

Talks at GS

With actor, director and former NYC firefighter Steve Buscemi

And Steve McGuinness, global head of Alumni Relations

September 8, 2021

Steve McGuinness: Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to *Talks at GS*. We are tremendously lucky to have Steve Buscemi with us here today. As I'm sure you all know, Steve is a world-famous actor, has been in many iconic films and TV series. Among them, *Fargo*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *The Big Lebowski*, *The Sopranos*, *Boardwalk Empire*, and of late, *Miracle Workers*. What many of you may not know was that before that, in the early 1980s, Steve was a New York City firefighter and going back to Tuesday, 11th September 2001, Steve, after being away from the department for over 15 years, made his way to downtown to the site of the attacks and worked tirelessly from that period on to work with his brother firefighters in terms of helping with the recovery. And Steve, it's a great honor to have you here today.

Steve Buscemi: Thank you so much. It's great to be here.

Steve McGuinness: We have a lot to get through. First of all, I just want to chat a little bit about some of your recent work. *Miracle Workers* just wrapped up. Excuse me, is about to wrap up in a week or so season three. Very different kind of show.

Maybe you could tell the audience how you got involved in that and how it came about.

Steve Buscemi: Well, it's an anthology show. So, each season has a different theme. So, in the first season, it was set in heaven and I played God. That was appealing. It was kind of a very sort of inept God. He was confused, and he had started, you know, the world, but he sort of lost track of what to do. So, and part of the appeal was the cast. Daniel Radcliffe played was more of like an angel. And so, we had some nice names. And then in the second year, it was set in the Dark Ages, and I was a shit shoveler. So, it was a bit of a demotion, but a lot of fun.

[0:02:13]

And then this season, it's a western. It's the Oregon Trail and I play outlaw. And so, each season is so much fun and I've always loved doing comedy. And so, it's nice to be on a show where I get to a TV series where you usually play the same character year after year, but to play a different character each season is great.

Steve McGuinness: Excellent. And you have – you know, clearly, you're trying to get across a bit of a different message. As you men – you mentioned the role of God. I saw the whole first season and it's kind of like every man, every woman. They just have all kinds of struggles every day. I'm not sure about what they should be doing. Almost can't make decisions times.

Steve Buscemi: He's a very human God in a way who's just overwhelmed. And in the end, it takes teamwork to, you know, save the world. Literally save the world. But that is usually the theme of each season is that you have to learn to work together if you really want to accomplish what you're setting out to accomplish and helping each other is a good thing.

Steve McGuinness: Right. Before we get to work with the FDNY, I just wanted to talk about another movie you did last year, *King of Staten Island*, where surprise, you find yourself back in the firehouse.

Steve Buscemi: You know, this is the first time I've played a firefighter. It took like 30 years to be able to be cast. Usually like they want to cast me as the arsonist. I finally got to play a firefighter and like a senior guy and the chauffeur, you know, the one who drives the truck and to work with Pete Davidson, you know, was just amazing. I've always loved him. I loved him when he first started on SNL and then to learn of his story, that his dad was a firefighter who was killed on 9/11 just endeared me to him even more. So, it was – that was a special one.

[0:04:12]

Steve McGuinness: Yeah. I mean, in a way it's fascinating because you, you kind of helped save his life. You look out for him at a very tough time in the film. He has nowhere to live, nowhere to go.

Steve Buscemi: [inaudible] in the firehouse. That's rare. I mean, you don't – they usually wouldn't.

Steve McGuinness: It's against the rules.

Steve Buscemi: It's against the rules, but because he was the son of a firefighter who was killed on 9/11, they made an exception. And it's – they're interesting to help out. And my character knew Pete's character's dad, you know, in the film so it was my character that got to tell him what his dad was really like, and that he wasn't, you know? Yeah. He was a hero, but he was a regular guy. He was a goofball just like you. When Pete hears that, you know, the humanization of his dad, I think, I think it really helps them. There's a lot of these kids who lost their dads or any – or a parent on 9/11 and didn't really get to know them and they become mythologized and oftentimes, kids feel like they can't live up to right, to their parent, you know? So I think it's important. Yes. They're heroes, but they were human.

