



Steve Carell is so good at playing the slightly defeated, dishevelled everyman (think Michael Scott in *The Office*, Andy Stitzer in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* and Cal Weaver in *Crazy, Stupid, Love*), you sort of expect him to be like that in life.

Except, of course, he's not. When I meet up with him on a sweltering Los Angeles day at Soho House, a celebrity stomping ground on Sunset Boulevard, he's infinitely more handsome – and younger-looking – than his onscreen self, and certainly better dressed.

Ask him why he's so good at playing, for want of a better word, "losers", he laughs. "I'm not cool in life – I get excited when there are cargo pants on sale in Target," he says. "I relate to them to a degree, but it's really not something I've been drawn to. I'm usually drawn to the absurdist comedy of these characters and the darkness they tend to inhabit, but also to the uplifting quality they all usually have."

What about the fact his characters are often fairly hopeless with women? Carell, who's been married to his wife Nancy for 17 years, smiles. "In terms of marital relationships, I don't think you necessarily need to have gone through something to play it. Having said that, I guess I must have a pathetic face."

In his latest film, *Seeking A Friend for the End of the World*, Carell plays Dodge, a man beaten down by life. He works in a miserable insurance job, is in an awful marriage and navigates life as if in a permanent sleepwalk. Even an unstoppable meteor hurtling towards Earth, ready to obliterate humankind, can't jolt Dodge out of his malaise. While the rest of his friends >

MISTER *nice guy*

HE'S CARVED A NICHE AS THE LOSER WITH A HEART OF GOLD, BUT STEVE CARELL'S COMEDIC TURNS ARE FUELLED BY THE DARKNESS THAT SHADES THE LAUGHS. BY TIFFANY BAKKER

CELEBRITY

and neighbours go on benders as they wait for the end of days, Dodge dutifully reports to work at a nearly empty office, seeking solace in routine. It's not until he meets Penny (Keira Knightley), one of the neighbours he's previously ignored, that he has an awakening of sorts.

"I found that funny," says Carell. "I thought, what an odd choice – that you'd continue to work. But, on a certain level, it makes sense people might do that for comfort's sake, because they really have no idea what to do." (For the record, Carell says if the world were about to end, he'd "eat as much junk food as possible" or "have as much sex as possible".)

In the film, his real-life wife plays his onscreen wife, who ditches him by hopping out of their car and running off (the couple have also worked together on *Saturday Night Live*, *The Daily Show* and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*). "The scene where she dumps me was shot on our wedding anniversary, which was ironic," says Carell. "What an extremely

parents. He did a Huggies commercial as a toddler and acted in children's theatre, but always saw acting as a hobby. He pursued his interest in history at university and had applied to law school ("it looked good on paper"), but his heart wasn't in it. That's when his parents stepped in.

"With their prompting, I went through all the things I'd grown up doing and enjoying. They're the ones who said I should try acting because it gave me joy. They said, 'Give it a shot. It's your life, you should be happy.'"

He's forever grateful for their support. "Parents are usually the ones saying you need to get a real job and make a living. So they instilled that in me – don't worry about the safety net; you have to live your life and be fulfilled by whatever you do."

After graduating from Ohio's Denison

leading role in 2005's *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*. In the same year, he took on the Ricky Gervais role in the US version of *The Office*, which earned him a Golden Globe and several Emmy nominations – and which, to the surprise of many, he left in 2010. "It was the right time," he says. "Acting and comedy don't have a safety net, but my safety net was being on a TV show. The scariest thing is to move on from something that works and is fun."

Ultimately, his decision to leave *The Office* came down to his kids: Annie, 11, and Johnny, 8. "I wanted to spend time with them and enjoy them as little kids. It's been great. We've been able to go on vacations and explore and do things."

The actor reckons he's not a strict dad, but no softy, either. "It's important for kids to have structure and respect. It helps build

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(from left) Carell and wife Nancy; taking home an Emmy Award as part of the cast of *The Office* in 2006; with Keira Knightley in *Seeking A Friend for the End of the World*.

romantic way to spend our anniversary. She shot me some daggers, didn't she?" he laughs. "Actually, the director came up to me afterwards and said, 'Wow, her eyes were saying some really major stuff to you.' It's like, 'Yeah, I don't want to see that at home.'"

Despite his success, comedy was never where Carell imagined himself. He wanted to be a dramatic actor. "Comedy was more a result of what I was hired to do, as opposed to something I sought out," he explains. "When I decided to pursue acting, I just wanted to be employed. But the jobs I was hired for were consistently comedic in nature. I didn't go into it as a comedian per se, and I'd never done stand-up or anything like that."

The youngest of four brothers, Carell grew up in Massachusetts and was drawn to performing, putting on shows for his

University, Carell moved to Chicago, where he began performing with The Second City, a prominent theatre group. According to fellow student Tina Fey, his castmates were in awe of him. "He was like a rockstar," she says. "He was amazingly funny."

"Steve is not unlike Tom Hanks," adds Fey, who would go on to star opposite Carell in *Date Night*. "He's so good, nice and straightforward with people that it reminds you there's no reason why anybody should ever be anything less."

In the late '90s, Carell began to turn heads with his work on *The Dana Carvey Show* and *The Daily Show* (he had auditioned for *Saturday Night Live* but lost out to Will Ferrell). He then had supporting roles in sitcoms (*Just Shoot Me!*, *Over the Top*) and films (*Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy*, *Bewitched*), until he finally landed his first

their character and self-esteem. I live my life for my children, I just can't wait to get home."

Now that he's turned 50, I ask him to reflect on his career and what he's most proud of so far. The answer is surprising.

"I'm most proud of *Little Miss Sunshine*," he says. (The 2006 indie hit, in which he played a suicidal gay man, was critically acclaimed but Carell's part was minor.)

"A producer-friend advised me not to take it because she thought I didn't have enough lines," he says. "That was her logic; my part wasn't big enough! I was just thrilled to be in this great story. I don't think acting begins and ends with dialogue. Obviously, I never listened to her. That's my advice to actors: don't listen to advice – unless, of course, it's from your parents. They're usually right." ■

***Seeking A Friend for the End of the World* is out on Blu-ray and DVD on December 21.**

PHOTOGRAPHY: MANAGEMENT + ARTISTS, SHAPPER MEDIA, WIREIMAGE.COM