

In conversation with

# Steven Soderbergh

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**H**e's made 20 films in 20 years, defined indie cinema for an entire generation

and directed a billion-dollar franchise. He prefers New York, but while his place there is being renovated, Steven Soderbergh is in an LA bungalow, a couple of blocks from David Fincher's gaff. On the front-room wall hangs a massive collage of celebrity heads: from Brad Pitt to Catherine Zeta-Jones. He made it to justify months spent poring over pulpy magazines like *In Touch*, *US Weekly* and *People*. "I thought, 'How many hours have I spent reading these? If that time is gone then I am going to shoot myself.'" So, he devised this creative solution, "for what it's worth. And it cured me. Since I finished, I haven't picked another one up."

He had earlier obsessions: a shoplifting phase, aged 12; later, a period of "not feeling particularly tethered to the truth" that led to the creation of reformed liar Graham (James Spader) in debut feature *sex, lies, and videotape*, the indie sensation he picked up the *Palme d'Or* for at 26. Now 46, Soderbergh is preparing his next feature. His Pitt-starring baseball picture *Moneyball* may have been shelved by Sony, but he's working with *The Limey* scribe Lem Dobbs on *Knockout*, an "ultra-realistic" action-thriller to star mixed martial arts fighter Gina Carano ("She can actually break people in half.") Then he'll likely move onto *Liberace*, with Michael Douglas, and Egyptian monarch



## On Matt Damon

"He's really, really fucking good. He just doesn't tart it up. And that's two things: talent and brains. Sometimes you get one or the other, but Damon has them both."



## On directing

"I view directing as a seduction. There's no difference to me between making a movie and showing it to an audience, and being in a bar and trying to talk to a woman."



## On Erin Brockovich

"The way to shoot that movie was get the fuck out of the way and let her do what she needs to do. That was the pleasure of it, disappearing completely and turning her loose."

musical *Cleo* (in 3-D!).

Soderbergh is known by some as a "one for me, one for them" filmmaker — balancing passion projects with studio movies — but he'd argue they're all for him. He couldn't get enthused otherwise. And while *Ocean's 14* will never happen, he doesn't rule out making another tentpole picture. "As long as I don't have to take a morning-after pill when I'm finished..."

So, to films 19 and 20, out this month. *The Informant!* is an off-kilter comedy about a whacked-out corporate whistleblower, with a delicious performance from Matt Damon. *The Girlfriend Experience* is a low-budget drama about an NYC escort — a GFE, meaning she offers companionship, a "girlfriend experience", as well as sex —

starring porn star Sasha Grey.

The breadth of Soderbergh's ability is quite extraordinary; he doesn't want to be a brand, but nobody else makes movies quite like him. *Empire* sent Editor-At-Large Nev Pierce to talk to the Oscar-winning director. "Our allotted hour turned into three, and then we went DVD shopping (he bought *Ong-Bak*)," says Pierce. "This will sound absurdly obsequious, but he was a superb interviewee. Smart, generous and engaged. To borrow a phrase of his, 'pure pleasure'."

**EMPIRE:** You have two movies out at the same time, one with the star of *The Bourne Supremacy*, the other with the star of *I Wanna Bang Your Sister*. What's it like working with someone who's exploited for

their great looks and sexual allure... and Sasha Grey?

**SODERBERGH:** Exactly! It's funny: I feel we've gotten to the point culturally where it's not a very outré move to cast somebody from the porn world in a mainstream movie, because porn is mainstream now. It's become so prevalent because of technology — it's everywhere. Thirty years ago, when David Cronenberg did it (he cast porn star Marilyn Chambers in 1977's *Rabid*), that was kind of a bold thing to do. I don't think so much anymore.

**EMPIRE:** Why Sasha?

**SODERBERGH:** I thought she had a quality that really played to the heart of the movie. I found out about her because I read an article in *Los Angeles Magazine* about three summers ago. She had just >>

turned 18 and come to LA with the intention of becoming a porn star. The way she talked about herself and that business was not typical. This specific kind of ambition, I thought, was very closely aligned with how I imagined Chelsea (*the escort in The Girlfriend Experience*).