Steve McGuinness: Right, flawed.

Steve Buscemi: Flawed.

Steve McGuinness: Very good. So, the fan base out here, any hints on any new projects coming up? Are we going to see season four potentially for *Miracle Workers*?

Steve Buscemi: Hopefully. We haven't gotten the official word yet, but hopefully that will happen. I just got back from LA where I directed a feature film that I'm not in, but it's all about mental health issues. It's Tessa Thompson plays a helpline worker. It's like a warm line, you know. It's not an emergency line, and she works at home because of the pandemic and she's the only character in it.

[0:06:05]

And she takes calls all night and all of the calls are off-camera. So, you only see her, you hear the people, but it's just about her navigating her way through this evening, through the night. And then she gets one call towards the end where she reveals a lot of herself to help the person who's calling. And it's very moving and Tessa Thompson is amazing, and it's called *The Listener*.

Steve McGuinness: Right. Very good. Well, we'll be on the lookout for that. Going back to your firefighting career, which you were a firefighter from 1980 to 1984. And how did you decide to join the Fire Department?

Steve Buscemi: Wasn't my idea. It's, I mean, as a kid, you know, I loved seeing fire trucks like any kid would, but I had no desire to be a firefighter. My dad worked for the Department of Sanitation in Brooklyn, I grew up a little bit in Eastern New York, Brooklyn, and my dad worked in Brownsville for 30 years. And he just, you know, I think knew that me and my brothers probably weren't going to go to college

based on, you know, our high school results of, you know, how we didn't in school. So, he was looking after us. He says, look, when you're 18, if you're still living under my roof, you're going to take whatever civil service test comes up.

So, for me it was the fire department. So, I was lucky. And not only did I take the test, but you know, he made sure that I trained for it, you know, because they had places that you can go to that would specifically train you for the test. And also, he knew how to get the – and this is all available, but most people don't know it, you can get the written tests from years before. And so, I studied those and I passed. I, like I did, okay. My name was put on a list, and I sort of forgot about it. And it took them four years to get to my name on the list.

[0:08:18]

And by that time, I was living in Long Island when I took the test. But that time I was living in the city, working as a furniture mover and trying to do acting. I had done some stand up, and I was taking acting classes. And then when it came up, you know, my dad was like, this is it, right? You're joining, right? And I was like, okay, I guess I'll join. And I was reluctant at first because not only because of the dangers of the job, but because I just didn't see myself, you know, doing that for 20 years, I really wanted to be an actor. My dad would tell me, we'll put it in your 20 and you could retire at half pay and then do all the acting you want, you know? And well, it doesn't work that way, but I was able to, you know, still do plays while I was on the fire department.

And once the guys in the firehouse – once they got winded, oh, they found out about, I was an actor. Oh yeah. They found out and they gave me hell for it, but they also came to the plays and they, you know, they, considered me an oddball, but, but I was accepted. You know, they liked me. And then I told them I was taking a leave of absence and they thought I was crazy. Of course. Nobody leaves this job. Nobody and I wasn't leaving. I thought I'll take a leave of absence, but eventually I'll go back.

Steve McGuinness: Did you have a particular role you were offered or?

Steve Buscemi: Yeah, I was – well I was doing a play with my buddy John Jesurun who I had done plays with before. And at the same time, I was filming this very low budget, independent film called *Parting Glances*, and I had a great role in it. And I just couldn't do everything. I couldn't do three things at once, you know, a job, a play and a film. So, I took three months off, extended that to six months, then to a year. And then I just decided my opportunities are now I have to, you know, be there if I get an audition or if I get a play or a film and it's, you know, and I have to travel. So, I just made my decision and I was naive, you know. Like I – but it was sometimes it's good to be naive because you can be a little bit braver.

[0:10:41]

Steve McGuinness: Right. Fantastic. Do you remember your first fire?

