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Richard D. Zanuck

**"They think
the people out
here are all crazy.
And they may
be right."**

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Great directors ♥ Steve Golin
Produced By Conference 2010

“YOU’LL NEVER GET THIS MOVIE MADE”

WITH *THE BEAVER*, STEVE GOLIN PREVAILS ONCE AGAIN

by Collen Wassel

Steve Golin knows what he likes. Over the past 25 years, he’s produced some of the era’s most quirky, challenging, acclaimed and ultimately, enduring films, marked by narrative and visual styles that demand an intellectual as well as emotional investment from the audience. This fall, he’ll do it again with *The Beaver*, a typically atypical Golin production directed by Jodie Foster that tells an engaging, funny and disturbing story of a man losing his mind.

“I just have a certain taste,” Golin explains, relaxing in an armchair in the Culver City headquarters of Anonymous Content, the production house he established in 2000. “I gravitate toward a certain type of material, and it becomes a little bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy, because once people can kind of figure out what your taste is, then generally you get material that goes along with that.”

With credits ranging from *Wild at Heart* to *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* to *Babel*, Golin’s taste is clear, yet not easily defined. The shelves to his right mix Criterion edition Truffaut and Fellini with commercial hits like *Gladiator* and *The Departed*. He praises the blockbuster *Bourne* trilogy as thoroughly as he does the French independent *A Prophet*. There’s no video-store category for Golin’s taste, but there are distinct common elements: visual styles that are new and compelling, and stories that explore one’s

humanity through layered, inventive and at times, even absurdist plots.

Growing up in suburban New York, the producer and PGA member didn’t get to see the kinds of movies he now makes. Before video stores and on demand, his viewing experience was limited to the wide-release, mainstream pictures shown at his local theater. When he went to New York City to study photography at NYU, however, that all changed. He recalls seeing *Bicycle Thieves*, *Casablanca*, *The 400 Blows* and others for the first time. “Suddenly it was different,” he says. “Movies meant something else.”

It was the stories of these films that captured Golin’s interest and led him in 1981 to leave a young photography career in New York to enter the producer program at AFI in Los Angeles. Five years later, he and classmate Joni Sighvatsson founded Propaganda Films, the now legendary

production house known for setting a new creative standard for commercials and music videos. The company’s award-winning projects were marked by engaging narratives told through brilliant, creative visuals, a defining style made possible by Propaganda’s gallery of previously unknown visionary directors that included David Fincher, Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze and many others.

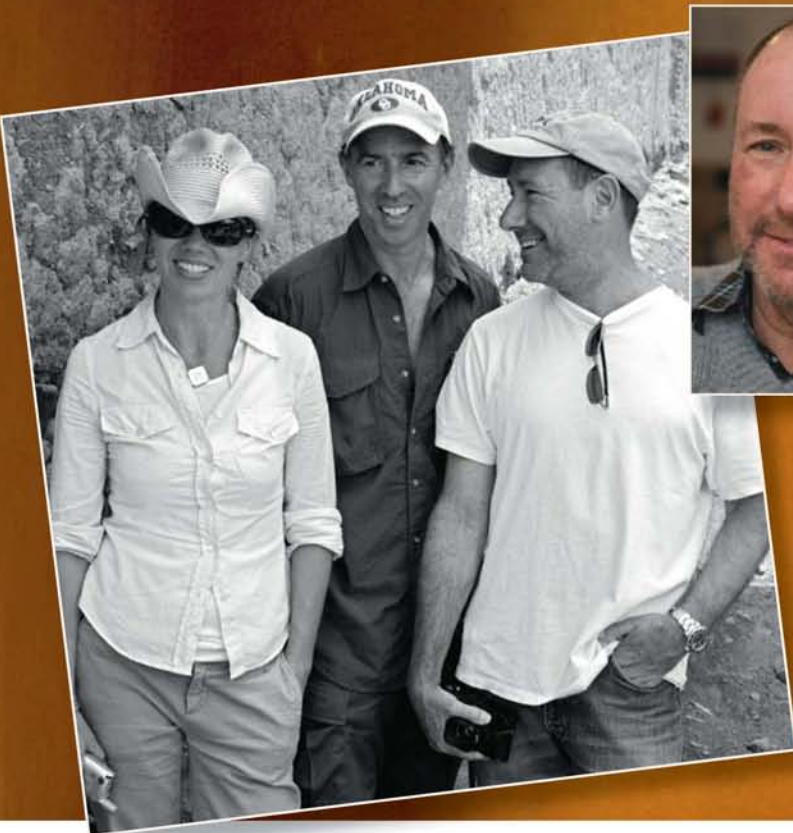
As he transitioned into features, Golin’s sharp eye for talent and close collaboration with directors enabled him to build a career distinguished by successful, important independent pictures that many would write off as too difficult to make. Key to Golin’s success is his enviable ability to pair inventive scripts with the creative minds capable of realizing them on the screen.