**EMPIRE:** It's fascinating, what people will do for money — prostitution and porn being extremes of that...

**SODERBERGH:** I'm baffled by the fact that if there's a camera in the room then it's okay. But if there's not a camera, it's prostitution. It doesn't make any sense to me at all. I don't believe you should be legislating how people pleasure themselves, period. But I think we're still in the throes of thinking about sex in an elevated way, because we're humans and we tend to think of *everything* we do in an elevated way. I certainly don't see any difference between what the GFEs are doing and what I'm doing.

**EMPIRE:** Isn't the difference in the profession the potential for harm?

**SODERBERGH:** Well, yeah. Because it has to be underground there is more potential for harm, that's the point. That's what doesn't make sense to me. Have it be a business: tax it, let them have a union... People argue from a moral standpoint, "It's denigrating to women and turns sex into a financial transaction," and I go, "I'd rather that than live in a society where people have to go underground to satisfy themselves."

It comes down to this issue we see in every walk of life: fantasy versus reality. Are you going to deal with the world as it is, or are you going to constantly try to turn it into something it's never going to be?

**EMPIRE:** The film has a lead, like Spader's character in sex, lie..., who thinks they've got their emotions in check, but then is blindsided by...

**SODERBERGH:** A random encounter.

**EMPIRE:** An idea of love as well.

**SODERBERGH:** Right. The movie is about control. Sex was just an expression of that. The movie is about a person who thinks she has her life compartmentalised and sees herself as a realist and even she, in a moment of vulnerability, falls prey to a fantasy. That's what was really interesting to me; that nobody is really immune. You put them in the right circumstance and even the most hardened cynic will slip into the belief that the world is a fantasy and magical things happen. I think it's all chance, it's chaos, and our

minds work to organise everything we experience into patterns, so that we don't go crazy. I understand that, but for me there's a limit and I reach a point where I go: it's just random.

**EMPIRE:** Do you think of your lo-fi projects as being in the same spirit as sex, lies, and videotape?

**SODERBERGH:** I think of them more as an efficient way of exploring the language a little bit. There are times when the tyranny of narrative really bugs me and at least with something like GFE or *The Limey* I can stretch out and try some things. It's nothing that Alain Resnais didn't do 50 years ago, literally, but at least it feels more like life to me.

**EMPIRE:** It's said films can't portray the inner life as well as novels, but on the commentary for *The Limey* you argue they can...

**SODERBERGH:** Oh, I think they can do things that novels *can't*. But

going on in the business, in terms of what's getting made, and I'm frustrated by my own inability to break through to something else.

**EMPIRE:** You're quite hard on yourself, aren't you?

**SODERBERGH:** Well, I think it's a real privilege to make a living doing this job. It's a great job — the best I can think of, actually. You walk into a room and say, "I'm imagining this," and they give you millions of dollars to go out and make it real. That's a pretty good gig. And, yeah, I have certain standards of my own — sometimes I hit them and sometimes I don't. I don't think being precious is really good for any artform. So I believe in being really prepared, working hard, doing everything I can think of to improve it, but staying on budget, staying on schedule, and when it's over, it's over and I'm onto the next thing. I'm

**"It's said my films are not warm... I'm not sure I care. If it's organic to the genre, then fine. But I won't cheat in order to engage someone."**

I certainly get the sensation that we've kind of hit a wall in the last 20 years. Obviously, people are pushing the technical side of it — and when *Avatar* comes out that'll be a game-changer, for sure — but in terms of the grammar of cinema, I haven't seen anything made since the late '70s or early '80s that I felt was really pushing the ball forward. That doesn't mean I haven't seen some good movies, but I don't feel like there's been a new wave of how stories are told cinematically. Some of the recent Godard stuff is pretty extraordinary. Notre Musique was really, really beautiful and he got at something at the end of that movie that I wasn't sure you could get at in a movie. But what's the audience for that? Like, how many people are interested in watching somebody make that attempt? This is not an inexpensive hobby — it's not something that you make and then hang on your wall. It's a public artform. I'm frustrated by what's

really dispassionate about it, in that regard. I haven't seen a great benefit in my own work in agonising over things. I've seen more of a benefit in my work, for moving quickly. It's harder to be pretentious when you're moving really fast.