Steve Buscemi: Yeah. it was a warehouse fire along the westside highway and a pier fire. There was a warehouse on a pier and it was my – this was my first time with the nozzle where I was the front guy, you know with the hose. And we went in and, you know, a lot of smoke and then it was just, it was an office within the warehouse that was engulfed in flames. And we worked our way towards it. And I'll never forget my captain, Captain Shulkin saying, all right, Stevie, we're going in. And when I heard those words, my first thought was why, what? It's on fire. Alright, we're supposed to stay put. This is what we're supposed to do. And it was, you know, and it was over fairly quickly. And it was just sort of amazing. It's like, oh, it works.

You, you know, you do that, the water comes out, there are guys backing me up and you put the fire out and then you back out. And that sense of, you know, danger and accomplishment was just very thrilling and you immediately see why they love this job, you know? And then afterwards, the comradeship that you feel with your fellow firefighters, you know, because you've been through an experience and that most people will never get to experience. And yeah, it was then I sort of like, then I fell in love. Yeah.

Steve McGuinness: The nozzle. Is that on the engine or the truck? If you could explain this to the audience.

Steve Buscemi: Sure. So, there's the engine company and there's the hook and ladder company, which is sometimes called the truck company and the entering company, their job primarily is to put water on fire. So, we're the ones that go in with the hose. And the hook and ladder company, they're responsible for breaking in, you know, like if the doors are locked, they're busting down the doors, they're ventilating. And they're making rescues if there was a rescue to be made, but, you know, I mean, you work as a team and you know, they it's – a fire is described as organized chaos.

[0:13:11]

You know, there is a plan, there is – there's protocol. But it, you hear this glass breaking, there's smoke, you're wearing a mask. Like, it gets fogged up. You're worried if you're breathing too hard, that you're going to use up all your air and you hear a lot of yelling and, you know, and, but you get through it, you know if you just follow what the plan is. That said, there's no such thing as a routine fire, you know. Oftentimes, you know, fatalities happen when you think, oh, okay, this is, you know, like it's not – it's not too bad. We know what we're doing. And then something happens. Something can go wrong, not the fault of anybody doing anything wrong, but a situation can get, can escalate very quickly.

Steve McGuinness: Okay. In terms of that culture you described, Goldman Sachs is known for having a tremendously strong corporate culture. 150 years plus of our

existence. How would you describe the culture in the firehouse with those men and women?

Steve Buscemi: I mean, first of all, you're living together in a house. The firehouse does become your second home and oftentimes, you'll work 24-hour shifts. So, you're there for quite a while. And, you know, you go out and shop for your meals and make the meals and you basically do housework when you're there because you sleep in the bunk room and the next day, you know, you do the laundry, you clean the toilets. So, there's all that stuff. And so, it's a very sort of domesticated with these, you know, people that you're living with. And sometimes, you know, like any family, you can get on each other's nerves, or you'd like to, you know, bus chops. And so, there's a lot of, you know, horseplay and there's a lot of pranks and there's just a lot of jokes. And it's fun.

I mean, it's, you know, being in a firehouse is if you get along with everybody, it's a really special place to work. And then at any given time, you're, you know, woken up in the middle of the night, whenever it is, and you're out, and there's a fully involved building, you know? And then that's the real work. Yeah. And that's when you really have to depend on each other. And it doesn't matter if you like each other, you have to respect each other and depend on each other.

[0:15:58]

Steve McGuinness: In any book you read or any movie you've seen, or a TV series a lot goes on in that kitchen, in that firehouse. Anything you could share with the audience on that? Anecdotes, or, I mean, it seems like the White House war room at times, but then other times it's like a college dorm.

Steve Buscemi: It is. I mean, you know, it's also the place where, you know, after every – so we call them jobs, you know, so a fire is called a job. After every job you go back and then you talk about it in the kitchen, and there's also training. You know. There's the cleaning of the tools, like keeping everything in shape. So, it is a mixture of, you know, you're always sort of in training and keeping everything up to date. But yeah, a lot of the times you're just sitting around, and you know, having a dinner and just living. I can't tell any of these stories, but they can get pretty salty.

