The Underneath *Surfaces in Austin*

Sex, Lies, and Soderbergh

by Patrick Taggart

ALAN PAPPE

In 1988, the American independent film movement was coasting along, resting comfortably, riding a high plain established by the success of the Coen brothers, Jim Jarmusch, documentarian Errol Morris, and a few others. We had yet to discover John Dahl, Quentin Tarantino, Rick Linklater, and Michael Moore. Spike Lee had debuted with *She's Gotta Have It*, but it would be another year or more before his breakthrough film, *Do the Right Thing*, arrived.

It was a period of almost unsettling calm, one that might have devolved into a period of disinterest and decay had not someone provided an explosive film event. That event was the Sundance festival screenings of Steven Soderbergh's debut feature, *sex, lies, and videotape*. This supremely self-assured first film unfolded with a sense of effortless inevitability and ignited the indie landscape. It later won the grand prize at the Cannes Film Festival and made Soderbergh a household name – at least in the households of industry executives, directors, film actors and artists, critics, and most serious moviegoers.

It wasn't that Soderbergh had produced such a terrific film at a tender age (he was 26). What created the sensation was that his film brimmed with a wisdom, wit, insight, technical assuredness, and serenity that is uncommon among filmmakers of any age and level of experience.

Or maybe he just got lucky. Perhaps he was to be one of those flash-in-the-pan boy wonders, a modern-day Orson Welles who would never again possess that combination of creative genius, vision, and hard work that produces masterpieces.

His second film certainly raised doubts. *Kafka*, a creative riff on the author's obsessions (and perhaps a few of Soderbergh's), seemed more an exercise than a narrative, although in technical areas it did not fail nor disappoint. In this film, the director began to fully explore manipulations of light, shadow, color, and film stock. This film showed that Soderbergh would never be confused with, say, Henry Jaglom, who frames thoughtful meditations on human relationships in structures of popsicle sticks and white paste. Soderbergh commands both substance and style, and tells his tales with a meticulous craftsman's artistry.

That is obvious to anyone who has seen his third feature, *King of the Hill*. Had he not previously made *sex, lies, and videotape*, it is entirely possible that this moving, lyrical treatment of the A.E. Hotchner memoir would have stirred the same ruckus. This film disproved the fleeting phenomenon theory and showed that confident, unostentatious but expressive style was securely in his grasp.

Due to a series of distribution strategy misfires, *King of the Hill* was seen by a relative few. And according to the filmmaker himself, he won't be surprised if the same fate awaits his new film. Here's what he says of *The Underneath*, filmed last year in Austin: "I'm not saying that the film is obstinate, but you have to pay attention and piece things together on your own. It requires the participation of the audience."

Soderbergh cannot be portrayed as a Hollywood basher, and his films, while highly individual, hardly scream "art-house!"

Among Austin's film community, Soderbergh's reputation was well established before *The Underneath* company moved into town. Location manager Tim Leary Swan has been an admirer since *sex, lies, and videotape* and was delighted to work with someone in his own age group. He recalls Soderbergh fondly, and speaks for many others on the project when he describes the filmmaker as demanding, meticulous, friendly, and easygoing.

"He wanted us to turn over every rock, location-wise, but he was very understanding and accepting of what we found." Swan said the crew used 35 locations on a 44-day shoot, including Bergstrom, the Shoal Creek area, Travis Heights, and others – and came in on time.

Art director John Fricke, who had to create the design, color scheme, and graphics for an armored car that is pivotal to the action, reports that each day's shooting was carefully planned and executed. "He's used to doing really low-budget projects, and everything was planned to a T," Fricke said. "It was shot according to script and schedule, and everything was planned."

Other comments from associates on the shoot include: "a really creative guy," "a wry wit," "self-deprecating," "easy to work with." He captured the heart of City of Austin film liaison Gary Bond by wearing Converse All-Star high-tops. If he has enemies in the Austin film community they have not been vocal, even though Soderbergh tends to bring much of his crew with him from out of town.

The filmmaker will be in Austin Monday, March 13, for the South by Southwest film conference premiere of *The Underneath*. Unable to participate in festival panels and seminars, he agreed to talk by telephone from Louisiana (where he was visiting his father) about his projects past and present.