**EMPIRE:** It's like writing; you can agonise over it, but the best stuff is often just banged out...

**SODERBERGH:** That's a process, in a way, of relinquishing control. And letting it happen instead of forcing it. That's the environment I like to set up. I'm not the kind of filmmaker who wants to dominate the situation I'm in. I like to pretend I'm invisible, which is why the styles shift from film to film. Some directors have a style they bring to each movie. I was like that when I started and I got out of it. I was lucky. The first four movies are made by a director with a very different mentality. I was in a rut. I was close to becoming a formalist and I sensed that was not a good use of my skills; that



I needed to treat it more like a sport. That's where the Lester book came in (*Getting Away With It, Or: The Further Adventures Of The Luckiest Bastard You Ever Saw — a book of interviews Soderbergh completed with A Hard Day's Night director Richard Lester*). I decided: I gotta go back, pick someone who inspired me and see if I can tap into what they're about. That helped me get out of that rut. That was a real cathartic experience... Schizopolis really is my second first film. It was a detonation that continues to reverberate.

**EMPIRE:** What do you consider your best work?

**SODERBERGH:** Out Of Sight is one of the least-flawed things I've done. I'm really happy with The Informant!. I was the beneficiary of things lining up at the right time with the right people and the right approach. I like the energy of it and we made the right calls. It's terrifying how early on the die is cast when making a movie. It's well before shooting. And that's a scary thing to know. I knew before I was making The Underneath that the movie wasn't going to work, and that was an unpleasant sensation to have to hide from people. All you can do, if it's going wrong, is try to exert enough influence to turn a car accident in which four people are killed into, you know, one where no-one is killed and you're in the hospital for three weeks... In the case of The Informant! I felt like the right key creative choices were made early and played out in a way that really unified the film.

**EMPIRE:** Is a big part of that down to being left to get on with it? The Informant! is so distinct, it's not a movie to be focus-grouped...

**SODERBERGH:** Warner Bros. were going on faith. The script's good, but you don't get the full effect because the voiceover and Matt's performance are the heart of the movie. That's difficult to imagine on a page. But I gotta give them props; the moment they saw it, they got it and they've been really bullish. But I have a relationship with that studio. There's no surprises. It's frustrating to watch The Good German lose every nickel that was spent on it, because they were as supportive on that as they were on The Informant!. And I don't like losing people money.

**EMPIRE:** Of course, you've made Warner millions with Ocean's...

**SODERBERGH:** Yeah. This is my whole theory about how careers >>

should work... One of the reasons the business is in the condition it's in now is a lack of vision about how to deal with talent. Instead of trying to identify, on a project-by-project basis, what is going to work, studios ought to be betting on talent and making deals that have specific financial parameters within which the talent can do whatever they want, if they prove themselves able to generate a profit. Because if you'd financed all of my films, you're up — significantly up, actually. That's the way you should be running this business. Because in point of fact — and any rat-based lab experiment about probability will tell you this — you increase your chances of missing when you choose films individually. They should be betting on the career of somebody.

**EMPIRE:** That's how they used to run, investing in people: John Ford, John Huston... It seems odd that a studio wouldn't be glad to make a movie with you or, say, Fincher.

**SODERBERGH:** There are a few things you have to consider when you look at it. The first may sound worse than it should, but by definition the really smart people in this business are the ones making the stuff. That has to be the case. Making it is harder than sitting in an office and deciding what should be made. As someone who has produced movies I'm telling you that's just a fact. And it doesn't mean that I should walk around feeling like a smart guy. I'm just saying that's a reality you have to understand when you try and convince somebody to give you money to make a movie: you know more about making movies than they do — by definition. When you combine that with the fact we're in a very tricky economic time, there's a lot of fear in the room, you know? So when you talk about things that are difficult to describe in writing, but are crucial to the creative success

of a movie, that's tricky. You're saying, "You're just going to have to trust me..." I don't like to say those words, and they don't like to hear them, and there's no question that in the last two years there are certain words in meetings that you *can't* say. You can't say things like "elevated", "smart", "better". You literally can't indicate at any point that you're going to do anything that won't be understood by a below-average-intelligence audience member. You really have to watch what you say.