Steve McGuinness: Okay. Very good. The morning of 9/11, as someone who lived in and around the city most of your life and someone who was in that job and role, can you describe what that morning was like for you on Tuesday, 11th September 2001 when you heard about what was going on?

Steve Buscemi: Well, it was very surreal. I was actually at LaGuardia Airport. I was on my way to the Toronto Film Festival. And I was supposed to go the day before, but I wanted to go the next day because it was Primary Day and I wanted to vote, you know? And so, I voted at like 06.00 and then got in the car and then went to

LaGuardia. Had no idea what was going on until I got there and saw, you know, on the news, on a TV, a bunch of people were watching it and nobody could really take in the news. Like it would just seem, and like they were – it felt like they were reporting it wrong. Like the commercial plane, what? This doesn't make sense. I still went to my gate and then they cancelled the flight.

[0:18:08]

I went down to the ticket office, and they shut down the airport. That's when I was my first inkling, oh, this is serious. And as I was leaving, a flight attendant was coming in. And even though we were told that two planes had hit, you could tell that nobody was really believing, and a flight attendant was coming in. And she said, they just hit the Pentagon, you know? And that's when I really believed, oh, this is terrorism, this is really serious. And I somehow managed to get back to Brooklyn and like everybody else just watched it on TV that day. I picked up my son from school, a friend – a friend of his who lived in Manhattan, his parents couldn't get into Brooklyn. So, we took his friend home and we just – I just was, you know, sort of in shock and numb, like everybody that first day.

And it wasn't until I heard the reports later of how many firefighters were missing, that it became not real. I mean, I don't want to use that word because I knew it was real that, you know, thousands of people were missing, but that's when, you know, for me ... so that's what it became. I'm going to know people, I'm going to know, I know what these guys are going through, so I, you know, I would call the firehouse, but couldn't get through. And it was, so I went down the next day to the

firehouse and luckily, one of the firefighters was coming back from there and he saw me, and he told me who was missing, and he drove me in. And then I just walked around for a couple of hours. And then I found my company Engine 55 because they were missing five members.

So, they were allowed access like on the pile. And I asked if I could help. I had my turnout coat, my helmet. Worked with them for a few hours, went back to the firehouse. And they said, if you want to come back with us, just show up in the morning at the firehouse and we'll make sure that you're with us. So, I did that for less than a week. And yeah, after, you know, the fifth day, I was there, I was mostly standing around and not really, you know, going much. And that's when I realized I don't want to be an extra body here, you know, but in the beginning, everybody was just removing the rubble, these bucket lines where you're just, you know, and then every once in a while a body bag would be asked for.

[0:20:57]

And there was a makeshift morgue and you had fathers looking for their sons, you know guys looking for their brothers and just the humanity. You know, just the effort that I witnessed was just ... I hope I never have to witness anything like that again. But I felt privileged to be there, you know that I had access to be there. And I say this all the time, I went there to help, but it helped me being there, you know, because they let me in. You know, it was – to just witness that humanity. And that love, it was pure love, you know, in the aftermath of, you know, extreme evil that was just you know, it was good for my heart. It wasn't until I stopped going there

that I started to experience anxiety, depression. I'm sure a fair amount of post-traumatic stress. And just so while I was there, you know, it, that was – to me, I didn't want to be any place else. And I felt privileged to be working alongside my brothers and sisters and, you know, all the volunteers and all, you know, the steelworkers, construction workers, police, sanitation, Red Cross, you know, it was just an amazing thing to experience and to be a part of.

Steve McGuinness: Truly amazing. Going back to the culture again, there's I have several friends and people I grew up with, I've known most of my life. They've been on the job still over 30 years and still going at it and they don't want to leave. And they, it means that much to them. And, you know, unfortunately the 9/11 tragedy has probably some something to do with that, as well as you mentioned. You've been working on a couple of documentaries with HBO one back in 2014, right, which you did. *A Good Job: Stories of the FDNY*. Why don't you tell the audience a little bit?