The first question raised by *The Underneath*, a remake of a 1949 film starring Burt Lancaster, is "why?" The earlier movie *Criss Cross* is a rather unremarkable *film noir* about an ex-convict attempting to resume an old lifestyle.

"It's really not a great film," he readily agreed. "But it has a couple of ideas that I liked a lot. The first was the idea of someone coming home and reconstructing a certain portion of his life. The other idea was inspired by the hospital scene. (The curious will have to wait for the movie.) I took those ideas and went off in my own direction and indulged my normal preoccupations. It seems pointless to remake a film that worked the first time. I just thought that some of the ideas didn't go far enough and I wanted to take them a little further."

There was no special reason for shooting the film in Austin, other than its reputation as "a good place to shoot a movie." That he lived here for a time until he was four years old had nothing to do with the decision. "I wanted a mid-size city that was not readily identifiable. It could just as easily have been Minneapolis."

The new film is being distributed by Gramercy, the art-house arm of Universal Pictures, and the same outfit that oversaw distribution of *King of the Hill*. And while the distribution of that film was arguably badly mishandled, he is careful not to place any blame.

"It was a complicated thing. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. Nothing in our early screenings indicated we would get the kind of good reviews that we did. By the time we did get the good press we couldn't get the theatres. And by the time we could get the theatres, people had forgotten about the movie. We had also come on the heels of about 10 other movies with kids in them, and apparently audiences don't like films set in the Depression even if there's nothing depressing about it."

If *King of the Hill* was unjustly ignored, it comes as small comfort that the enigmatic but unsatisfying *Kafka*, even given its values, deserved what it got. With two commercially unsuccessful films behind him, Soderbergh accepts an uncertain future.

"I hope I will keep on working, but the films I like – it's quite possible the films I like won't be in vogue or people won't want to see them anymore. If so, I'll just do things on the fly and cheap and be quite happy that way."

If his record proves anything, it's that he is resistant to the temptations and pressures to dive into the mainstream with its promise of riches and fame and compromised goals. His advice to other beginning filmmakers is to know what it is they want to do. "By the time I did *sex, lies, and videotape* I already had three or four things I wanted to do, and *King of the Hill* and *Kafka* were two of them," he said. "And there's nothing wrong with the mainstream if you can make something good there."

Indeed, Soderbergh cannot be portrayed as a Hollywood basher; and his films, while highly individual, hardly scream "art-house!" I suggested that it might be mutually beneficial to work as a hired gun on such a boldly commercial project as a James Bond film and he enthusiastically agreed.

"I would have no problem doing that… if they asked me I'd say yeah, if I could use someone like Mel Gibson and make it more technology-based and spend more time on the character. Yes, some of those [early

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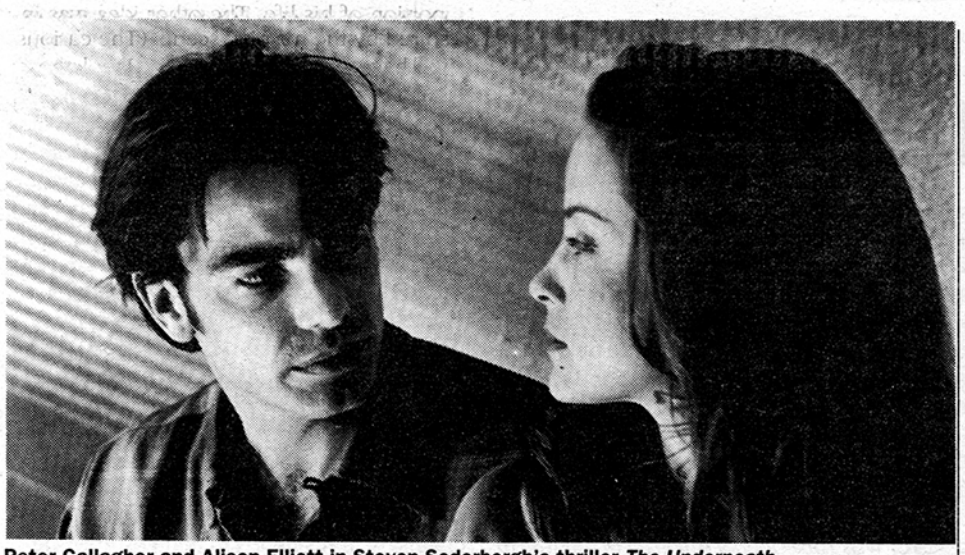

Peter Gallagher and Alison Elliott in Steven Soderbergh's thriller *The Underneath*.

