

## THE ACADEMY AWARDS

# Spotlighted Behind the Scenes

## 'Syriana' Screenwriter Stephen Gaghan, Conspiring to Get the Words Out

By MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN  
Special to the Washington Post

Stephen Gaghan hears voices in his head, and on some mornings they come from seals. Hunched over his desk before the first rays of sunlight hit the Pacific, Gaghan stares out the window of his beach house and watches seals pop their heads out of the dark water.

"I'm the only light on the water, and the sun starts to rise over the [El Segundo] oil refinery, way across the bay," says Gaghan, the director and screenwriter of "Syriana," the political thriller about the oil industry that's up for Best Original Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor (for George Clooney). He thinks about the seals watching him inside his small lit cage on the coast. "They're thinking, 'What a horrible way to live! Who feeds him? Are there fish in there?'"

For Gaghan, 40, seal voices are part of a peaceful and quiet morning ritual that helps him maneuver into a state of industriousness. To hear him describe it — as he does, very matter-of-factly — his entry process is so delicate it seems to rival the space shuttle's return to the Earth's atmosphere: If the timing, position or speed is slightly off, the entire mission is in jeopardy. Procrastinating on e-mail one morning at 6:37, Gaghan half-joked that the day was almost shot. "As the sun's coming up, I like to be writing," he says. If I don't get started by 8, I can feel like the day is lost."

In 2001, Gaghan won an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay for "Traffic," a gritty film about the drug trade. Working on that script, Gaghan endured a seven-month period during which he could not write a thing.

"I decided I wanted to read the Old Testament," he says. "And one day a rabbi friend who looks like Tolstoy said to me, 'What do you think the Torah's definition of humility is?' I said, 'I don't know. Not thinking you're a big shot?' He said, 'It's doing the work God has assigned for you.' And I said, 'Okay, what did God say is the work assigned to me?' He said, 'You're a writer: Write!'"

Gaghan filed away the conversation, and two weeks later at 3 a.m. he sat straight up in bed, hearing a voice that said, "Duck salad? You never eat duck salad." He wrote it down, and six weeks and 350 pages later, he had completed his 165-page script. The duck line turned up verbatim in "Traffic," in an early scene with

Catherine Zeta-Jones. "I don't know where the voices come from," he says, "but I know I have to get them into scenes."

Gaghan's office is a freestanding "shack" on stilts that he has rented for seven years, just inside the Malibu border, near Tuna Canyon. Every morning, he drives five miles north on Pacific Coast Highway to his hideaway. Built in 1962, the structure has all original appliances, including the dishwasher. Inside, there is a couch, a dining room table that serves as Gaghan's desk, thousands of books and a couple old, sun-faded chairs. Gaghan stores his surfboards on a rack in the middle of the room. He works on a 12-inch Macintosh PowerBook, to which he attaches a larger monitor that bears a few old, yellowed sticky notes. His favorites: "thinking = death. doing = life" and "Stop wasting time. This is a privilege."

Procrastination is an integral part of the process, so Gaghan has refined the art, with the Los Angeles Times, the New Yorker or by checking e-mail every three minutes. When the pressure gets too intense, there's surfing or Cora's Diner in Santa Monica, where Gaghan will go for huevos rancheros, an outing that can easily take four hours.

But eventually he's drawn back to the task at hand. "I have all sorts of tricks to get myself going," he says. "I'll sit down and think, 'Okay, here it comes, the great-

est sentence I've ever written.' And then it's just terrible. Then I go to the other polarity: 'You're terrible. You're a fraudulent human. Seals, stop looking at me.' And before you know it, the writing window is closing."

Another of his tricks involves setting an egg timer for three minutes, kneeling on the floor and begging the universe to assist in writing the worst sentence ever written. "And [the worst sentence] absolutely happens, without fail," Gaghan says. But it helps get him going and drives away his fear and expectations.

When he starts writing, Gaghan quits e-mail programs and turns off the phone. He writes all his notes out on yellow legal pads and surrounds himself with paper — note cards and sticky pads — which he shoves in a giant plastic container when he's finished with a project. He avoids eating because it makes him sleepy, but he has an unlimited supply of coffee and Perrier to keep him going from 5:30 a.m. until he makes lunch about seven hours later.

When he's in the zone, he says, there's is nothing he'd rather do.



Stephen Gaghan with "Syriana" star George Clooney in Berlin Feb. 10. The film earned both men Oscar nominations.

BY JAN BAUER — ASSOCIATED PRESS



BY GLEN WILSON — WARNER BROS.

"I have all sorts of tricks to get myself going," says Gaghan of his writer's block battle.