

# The Tao of Steve

HE'S YOUR OFFICEMATE, YOUR FAVORITE VIRGIN—AND NOW HE'S TALKING TO GOD. INSIDE THE RESTLESS MIND OF **STEVE CARELL**, HOLLYWOOD'S NEW KING OF COMEDY. BY BROOKE HAUSER PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN SCHOELLER





## I. "HAI-GOO-BA!"

In person, nothing about Steve Carell screams, "Look at me!" He wears his short hair combed, with a side part—a style often found in men's catalogs. He is neither tall nor short, and though he is broad-shouldered and hairy-chested, he doesn't seem burly. With the exception of his thumbs, which are cartoonishly wide and flat and appear to have been bludgeoned by a large rock (think Fred Flintstone, after an incident at the quarry), he is entirely inconspicuous. He could be your dentist, your waiter, your next-door neighbor.

What Steve Carell is *not* is the kind of guy who is used to doing nude scenes in multimillion-dollar productions such as *Evan Almighty*, a spin-off from 2003's *Bruce Almighty*. Sitting fully dressed in a director's chair on a soundstage in Waynesboro, Virginia, the 42-year-old actor relives the moment a few days ago when his character, Evan Baxter, discovers the first sign that God (Morgan Freeman) has chosen him to become a modern-day Noah. Baxter embraces his new image by walking into his yard in nothing but his birthday suit and a long beard.

"I had to wear a pouch held together by a string, not unlike the string that holds on a party mask," Carell says, his hands folded like a second-grader's above his lap. "I asked Will Ferrell about it, because he tends to do things like that. You can't seem to have any sort of inhibition. Or shame. Or absolute horror at your own physical presence. I know I'm not a woman's fantasy man; I don't have to uphold this image of male beauty, so that's kind of a relief in a way." He cocks his head to one side and smiles. "I don't know if that's the right word for it. It's very sad... I'm a character actor—that's what it comes down to."

Carell is one character actor who is quickly scaling Hollywood's A-list, thanks to last year's \$109 million-grossing *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, which he starred in, cowrote, and executive-produced. Although he has the comic chops to go big-top broad, he is perhaps better known for being disarmingly subtle, in roles such as *Virgin*'s Andy Stitzer or minorly tragic paper-plant boss Michael Scott (for which he won a

"THERE'S NOTHING DANGEROUS ABOUT STEVE CARELL—UNTIL HE PERFORMS," SAYS STEPHEN COLBERT.

Golden Globe) on NBC's *The Office*.

Given the enormity of *Evan Almighty*—which finds Baxter promoted from newsroom bully to New York state congressman—it's hard to believe that just a few years ago Carell warned friends and family that his scenes as Bruce's nemesis might get cut. The *Evan* set itself is nothing short of biblical: On a dirt lot in the small town of Crozet, the production team has erected the wooden ribs of a 450-foot-long ark, complete with a barn loft and working wheel. Base camp, an endless maze of trucks and tents, is practically visible from the moon.

Today, due to rain, director Tom Shadyac (*Liar Liar*, *Bruce Almighty*) has relocated to the soundstage, where they are filming a scene in which Evan drives his family to their new home. Pointing to a brochure, he promises that their posh housing development has something for everyone: a playground, three lighted basketball courts, even a man-made lake to fish in.

Despite the breeze outdoors, the air inside is as hot and clingy as a wet wool sweater, making Carell, locked into a Hummer with his onscreen wife (*Gilmore Girls*' Lauren Graham) and three sons, break into a furious sweat. Between takes, he holds a pocket fan up to his face and blots his T-zone in mock panic. As afternoon turns into evening, everyone gets worn down; dialogue starts coming out like glue. Frustrated when he flubs a line, Carell finally curses: "Damn it!"

Just when the crew seem ready to ask, "Are we there yet?" Shadyac gives the actors permission to loosen up. That's when the magic happens: In a matter of seconds, Carell transforms into a male Vanna White, showcasing the features of the neighborhood: "Swing sets, et al., and a bocce ball court!" he says, flashing a smile as cheesy as a bag of Doritos. In another take, he does a straight run-through only to end by swerving the wheel of the Hummer and screaming, "DEER!"

Shaking silently, Shadyac and his crew bow their heads as if in prayer as Carell tosses out line after line, without breaking character:

"Here it is. Our little slice of nirvana—not the group!"  
[glaring at the oldest boy, who's listening to music on an iPod] "Turn it down, PLEEEASE. I can hear it through your earlobes."