Steve Buscemi: That was when I was, you know, doing *Boardwalk Empire* and I have a production company, Olive Productions and my producing partner, Wren Arthur and I had a meeting with Sheila Nevins who ran the documentary division, and we were pitching all these other ideas, you know, documentaries and Sheila looked at me. She says, Steve, you were a firefighter. Don't you ever want to do something on the fire department? And actually, I was sort of intimidated to do anything about the fire department, because I felt like I'm too close to it. I know all – you

know, like I know them. If I get those wrong, I'm just, I'm like going to hear a lot of uptake – take a lot of gruff for it.

[0:24:08]

So, but then I started thinking about it and I thought, yeah, why not? And as long as I didn't direct it and Wren, you know, she's great. She found that the director, Liz Garbus documentary filmmaker whose work I knew, so Liz directed it and we all pitched in and helped get the people that we were interviewing. And it did, you know basically it just tells you what the job was like and what they go through. And of course, it touched on 9/11, but one of the things that 9/11 brought out was that, you know, firefighters, they've always been going through this and going through dramatic fires and losing people, you know not as on the bigger scale as 9/11, but what we were finding out was they needed help too, you know? And so that was one of the things about 9/11 that brought out that these guys needed counseling. These, you know, that they, that they needed help and firefighters are not always adept at even realizing that they need help. You know, they're used to helping others. And for them to ask for help is huge. And even though the fire department has its own counseling unit, a lot of the members just, they just don't want to go that route.

So, in the last year, around the same time, you know, I started working with this group called Friends of Firefighters and they operate outside the fire department and they provide free mental health services to firefighters and their families.

Active firefighters, firefighters, retired firefighters, which is important because, like I said, a lot of firefighters before 9/11, you know, they were still suffering from post-traumatic stress. And so, they operate out of an old firehouse in Brooklyn which is great for the guys because – I can't, and I should say firefighters, it's men and women, it's open to all. And it gives them a place to go to that they feel comfortable in, you know, that there's a firehouse kitchen and there's, you know, you see some of the old-timers and so it just makes it a little bit easier for them to ... they feel safer in that environment.

[0:26:48]

Steve McGuinness: Total of 343 firefighters died from the attack, 75 firehouses lost at least one team member. So, it was very indiscriminate. Every rank, every division, every arm was touched. And you have the ongoing issue of the cancers from the air and the dust and removing them rubble because everything was which we pulverized. How have they recovered so strongly?

Steve Buscemi: It's been very, very difficult, you know. You would hear guys say to each other on the pile, you know, oh, I bet this is going to kill us in 20 years. It didn't take 20. It took, you know, like the first cases were showing up in five years and we're losing a lot of first responders to 9/11-related cancer. And so, it's like there, you know, it just never ends for some of these firefighters and their families. And thank God that the funding, you know, the compensation fund has now been implemented, you know, that it's permanent because it used to be that they had

to go back like every five years and lobby Congress. And so, Wren and I got involved in another film called *Dust*, which was made by a firefighter's daughter.

Her name is Bridget Gormley, and she lost her dad because he was on the pile, he's a firefighter and he was lost to cancer. And she just made a film about what these firefighters and their families, and not only, you know, and these people who just lived in that area, what they're going through and why they need, you know, our support and funding. So, they don't have to keep fighting to just get their basic needs met. So that's a film that we're very proud to be a part of. And hopefully that will be – we're having a screening tomorrow night and we're hoping that it will be seen in a, you know, wider venue soon.

Steve McGuinness: Steve, we want on behalf of everyone, thank you for the tremendous session here with us. And we wish you all the best of health and continued success and keep turning out that great products.

Steve Buscemi: Thank you so much. I really enjoyed talking with you and I enjoyed talking with everybody here and good luck to everybody.