Bond directors] were getting pretty pedestrian.... There's been a kind of line drawn in the sand and it's too bad. We don't need more art films, we need more mainstream films made more intelligently. And you know, for all the success of *Pulp Fiction*, it doesn't mean that the independent has finally struck a blow for artistic integrity. The industry mainstream should love this movie. It's relentlessly entertaining; it has [a] great cast."

Soderbergh agrees that an alarming number of filmmakers make films that go out of their way to ingratiate themselves with audiences, whether it involves canonizing their protagonists or tacking on screen-tested endings.

"*The Underneath* doesn't do that, but I'll say that I've been in situations of previewing a film and sensed that there were things wrong that needed to be addressed. In fact, I've done reshoots on all my films, but only *King of the Hill* involved the ending. And of course, it should never involve whether the character should live or die. You can play around with it but at the end of the day there's one ending that fits the story. Everyone seems to be afraid of alienating a segment of the audience who will then hate the film. It's kind of sad."

For that reason, he has little use for the "interactive" movies that just hit the market. They will fail, he believes, because audiences are drawn to the process of going someplace with other people and being told a story. "We don't want to tell the story, we want to have the only ending it could have. So I don't think that's going to work."

"We don't need more art films, we need more mainstream films made more intelligently," says Soderbergh

His current project is an adaptation of John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, the 1980 first novel by an unknown young writer who killed himself before the work was published. The book caused a significant stir in literary and publishing circles and has baited filmmakers for more than a decade. It is now bedeviling Soderbergh.

"We want to make it but we're still working on a script. It's been a real challenge. For 13 years people have been trying to get a script. It requires more than just a faithful adaptation of the book. We're trying to come up with a filmic equivalent of Toole's voice and turn it into images. The whole film needs a cinematic overlay on top of Toole's voice. A problem we have now is that every time Ignatius is off the screen the movie dies."

If the *Dunces* project gets made, it will be Soder-bergh's fourth film in a row to draw from the work of other writers. Those who have been caught in the spell of the bracingly original *sex, lies, and videotape* necessarily wonder if he has another purely personal film in him.

"I am writing another screenplay now; in fact, I have a couple of things. But the things based on personal experience are tough. I have to work up to those. It takes a while to reflect on those experiences, about four or five years. And really, the problem is I hate writing."

Hate writing? Go figure. It was, after all, writing that got him nominated for an Academy Award. His script for *sex, lies, and videotape* was nominated for an Oscar for best original screenplay in 1988. And he will not say the Oscars have lost their relevance, even if it's been a while since he was a player in that dizzying arena.

"Commercially, there's plenty relevant and I love movies and anybody that loves movies follows them," he said. "When I was nominated, it was just sort of a fun event, a neat party with a terrific door prize. I told myself, 'Don't martyr yourself out of a good time.' But I don't know if I'll be able to get that close to that kind of recognition again." ■

The Underneath world premieres on Monday, 3/13, 9:00pm at the Arbor. Film passes are not good for this show. There are a limited number of $10 tickets on sale at Star Ticket outlets. Proceeds benefit Planned Parenthood.

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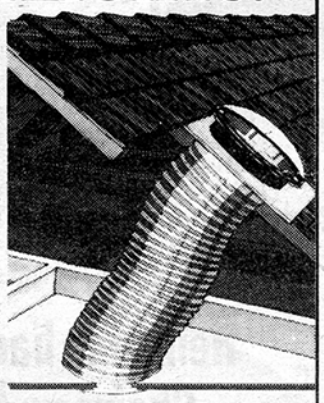
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