**EMPIRE:** That's depressing.

**SODERBERGH:** It is what it is. You gotta find a work-around. What choice do you have? I don't have \$40 million — I gotta go ask for it. I loved doing the GFE, but I don't want to do that all the time. I like having the freedom to alter the size of the canvas, you know? You have to remember, every time, for lack of

Oscar-winning director"... And perhaps you say to Sony suit Amy Pascal, "You have to trust me," and she says, "Nah..."

**SODERBERGH:** I can't sit around wallowing in that. It's like asking yourself the question, "Why doesn't so-and-so love me?" There's just no point in spending energy picking at that. Once it was clear that there was no iteration that was going to satisfy them I started making calls to figure out if there was something else. I had 200 crew people who thought they had a job this summer! These are the people I bring from movie to movie and they're in a total dead zone right now. So I don't have the luxury of trying to parse why somebody said "no" to me. And to talk about it in any detail publicly makes me either sound like a self-promoter or like a victim and I'd like to think that I'm not either. It's

*Guardian* anymore." That was lame. What was hilarious was I got calls from people all over the place going, "Are you okay?" Jonathan Demme, who I know casually, called me, like, "Don't quit! I read that article and had to call you!" I guess it achieved its goal, which was to get attention. But it wasn't cool.

**EMPIRE:** Martin Scorsese says directors should understand that their flaws are as much a part of their work as their strengths. What are the flaws that define your work?

**SODERBERGH:** The biggest knock would be that the films aren't as emotional as they ought to be; that they're not warm. I'm aware of that criticism, but I'm not sure I care. What it comes down to is that I'm not willing to do *anything* to get a reaction out of an audience. If it's organic to the environment and the genre then fine, but I won't cheat in order to engage someone. I view directing as a seduction. There's no difference to me between making a movie and showing it to an audience and being in a bar and trying to talk to a woman. I have the same rules in both situations. If I'm trying to engage someone, I'm not going to lie about myself or come off as self-aggrandising. I see a lot of movies and I can tell that I don't want to hang out with that person *at all*. Because directors really are their movies. If you've got a body of work to look at and then you meet the person, it's hilarious how much they are their movies. I'm sure people have watched things I've done and felt like they're just kind of remote, and I'm sure you could find people that would characterise me that way as a person. They would say, "He was perfectly nice, but obviously is close to very few people and doesn't open up a lot." That would be a valid description of my personality, I think. I'm not, like, a hugging guy. If you asked people on my crew I don't think they'd go, "Oh, he was the warmest person ever..." I think they'd say, "He was in a good mood and civil and fair. Never raises his voice..."

**EMPIRE:** But they're not having you round for barbecues...

**SODERBERGH:** No. Greg Jacobs, my producing partner, is the warm one! He takes care of people. I operate on the idea that past a certain age you should be able to take care of yourself. So, other than actors, who I try to make happy, I'm not great at taking care of people. I'm trying to

## "I edit things that don't belong to me, just for fun... I've got a mash-up of Hitchcock's Psycho and Van Sant's, which I call Psychos."

a better term, an 'auteur director' goes over budget or acts like an asshole, they've made it difficult for everyone else to get something good made. And I wish the people who fall into that category would be more cognisant of this. There's a cause and effect when you have someone who's an A-list, final-cut director who goes out of control or is so unpleasant to be around that when the next project comes up, with a person who is not like that, they just go, "Life's too short. I'd rather get somebody I can control." So that's why I'm not sitting around vilifying the studio and saying they are Philistines. It swings both ways. There's a lot of regressive thinking on both sides — I've seen it.

**EMPIRE:** With Moneyball, when you're sat there thinking, "This movie is not going to go..."

**SODERBERGH:** Well, not with me! (Laughs)

**EMPIRE:** There must come a point when you're thinking, "I'm an

just... It's the business. I understand the business. I understand why they made the decision, even if I don't agree with it. They're scared.

**EMPIRE:** There was a piece in *The Guardian* recently, around the DVD release of Che, where it sounded like you wanted to give up. But you don't sound defeated...