“Propaganda was a real director-driven company, so I think he’s always going to come at it from that perspective,” says Spike Jonze, whose first feature, *Being John Malkovich*, Golin produced in 1998. At the time, Propaganda was being sold by PolyGram to Seagram, a tricky transition that threatened the future of several Golin projects, including *Malkovich*. “I think every time it came up, they would just laugh at him in the corporate Board meetings or however it was,” Jonze continues. “They just saw it as this really weird script with some music-video director, so it wasn’t high on their list of priorities. The only reason that movie got made was because Steve really pushed and pushed and ultimately, really stuck his neck out in that company.”

Being John Malkovich went on to gross more than \$22.8 million in domestic box office and win more than a dozen awards each for Jonze and screenwriter Charlie Kaufman. “That movie was really fun because everyone was like, ‘You’ll never get this movie made,’” Golin recalls. “But with Spike and Charlie, we somehow figured out how to make it.”

“Now I realize he’s kind of an old-school producer, in a way,” Jonze continues. “It’s about the material, the art, the director. Whether it’s popular or not, if it’s something he’s interested in, he commits to that and commits to that director. And once he’s behind you, he’s behind you, and that’s never going to waver.”

Steve Golin in Alaska, location-scouting for *Everybody Loves Whales*, his upcoming movie for Universal. (Photo by and courtesy of Nelson Coates)



Far left: Steve Golin (right) with Jon Kilik and Ann Ruark on the set of *Babel*.

(Photo by and courtesy of Mary Ellen Mark)

Left: Steve Golin

Below: Golin (left) on the set of *The Beaver*, with Jodie Foster and Rob Friedman of Summit Entertainment. (Photo by Ken Regan and courtesy of Summit Entertainment)



Alejandro González Iñárritu calls that commitment one of Golin's defining traits. "There are two types of producers: studio producers and director's producers, and Steve is clearly, 100% a director's producer," he says firmly. Five years before their 2006 Best Picture nomination for *Babel*, González Iñárritu and Golin met when the director was asked to create a spot for BMW's commercial series *The Hire*.

González Iñárritu was hesitant to accept the job, doubtful that his raw dramatic style was what the client wanted. "My story was very bloody, very tense and not a happy ending for a car commercial," he laughs. Golin assured him that BMW knew who they were hiring and that he would be free to create the ad he wanted. The resulting work, a thought-provoking 11-minute short entitled "Powder Keg," was an acclaimed success.

"I was really amazed because he delivered what he promised," González Iñárritu says. "With Steve, there's never a moment of bullshit. I would say one of his signature qualities is honesty. And in that, you have the possibility to be one of the few giants in this business."

Golin's steadfast support of directors is tempered by his own artistic insights and a natural business savvy that guides each production from concept to screen. He knows what first attracted him to a script and endeavors to maintain that for the audience. "You're not there necessarily to protect the director. You're not there necessarily to protect the studio," he says simply. "You got to keep your eye on the movie and keep your ego in check. It's not about being right, it's about doing what's best for the movie."

"He's extremely human yet very strong of opinion," begins Michel Gondry, director of the 2004 breakout *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Renowned for his innovative, experimental visuals, Gondry credits Golin for keeping his

style in check. "I had created all these visual transitions to go from memory to memory," he says. "They were so complex, and at some point, I remember Steve sort of laughing because he realized it was probably impossible."

During shooting, Gondry found it difficult to achieve the shots he envisioned while maintaining the emotions of the story. "Steve said, 'just make the scenes simpler,'" the director recalls. "He comes from a real place of understanding — of people working on the film, of people watching the film — and that translates into a humanity the audience can understand. I think by not buying into every single idea that I had, he made it better, because I needed to be better guided."

