Animal Factory*'s story brings to mind the great '70s films. I was thinking of *Scarecrow* in its elemental relationship between two very different types of men. I also think *Trees Lounge* bears a certain relationship to these films. What



in the film. How did you achieve a balance between the two?

**BUSCEMI:** By having Danny around. A lot of these guys look up to Danny and Eddie Bunker. I mean, these guys, they did time. And there they were. They've really made a difference. Eddie Bunker taught himself how to write in prison, so I think these guys saw that there is a way out.

**TREJO:** [When shooting in prison,] you treat everyone with respect. You see the difference between the way guards treat inmates — "Get over here!" — and the way they treat a director — "Sure, what can we do?" When the guards are screaming at you, you almost automatically wanna say something like, "You want your mom to come, too?" Something cute, you know?

**FILMMAKER:** The book was written in the '70s. What made you decide to set the film in the early '90s?

**BUSCEMI:** Well, Eddie was really writing about his experiences in the late '60s. And I thought about doing a period piece, but that becomes more expensive. So we placed the film in the early '90s. Now you have the super-maximum-security prisons, and I wanted to pre-date that. It kind of has a feel that you're not sure when it takes place, but that it's not the prison system now.

**FILMMAKER:** You're one of the few directors working that's keeping alive this tradition of the great American character-based film. They are not easy films to get made in today's business environment. What do these films hold for you that makes them worth fighting for?

**BUSCEMI:** Part of it is that I have a lot of really talented actor-friends that I think should be working more, and that's only gonna happen in ensemble films. I think that stories that have more than one or two leads in them are more interesting. Sometimes you see films that have great characters, but once the plot kicks in, these characters just become slaves to plot. I like films that you can watch and absorb and not feel like you're being told a story. The story kind of develops and unfolds. You lose your sense of time and just get caught up in people's lives. ▼