

# interview



**Six of the Best**  
From Adele to Clinton: Henry Winkler, aka the Fonz, on his coolest people  
[thetimes.co.uk/sixbest](http://thetimes.co.uk/sixbest)

# Hollywood's funnyman plays his ace

**His latest role is a flamboyant LA magician but Steve Carell remains an unassuming comedy superstar off stage. Tim Teeman met him**

TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, STEVE SCHOFIELD



**'My hope was to make a living. Fame wasn't something I aspired to; it remains a shock'**

engineer, and his mother Harriet, a psychiatric nurse, were much more "regimented" with his oldest brother, nine years his senior. With Carell, born five years after his nearest sibling, they "weren't as cautious, probably out of fatigue than anything else", he smiles. "With my children it's been the same... As you have more children you become more at ease with being a parent."

Carell never considered performing "a potential profession", applying to law school "out of respect to my parents who had worked so hard. I felt I owed them a job title." But they let him "off the hook", advising him to do what made him, not them, happy. He made a list of things he enjoyed: ice hockey, student government, debating, history, "but the common thread was acting and doing plays."

In Chicago, he studied and later taught at the Second City theatre company. He "struggled, waited tables" but never considered giving up. "My hope was to make a living. All this [fame, success] was not even in the realm of possibility. It was completely unexpected. Fame wasn't something I aspired to; it remains a shock. My wife and I are constantly counting our blessings."

Carell met his wife, Nancy, at the Second City, then both worked at *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* where Carell was a

want to stay at a party too long." Carell will not appear in *The Office's* finale on May 16. "I don't want to sound pretentious but I think Michael as a character has evolved beyond being seen. Whatever they'd expect, the audience would be disappointed. It's best left alone."

Colleagues have said he could be a leading man — though one with a satirical edge. He doesn't agree and notes he plays "a paranoid, schizophrenic, drug-using murderer" in Bennett Miller's forthcoming drama *Foxcatcher*, the true story of the multimillionaire John du Pont who killed the Olympic wrestler Dave Schultz in 1996. "He saw something in me that he thought made me capable of portraying du Pont... I don't think too much about how other people view me. I think people assume I'm like Michael Scott, that he is my default real personality." And they are wrong? "Yeah, I don't think that's who I am at all."

The ageing process "has been really good" to Carell. He became successful after he turned 40 "when I was already middle-aged". His hair is salt and pepper now, though it's usually jet-black on screen. "Yeah, I'm letting it go. On *The Office* I was colouring it." He will again when he reprises his role as the weatherman Brick Tamland in *Anchorman: The Legend Continues*, out this December.

His production company is also making an "FBI wedding comedy" and he is about to shoot *Mail Order Groom* with Tina Fey.

Despite his wealth, Carell lives modestly. He laughs that as a parent "you become your own parents": driving in the car, his children misbehaving, he finds himself threatening to "turn this car round and drive home". Children make you less self-centred, he says. They "reprioritise your life". When Annie was born, he felt less "desperate" at auditions. Now, as a producer, he gravitates to the less desperate: "You're more into the person who's not so into you."

Carell's father once said that his son liked being the goalie in ice hockey because he liked the attention. "I told my dad he was wrong — that was not why I wanted to be goalie. Anyway, the goalie doesn't get any attention." On film sets now he occupies the same world. "I try not to take up more space than I am entitled to," he says, hands clasped, navy suit unrumpled and, just like a solicitous bank manager, bids farewell with a friendly, firm handshake.

**The Incredible Burt Wonderstone is out on March 15**



LIP SERVICE Steve Carell and Leslie Mann in *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*

Is this really one of the kings of movie comedy sitting opposite me? Steve Carell is one of the linchpins of Hollywood's so-called "fratpack", alongside Judd Apatow, Paul Rudd and Will Ferrell. He is the star of America's massively successful version of *The Office* — he played their "David Brent" — and of the films *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Anchorman* and *Crazy, Stupid, Love*. In 2010 he earned an estimated \$175 million. But in his hotel room in Los Angeles, Carell, with his navy suit, hands clasped and modest demeanour, seems more like a bank manager than a major Hollywood player. "I don't like the spotlight on me," he says. "I don't like being the centre of attention, which is ironic given what I chose to do." Off stage he is a "reserved" husband and father. "I just enjoy acting, doing characters," he says. "At a party I'm not the one holding court, I'm the one laughing at all the jokes. That's how I feel more comfortable."

In public, he assumes "a more gregarious persona, because no one wants to see a super-shy person. You've got to get out of your shell so you can communicate with people. I guess I try to present a more interesting version of myself than actually exists. Not that I'm boring, or uninteresting, but I'm not 'on' at home. I don't run around with my kids doing funny faces and character voices."

There is a stark contrast between the unassuming actor and his hapless on-screen characters. He shares a comic affinity with Rowan Atkinson: a face that can elasticise on demand into a hundred bizarre expressions.