Throughout his career, Golin has served as a bridge between the business and the art of filmmaking, in fairness turning producing into an art form itself. He knows this business intimately, having learned his way through years of making hits, flops, Oscar winners and cult favorites. To talk with him is to go on an intelligent ride of thought from remake strategy to marketing spend to the demise of the specialty label. He segues from the upside of VOD for catalog owners — "If I want to see *Casablanca* and it costs \$2, I'm probably not going to bother to pirate it." — to questioning the industry's focus on fourth-quarter release dates — "I think it's a mistake. I'm sitting around in May thinking, I want to go to the movies, but there's nothing I want to see."

These insights are offered with a candid, casual air that can only come with the confidence of experience, and his measured approach to filmmaking as a whole makes him an ideal collaborator not only for directors but also studios and distributors. "You know, a lot of it's common sense," he says, "but as you accumulate a certain amount of experience and make almost every mistake possible and try not to make them again, you become a little more valuable." He points out, how-

Below: Steve Golin (right) with Jon Kilik (left) and Alejandro González Iñárritu at the 2007 Producers Guild Awards



Right: Golin receives the Franklin J. Schaffner Alumni Medal in 2008.



ever, that a good reputation doesn't make the business any easier, particularly for the kinds of movies he makes.

The Beaver begins with a man on the verge of a serious mental break and follows him and his family through a journey of healing that is both humorous and unsettling — and aided by a beaver puppet that the main character, in a sense, lives vicariously through. "It has a pretty absurd concept, obviously," Golin admits. "The challenge was convincing people that it could be commercial and accessible. There's a pretty dark element of the movie, and that was a big hurdle to get people over."

"It was an undeniably beautiful script — witty, smart, the characters fully complex," says director Jodie Foster. "But *The Beaver* was not the easiest sell in the world. There was a crucial detail in the script that every indie studio in town demanded cutting in order to even discuss financing. Steve never wavered."

In the end, Golin secured distribution with Summit Entertainment, and over the course of production, Foster benefited from his unique style to help realize her vision for the movie. "He's all about letting the director be free to create a visual style and a language for the film," she says. "He sort of watches from the sidelines until he sees something that might derail the narrative. Then he steps in with very few words to challenge the director to come up with the answers."

"Steve's greatest gift is his instinct, his gut," Foster continues. "He knows instantly whether something feels real to him or not, whether it's right for the characters. This means he can make a decision quickly and with guerrilla stealth. That's why he's the consummate independent producer."

When asked about his instincts, Golin shrugs. "I think there's a really mysterious element to it," he says. "I mean, when we were making *Being John Malkovich*, I was really

scared it was going to be a disaster. We laugh about it now, but even John was asking, 'Are you sure this is going to work?' And I said, 'No! I'm not sure. This is pretty frightening.'

"I think the biggest thing in producing is you have to have such a thick skin," Golin continues. "Woody Allen said 80% of it is just showing up, but I think he underestimated that. You just got to be tenacious."

Yet there's something more fundamental than tenacity behind Golin's success: his movies resonate with audiences because he is the audience. He makes the movies he wants to see. "He's very smart and very successful, but the business is not what drives him," explains González Iñárritu. "He makes film because it's something that he loves."

Over the course of 90 minutes, Golin has run through a long list of recent favorites, praising *Snabba Cash*, *An Education*, *Up in the Air*, *Inglourious Basterds* and plenty more that don't fit neatly into a set genre or style, making it no surprise to hear that his future projects won't either. "I want to expand. I want to do different things," Golin says. "There's a bunch of big movies I feel like I could do a good job on, like *Bourne* or those types of movies. I haven't done a movie like that yet, but I want to."

As he finishes post on *The Beaver*, Golin is prepping *Everybody Loves Whales*, a family-friendly feature based on a true story of dissimilar people coming together for a common cause. He details a handful of projects he has in development, which include a romance, a biopic, a mob drama and a family adventure — a variety that's very much in line with the casual eclecticism of his output.

"It always begins with the material," Golin says. "And you have to go from there. I feel like there are pluses and minuses to the way I do it, but I don't have any desire to change it. I enjoy my life. I'm doing okay, so I'm just going to continue to do it." 🐾