"And now something for our fisherman... Fish! Maybe we'll see a snake... eating a fish!"

Even his flubs come out funny: "And here we are... HAI-GOO-BA!"

## II. "YES, AND..."

There are two kinds of comics: those who try to be funny (Jerry Lewis, Jim Carrey) and those who are funny without trying. Steve Carell belongs in the second category. Off-camera, he is not a laugh-a-minute kind of guy, but as with everyone, if you scratch the surface, you'll find a bundle of amusing aberrations and quirks. For instance, he doesn't have much of a CD collection, but he knows all the words to Outkast's

"Hey Ya!" (According to his *Virgin* costar Paul Rudd, he has the best falsetto in show business: "He can go as high as Brian Wilson, and I wouldn't be surprised to find out he could go as low as Barry White if he needed to.") A Revolutionary War buff, he once played the fife in a re-created British regiment in his native Massachusetts. And, says his wife, Nancy Walls, "I think it's strange that he puts his clothes on after taking a shower, without drying off. It's just not part of his regimen."

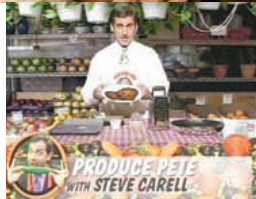
Although Carell may be oblivious to some of his idiosyncrasies, he realizes that therein lies the laugh. "I just think it's funnier when characters are not aware of their foibles and shortcomings. That's what makes them human," he says in his trailer, surrounded by photos of his wife and their kids, ages five and two. "It's a fairly common rule of thumb that you don't condescend, and you don't comment on your character while you're playing it."

Audiences will see him taking this rule to heart in July's ensemble comedy *Little Miss Sunshine*, where he plays a gay Proust scholar who goes on a road trip with his family in a sputtering Volkswagen van. "The character had just tried to commit suicide, was in the depths of depression; there was nothing funny about life to him," says Carell. "The way he fits into the rest of his family—everyone is a misfit and so out of place—that to me is funny." He lights up. "You know what? I think a character in a comedy should not know they're in a comedy."

Whether riding out an awkward pause or straightening his tie to signal distress, Carell has made an art of life's outtakes and deleted scenes. In *Virgin*, he distilled his character's dorkiness down to a monologue about making the perfect egg-salad sandwich. "We wanted to establish that his life was boring, and we had scripted a long description of him taking all his electrical cords and putting them in tubing so that the apartment looks cleaner," says Judd Apatow, *Virgin*'s cowriter and director. "At the end of it, I said, 'Do a different one.' And he spit out that egg-salad sandwich story. It feels like a well-written piece of comedy material, but it was off the top of his head."

Carell's costars and directors are consistently awed by his ability to pull whole scenes out of thin air. "You hardly ever yell 'Cut.' You just let Steve go until the film runs out," says Will Ferrell, his costar in *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*, in which Carell plays Brick Tamland, a weatherman who speaks in non sequiturs. "Once we established the joke that Brick was not all there, Steve was so fun to watch. He can just go into all these different rants, like, 'I ate a red candle.' 'I ate some fiberglass... ohhh, my stomach is itchy.' You just kind of sit back and marvel at it. It's the closest thing to divine intervention in a way, because it either hits you or it doesn't."

As mysterious as good improv may seem, Carell, who sharpened his skills at Chicago's Second City, doesn't shy away from trying to explain his method. "The main thrust of it is just listening," he says. "There were devices like, 'Yes, and...'; meaning, if someone says something, you agree and add to it. They may seem like playground games, but it breaks patterns when you're forced to just respond and not feel embarrassed. If there's a sense of reality to it, of something that's organic to the scene... " He stops and rolls his eyes. "Oh my God. 'And (Continued on page 118)



1) CARELL IN *EVAN ALMIGHTY*, DUE SUMMER 2007. 2) AS THE DEPRESSED PROUST SCHOLAR (WITH PAUL DANO) IN JULY'S *LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE*. 3) A *DAILY SHOW* SKETCH. 4) SPOUTING STRANGE EPITHETS DURING THE CHEST-WAXING SCENE IN *THE 40-YEAR-OLD VIRGIN*. "WHAT'S MOST IMPRESSIVE ABOUT HIM TO ME," SAYS ALAN ARKIN, CARELL'S COSTAR IN *SUNSHINE*, "IS THE JOY HE EXUDES WHEN HE'S WORKING."