**SODERBERGH:** Okay... What that guy did was not cool. I was *not* depressed, I was *not* defeated, I was *not* resigned. In fact, I was very much the way I am right now. I was speaking in sort of philosophical terms about the business, about that film, and it was spun and put out in the aftermath of the Moneyball situation to look as though it was a reaction to that. That was not cool, the way I was characterised in that piece. It was kind of the *US Weekly* version of an interview. It was kind of alarming, coming from an otherwise reputable paper. There is nothing I can do about it, other than say, "I'm not talking to *The*

### Your Q

**What is your favourite of the Ocean's trilogy?**

Steve Moore, via email  
"Twelve. No question. Between the images and the soundtrack, I think that's a really pleasurable experience. If you put a gun to my head and said, 'Watch one of them,' it would definitely be that — it's not even close. But I know it's not a popular choice..."

ALL STAR (1), ADAM (2), MOVIE (3), KOBAL (1)

# The Top Five Soderbergh Movies

SELECTED BY **SIMON CROOK**

**5** **Schizopolis (1996)**  
Soderbergh's always been a sucker for cine-experiments (see *Full Frontal*, *Bubble et al*) and, after losing his grip on ice-cold (but underrated) thriller *The Underneath*, he recharged by starring in his own zero-budget doppelgänger comedy-thingy. With its ripped-up narrative and Pythonesque goofballing, it's sheer creative anarchy and as mad as an army of noses. Rudely inventive and hugely funny, too — and, boy, did it loosen him up.



**4** **Ocean's Eleven (2001)**  
With enough star wattage to power the Vegas strip (Pitt! Clooney! Roberts! Carl Reiner!) and his split-screens sparkling like jackpots, Soderbergh fully embraced the blockbuster with this effortlessly breezy pimp-up of the Rat Pack classic. Clooney's mob went on to bust two more joints in even higher style, but it's the original that captures the rare twinkle of a glamorous, light-footed matinée movie.



**3** **sex, lies, and videotape (1989)**  
"It's all downhill from here..." Soderbergh's deadpan response to winning the Palme d'Or masks the impact his debut had on breaking American indies into the mainstream. Behind that come-on title is an invigoratingly talky drama about the deceits and powerplays of modern sexual politics — a kind of Woody Allen refit for Generation X. Great cast and, as ever with Soderbergh, credible, vivid female characters.



**2** **Out Of Sight (1998)**  
Soderbergh finally escaped his "arthouse ghetto" with this bracingly hip take on Elmore Leonard's pulp novel. David Holmes' '70s funk soundtrack adds drive, but it's the cat-and-mousing between Jennifer Lopez's FBI agent and George Clooney's evasive criminal that gives real fizz — they leak electricity like a snapped pylon. Flopped on release. Now a stone-cold genre classic.



**1** **Traffic (2000)**  
Inspired by Ken Loach and his naturalistic handheld stylings (Soderbergh did his own camerawork), Sodey brings a voyeuristic intimacy to his drug-trade epic, tracing the damage from user to trafficker. The dramatic punch is resounding, the use of colour-coding to make its multiple plots easy to follow stylistically inspired. Bagged him an Oscar; *The Wire* simply wouldn't exist without it.

be better about that.

**EMPIRE:** Your flaws...

**SODERBERGH:** I'd argue my failures have been more on a conceptual level than on an execution level. I have made some mistakes that, in retrospect, came from over-estimating the appeal of a certain idea. *The Good German* is a failure because the idea isn't simple enough to attract enough people to return its investment. The execution of it is fine, but it's clear that there just aren't enough people in the world wondering, "What if Michael Curtiz could do anything he wanted?"

That's my fault for not seeing the target was just way too small. *Solaris* is another example. Creatively I have issues with it — there are parts of the movie I don't think I solved — but I think it basically works on its own terms. The problem is suicide is not a subject that people want to see in a movie. They just don't. You got two camps: either people who've never had someone close to them kill themselves, so they don't really understand the impact of it, or people who have, in which case they do not want to go see a movie and re-live it! When I look back on that now I go, "The problem with that movie is it's about a fucking suicide and nobody wants to sit through that!" I don't regret making those movies, but I'd do it differently now. I've had two movies that shocked people when they exploded out of nowhere: *sex, lies...* and *Traffic*. I felt *Traffic* was a zeitgeist movie. But I've been convinced on the topicality of other movies and they haven't worked. I don't have a divining rod.