When I speak to him, Carell, 50, is seated beside a huge poster for his new film featuring the actor in diamante-encrusted trouser suit and blond wig. In *The Incredible Burt Wonderstone* he plays a Las Vegas magician (the old-school, coins materialising from behind the ear kind), engaged in heated rivalry with Jim Carrey's "extreme" magician Steve Gray, who prefers drilling nails into his temple. "Fun, not earth-shattering," Carell calls it.

Wonderstone is a showbiz diva, a permatanned monster made heroic when humbled. The costume "felt fantastic, the real me," he laughs. "Playing a big, strutting peacock egomaniac is fun. You have the licence to be a terrible, self-aggrandising person; all the things I am not, I hope."

While Carell now couldn't do any magic "to astound anyone", growing up in Massachusetts he used to do "little magic shows for the neighbourhood". His favourite trick involved a levitating wand. Carell's children Annie, 11, and Johnny, 8, had a "fleeting interest" too. "That fascination never goes."

As a child, Carell, the youngest of four boys, was "pretty shy. I enjoyed the class clown but I wasn't him." He performed in plays. His parents Edwin, an electrical

AT THE DOUBLE Steve Carell, right, and with Steve Buscemi in *The Incredible Burt Wonderstone*, below



# film

MERIE WEISSMILLER WALLACE / DISNEY



# Why there's no place like Oz

**Ahead of a new film, Erica Wagner explains how L. Frank Baum's fantasy has endured**

Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain! Professor Marvel said — but all too late, and Dorothy Gale from Kansas, and her companions the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, the Cowardly Lion (not forgetting Toto) learnt the secret of the great and powerful Oz. That scene, from MGM's classic 1939 film — a landmark in cinema history — is indelible, and yet now, with Disney's *Oz: The Great and Powerful*, audiences are due to get an even closer look at the Wizard's journey from the Great Plains to the Emerald City. In this prequel to the MGM film, James Franco steps into Frank Morgan's shoes, and Rachel Weisz is the Wicked Witch of the East: the one who gets squashed by Dorothy's house. You won't find any ruby slippers — MGM still owns the rights to those, since they were the studio's invention, changed from silver in the book to highlight Technicolor's marvels — but you will find proof that the land of Oz is one of those rare imaginary places, like Narnia, like Middle-earth, that has moved from being the creation of one mind to a universe which belongs to us all.

That was L. Frank Baum's great achievement, though — certainly since 1939 — Oz as envisaged by Hollywood has eclipsed the author's own vision. It's fair to say that the opening of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, first published in 1900, seems a little dry to modern ears: "Dorothy lived in the midst of the great Kansas prairies, with Uncle Henry, who was a farmer, and Aunt Em, who was the farmer's wife. Their house was small, for the lumber to build it had to be carried by wagon many miles. There were four walls, a floor and a roof..." But make no mistake: Baum's book — and the 13 volumes that followed — made his name and his fortune, and are still beloved around the world. And there were, after all, at least four Oz films before the one with the ruby slippers appeared. These days his great-grandson Robert Baum, a

1906," Robert tells me. "One of the places they went was Egypt. They were somewhere up the Nile going to one of the ruins with their guide; they were at an oasis, and a camel train came in. And on one of the camels was a mother with her daughter on the back: the guide said, these people have been displaced from their home, and they could only bring whatever they could carry. The little girl had a doll — and a copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In those days it travelled that far and had that much of an effect on people. I think now he'd just be amazed and think — my gosh, what have I done?"



FURTHER ADVENTURES L. Frank Baum, above. Left, the new *Oz: The Great and Powerful*

And Baum knows the real legacy of his great-grandfather. "Ozma, who is one of my cousins, we were at a theatre once where they were showing the film — and the audience was booing the witch, and cheering with Dorothy — and cousin Ozma turned to me and said, 'Oz doesn't belong to the family anymore; it belongs to the people.' I think she's exactly right." Cousin Ozma! How excellent is that?

**Oz: The Great and Powerful** is released on March 8. The documentary *In Search of Oz* will be screened at the BFI on March 4, followed by a panel discussion

**'TRIUMPHANT'**  
LIBBY PURVES - THE TIMES

★★★★★  
**'MAGNIFICENT. A BOX OFFICE SENSATION'**  
TIM WALKER - SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

★★★★★  
**'UNMISSABLE and THRILLING'**  
MARK SHENTON - SUNDAY EXPRESS

★★★★★  
**'SEDUCTIVE, EXHILARATING and MAJESTIC'**  
HENRY HITCHINGS - EVENING STANDARD

★★★★★  
**'SIZZLING and EXTRAORDINARY'**  
PAUL TAYLOR - INDEPENDENT

★★★★★  
**'SHOWBIZ HEAVEN'**  
CHARLES SPENCER - DAILY TELEGRAPH

★★★★★  
**'You leave the theatre in SHEER EUPHORIA'**  
CLAIRE ALLFREE - METRO

★★★★★  
**'YES, a BROADWAY LEGEND is back in town. SPECTACULAR'**  
LIBBY PURVES - THE TIMES

**A CHORUS LINE**

NOW BOOKING UNTIL JANUARY 2014  
**THE LONDON PALLADIUM**  
American Airlines 0844 412 2957 | [AChorusLineLondon.com](http://AChorusLineLondon.com)