PREVIOUS SPREADS: STYLIST, TERESA; LOCAN; GROOMING, JANE CHOI; PROP STYLING, ETHAN TORMAN; PREVIOUS SPREAD: JACOB AND PAINTS; ARMY NAVY; BOOTS, TIMBERLAND. THIS PAGE: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: MATTI NELSON/UNIVERSAL PICTURES; ERIC LEE; SUZANNE HANCOCK/UNIVERSAL PICTURES; PRODUCED BY THE NORMAL COLLECTION; COURTESY OF COMEDY CENTRAL.

## Steve Carell

(Continued from page 60)

now, Steve Carell on the *Actors Studio*.”

In improv, as opposed to real life, Carell doesn't have time to overthink. He just goes. In a matter of nanoseconds, the normally mild-mannered comedian can access the kind of pre-civilized, hysterical behavior usually displayed by psychotics and small children. Second City owner Andrew Alexander recalls one sketch about an abusive spelling-bee moderator: “It was that craziness of Steve that you always were surprised by, knowing him offstage. He was just a normal guy.”

“I always think that Steve and Will Ferrell are similar because they're very nice men who do not seem to have any major neuroses,” says Apatow. “I don't think [comic talent] is about the fact that you were raised by a madam at a brothel. Some people are just smart and somehow were influenced to look at the world from a weird angle.”

“Maybe many years from now they'll discover Steve has a room in his house where he's bitten the heads off of dolls,” jokes Rainn Wilson, Carell's costar on *The Office*. “They'll find, like, eight thousand dolls with their heads chewed off. But that would be it. There wouldn't be any drugs, he never cheated on his wife, no alcohol in the equation—just one really weird thing that is ultimately discovered about Steve Carell.”

### III. CHEST-WAXING, BINGE DRINKING, AND A TUBFUL OF CRISCO

As off-the-wall as he sometimes gets when working, in real life Carell is as conscientious as a Cub Scout. Raised by an electrical engineer and a homemaker in the affluent Boston suburb of Concord, he is the youngest of four sons. When he wasn't playing hockey, lacrosse, or soccer at Middlesex School, he performed in musicals and jazz band.

“There were only ninety people in our class, so it wasn't like you had the theater kids and the band kids and the athletes,” he says. “There weren't any lines drawn that way, like, ‘Oh, that's uncool.’ Whatever made you happy.”

For Carell, that “whatever” turned out to be comedy. But try to ask a straight man when he first knew he was funny, and you'll come up empty-handed. “It's such a hard question to answer because I don't think of myself as funny—I don't fill up a room with my humor, ‘as it were,’” he says, hanging air quotes. “I would fail miserably as a stand-up comedian.”

Still, he was interested enough in performing to major in theater, as well as history, at Denison University in Ohio. After graduating, Carell flirted with the idea of going to law school, but ended up taking a string of odd jobs, including “working at the post office,

in the produce department of the supermarket, and many, many waitering jobs, from Howard Johnson's to the Hard Rock Cafe and Houlihan's—all fine dining establishments.”

In the late '80s, he joined Second City, where he met his future *Daily Show* colleague Stephen Colbert. The duo started out by performing skits for corporate parties. “We did this circus idea,” says Colbert. “I was a ringmaster, like *Novell*—a carnival of solutions!” And Steve acted out what I was saying. He would do shtick in front of the audience, like walk an imaginary tightrope or do pratfalls, to buy me time till I could remember the difference between NetWare, network, shareware, and freeware. I wish I could say we had this tremendous experience together, and that's where we became friends. It was actually doing the worst possible job.”

Colbert later wrote a sketch for the two of them titled “Maya With Steve.” In it, Carell played himself accompanying his friend to his hometown, only to discover to his dawning horror that Colbert thinks he's a charismatic, Maya Angelou—like black woman named Shirley Wentworth. “Steve can be enormous,” Colbert says. “I used to say to him, ‘We're going to need to film you in IMAX because that's the only way to capture a performance this large.’ But this was the first time I remember him saying, ‘I want to see how *small* I can do this.’”