**EMPIRE:** Your movies don't really prescribe emotional responses...

**SODERBERGH:** No. I think you can enhance the feeling of something in a variety of ways — through composition, cutting, music and sound — but I'm not big on telling people where their head should be. Take a movie like *Erin Brockovich*, probably the most emotional film I've made: the reason is because she's a very emotional person. So, that aesthetic is an appropriate expression of her personality. It's not my personality, it's hers.

**EMPIRE:** But there was a way to shoot that movie...

**SODERBERGH:** The way to shoot that movie was get the fuck out of the way and let her do what she needs to do. I mean, that was the pleasure of it, disappearing completely, just making sure the camera was in >>

the right place and turning her loose. That was the most fun I've had on a film shoot. I could have shot that movie the rest of my life. It was just pure pleasure shooting that.

**EMPIRE:** She's great, but it's an achievement to make a movie like that, with an emotional response, that doesn't make you want to vomit.

**SODERBERGH:** Right. I agree. I don't want anybody to hate themselves in the morning, I really don't, whether that means you've been cloying or glib. I get as upset by films I think are dealing in a very glib fashion with violence, whether it's physical or emotional, as I do with movies that I think are being cloying or saccharine. That's disturbing to me. I worry that's become an acceptable mode of expression. It's one thing to watch something uncomfortable and sort of laugh at it because you identify with it; it's another to just be watching something in which the filmmakers are making fun of a situation that's really painful or humiliating for someone on screen. I don't know. There's a line there that I see getting crossed a lot.

**EMPIRE:** In *The Informant!*, you have a character that's delusional, but it's not a movie that mocks him.

**SODERBERGH:** I'm not above him. At all. Part of what made me think it should be a comedy was that it had one of the best building blocks for comedy that you can have, which is the escalating lie. That was really the thing that started me thinking we should not be doing this straight. First of all, what are you going to do that's going to be better than *The Insider*, really? And in reading the book you really did gasp when these pennies would drop. Then when (*screenwriter*) Scott Burns came up with the idea of having a voiceover that explained *nothing*, that illuminated *nothing*, that didn't help you orient yourself *at all*, then I thought, "That's going to be fun."

**EMPIRE:** And you got Matt Damon to put on weight and wear a tache.

**SODERBERGH:** He's really, really fucking good. He'll get a lot of props for this, but anybody who has worked with him knows how good he is. That's why they want to keep working with him. He just doesn't tart it up. You look at him in *The Departed*. He's not the one who got all the attention but he is really, *really* good in that movie; he's just doing his thing.

**EMPIRE:** You don't catch him acting.

**SODERBERGH:** That's exactly what it

is. And that's two things: talent and brains. Sometimes you get one or the other, but he has them both. He's a keeper.

**EMPIRE:** Your movies are extremely well cast. Look at *King Of The Hill* where, pre-fame, you have Adrien Brody, Katherine Heigl...

**SODERBERGH:** Lauryn Hill! Oh, let me give you an indication of how smart I am: I remember talking to her between set-ups and saying, "So what else are you doing?" and she's like, "Oh, you know, I sing a little bit..." And I'm telling you now, my reaction was like, "Yeah, *whatever*." I guarantee you I totally shined her on. I remember just a few years later thinking, "Oh my God, Lauryn Hill! Shit, she wasn't kidding!"

**EMPIRE:** It's interesting, who you choose to work with...

**SODERBERGH:** My wife wants me to make a T-shirt that says, "You never really know someone until they've directed a movie for you." Working on a film is a really fascinating way to learn about someone. It is impossible not to reveal yourself at some point during the process. That's why I tend to bring people from movie to movie. I really value people who get the way we like to work and have their priorities straight. Clooney and I were both big believers in that, in the 'life's too short' category. We avoided people who were known to be unpleasant or had proven themselves to be unpleasant. I know there are directors who believe that tension is a great motivator. I guarantee you they feel like that in their lives. It's just not me. I think chaos as a subject is really interesting; as a method it's not.

**EMPIRE:** Being 'in charge', you can discover things about others, and yourself, that you'd have happily never realised...

## Your Q

### Do you prefer working with ensemble casts or a few actors?

Sarah Counter, via email  
"They both have their pleasures. There's something interesting about making a movie in a single point of view — whether it's *The Informant!* or *Erin*. But there's also a real pleasure in watching actors bounce off of each other, you know? So it's fun to switch back and forth."

**SODERBERGH:** Yeah. You really have to step back and go... First of all, panicking never solved anything.

The same probably goes for raising your voice or making a nasty remark. The thing to remember is we spend most of our time on this planet telling stories; people just tell stories back and forth. So, what do you want the stories that involve you to be? That's really what it comes down to. I'd rather have the story be, "We were in this terrible situation and Steven didn't lose his cool," as opposed to, "He *lost his shit!*" Now, there are times when you're absolutely justified in reaming somebody out. I mean, they've made a mistake and sometimes it's the kind of mistake you feel like a professional shouldn't make. Those are really difficult situations. The people that know me know when I'm really upset. I just go dead quiet. If somebody comes up to me and says, "I sent all the cars that were supposed to be in this scene back to Los Angeles yesterday...", my response will be, "Okay..." (*Long pause*). Then I will walk away and try to figure out if the scene can be shot without cars! The cars are not going to reappear by my blowing my stack. If you're really evolved then you can come up with something funny to say. But that's hard! You've gotta have a lot of RAM to process a situation quickly and come up with something funny. But if you can do that, then people will throw themselves in front of a bus for you. And that's what I would like.

**EMPIRE:** Is there another trajectory to your career? Were you offered films after sex, lies... that could have taken you in a different direction?

**SODERBERGH:** I don't know... I knew I needed more time in a smaller arena, because I'd only made one feature. I felt I had a lot to learn. So I was trying to explore some things on the side before accepting a high-profile assignment. One of the reasons *Out Of Sight* was such a pressurised situation was that I knew the stakes were really high, creatively: if I fuck this up, then half of the business is going to be off-limits to me. Coming out the other end of it I felt, "Okay, I think I can find a way to operate in the studio system." I had a lot of energy, coming out of *Schizopolis* and *Grey's Anatomy*. I had a lot of ideas. That was a good run: *Out Of Sight*, *The Limey*, *Erin*, *Traffic*, the

first *Ocean's*, in, like, three years. I was feeling, like, "Give me the ball!" And you go through those periods where you're seeing the ball really well and then sometimes you're not seeing the ball well and you just have to keep going.

**EMPIRE:** Do you sense your time is more precious now, because your career feels more finite?

**SODERBERGH:** It's feeling very finite to me. I do want it to conclude at a point where I'm young enough to do something else. It was Rousseau who started painting seriously at 51 and I feel like there are a few things, painting and photography, where I have enough basic skills that if I dedicated myself to them in the way I dedicated myself to film, in five years or more I could become good. That would be great.

**EMPIRE:** But you'd miss it, right?

**SODERBERGH:** No. It's funny; I didn't believe Lester when he said that. Now I do. Actually, I'd miss editing. I edit stuff on my own, things that don't belong to me, just for fun, because it gives me that much pleasure. I have an hour-and-50-minute version of *Heaven's Gate*. I've got a mash-up of Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Van Sant's *Psycho*, which I call *Psychos*. I do that shit just to do it. I think if you ask any filmmaker, "What's the most interesting part?" they'll all say editing. But everything else about it, I wouldn't miss.

**EMPIRE:** So, do you feel you're getting better?

**SODERBERGH:** Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Just in terms of problem-solving and anticipating, I'm better than I was five years ago. Not because I'm smarter, just 'cause the more experience you have, the more you can anticipate. But I feel like I'm better in ways that aren't helping me in the larger sense. It's always good to get better at anything, to work on your corner jump-shot, but it isn't addressing this larger question of mine: is there a new language that I'm missing, that hasn't been created yet? I'm no closer to that than I was 20 years ago.

**EMPIRE:** That's a tough task...

**SODERBERGH:** Yeah, but if you don't move the ball forward, then what are you doing?

[nev@empiremagazine.com](mailto:nev@empiremagazine.com)

**>> The Informant! is out on November 20. The Girlfriend Experience is out on November 27. Both will be reviewed in the next issue.**