It wasn't until he was 30 and an improv teacher that Carell met Walls, a Second City student who also tended bar across the street. The pair were perfectly suited to each other in that they both were—and still are—shy. “He would come into the bar, and I would give him his Diet Coke—he's a huge Diet Coke fan, that's his only vice, I think,” says Walls, 39. “It was one of those, ‘Well, what if I were to . . . ask you out . . . some time.’ It was really vague and very circuitous. Finally, it sort of ended with, ‘Oh, so you want to go out, right?’ ‘Yeah, is that what you're saying?’ On our first date, we went to a jazz club and just kind of talked.”

After they got married, the couple moved to New York City, where Walls was cast on *Saturday Night Live* and, following a stint on *The Dana Carvey Show*, Carell joined Jon Stewart and his band of political pranksters on *The Daily Show*. There, Carell learned two important tenets of fake-news correspondence: **1. Always make yourself look like the idiot—not your subject.** “The first field piece I did involved a man who lived in Nebraska and referred to his trailer as a ‘venom research

facility,’ which was, in actuality, a trailer full of snakes. And he was also an Elvis impersonator,” says Carell. “I thought, ‘Incredibly quirky person, very sweet, really had done no harm to anyone, and didn't deserve to be mocked.’ So, I decided I would assume a character who was a complete ass, and that would be funny in and of itself.”

**2. Even if the news is fake, everything else should be real.** For a segment he did with Colbert on binge drinking, Carell went all the way: “I started with a glass of wine, then a Bailey's, then a screwdriver, then a beer, then a shot of Jägermeister—they ran out of tape before the real story began,” he says, turning a bit green at the memory. “Oh, I got so sick. [Stephen] pretty much wheelbarrowed me into his car and put towels on the floor as he drove me back to New Jersey. He said, ‘If you have to, roll down the window.’ I didn't. I threw up into the window, and it dripped down into the mechanism inside his door.”

Carell has spent the last 20-plus years paying his dues in blood, sweat, and vomit, proving he'll do almost anything for a great reaction shot. (Who could forget Jon Stewart's face when he ate from a tubful of Crisco on the air?) But the actor, who made his film debut as “Tesio” in 1991's *Curly Sue*, says he never anticipated a big break: “I thought at best I'd be the wacky second banana on a sitcom. I never thought I'd be the lead in a movie.” And yet, in the next couple of years, he is scheduled to headline three movies in addition to *Evan Almighty*: a romantic comedy, *Dan in Real Life*, opposite Juliette Binoche; an adaptation of the late-'60s TV series *Get Smart*; and a comedy he describes as “a heterosexual male love story.”

Clearly, the weirdness of it all is still sinking in, as is the realization that his life will never be “normal” again. Drinking a Diet Coke, Carell is palpably quiet amid the glow of klieg lights and Virginia fog that envelops the ark at night. He points to a small figure making his way across the highest beam and whispers, more to himself than anyone else, “That's my stunt double. *What?* How did I get a stunt double?”

### IV. “A BURLAP THONG . . . AND SANDALS”

Surrounded by half a dozen molds of his head, each in a different stage of Evan Baxter's hirsute transformation from man to myth, Carell sits Zen-like in the special-effects makeup trailer. Having donned the “Unabomber”

beard earlier, he is now getting the “Ten Commandments” treatment, as Oscar-winning designer David Leroy Anderson (*Men in Black*) painstakingly applies strands of long auburn hair to his face. “It's from my chest,” the actor jokes, moving his mouth carefully. “It's what they ripped off.” “Actually,” a stylist interjects, “I think it's from Europe.”

After about three hours, Carell is sent to the ark. Standing in an orange-red cloud of dust, he does a few runs of a scene in which Evan decides he doesn't want to work for God anymore and throws a hammer on the ground, declaring to the moonlit sky: “I quit! Get somebody else to build your ark!”

Though she's not in the scene tonight, Graham soon shows up with her father and stepmother, who have surely come as much for the star sighting as they have to see an ark in the middle of Virginia. Carell quickly shifts into gear as their host. Never mind the fact that he's dressed like a biblical character; once he's in improv mode, he might as well be serving chips and dip.

GRAHAM: [*eyeing Carell's burlap robe*]

Ooh, natural fibers—I like. What are you wearing underneath?

CARELL: Actually, a burlap thong . . . and sandals.

GRAHAM: That's very Brando of you.

CARELL: Yeah. [*shrugs*] I'm Methody. ●