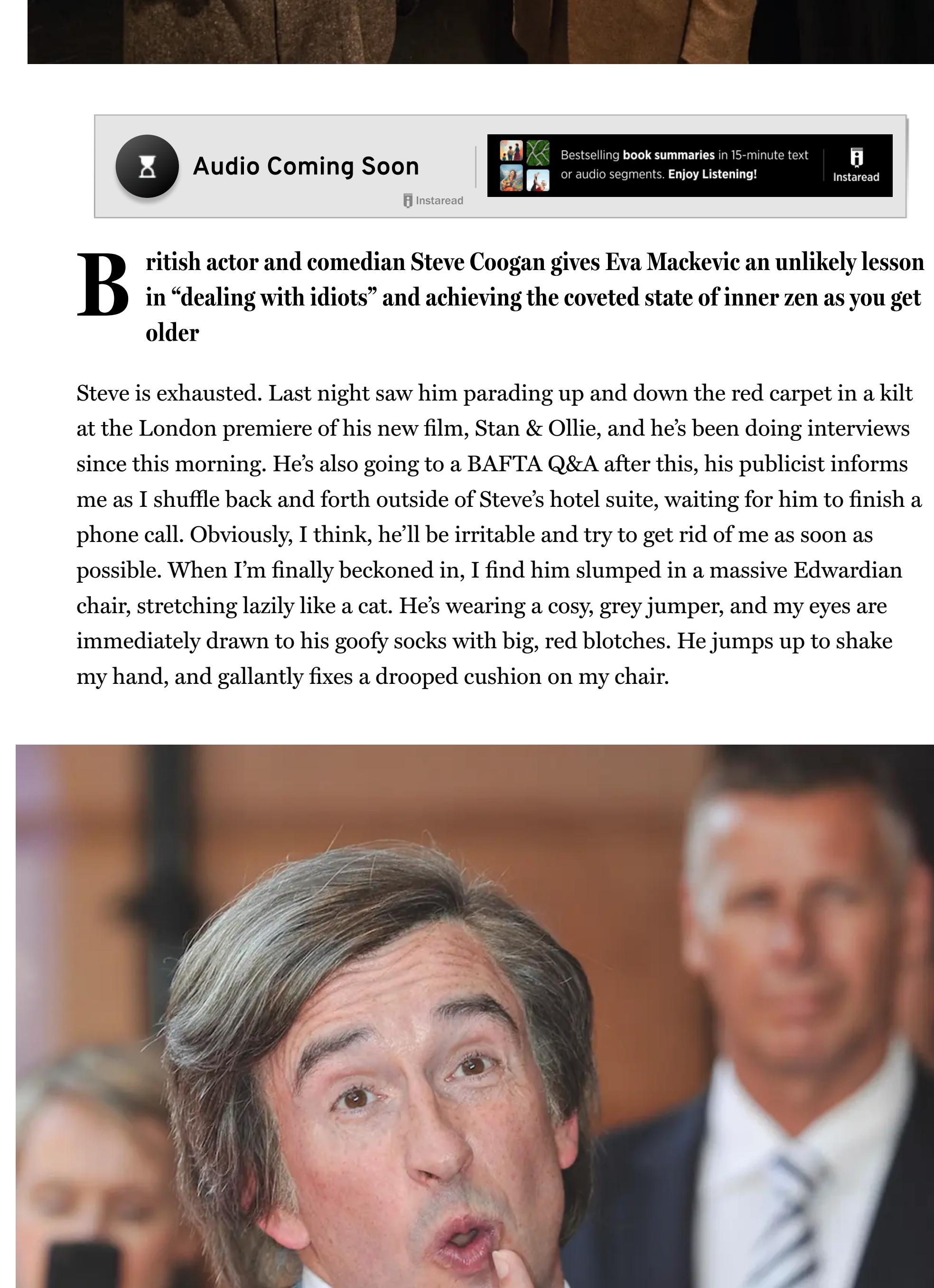


Interview: Steve Coogan

BY READERS DIGEST
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British actor and comedian Steve Coogan gives Eva Mackevic an unlikely lesson in "dealing with idiots" and achieving the coveted state of inner zen as you get older

Steve is exhausted. Last night saw him parading up and down the red carpet in a kilt at the London premiere of his new film, *Stan & Ollie*, and he's been doing interviews since this morning. He's also going to a BAFTA Q&A after this, his publicist informs me as I shuffle back and forth outside of Steve's hotel suite, waiting for him to finish a phone call. Obviously, I think, he'll be irritable and try to get rid of me as soon as possible. When I'm finally beckoned in, I find him slumped in a massive Edwardian chair, stretching lazily like a cat. He's wearing a cosy, grey jumper, and my eyes are immediately drawn to his goofy socks with big, red blotches. He jumps up to shake my hand, and gallantly fixes a drooped cushion on my chair.



"My parents used to read Reader's Digest," he says, sitting down across from me. "Nowadays we have all these different search engines, all this malarkey, but Reader's Digest is a great way of curating and getting out stories that wouldn't normally reach people." I'm immediately put at ease: while I can tell by the frequent stuttering and surreptitious yawns that Steve's clearly tired, he exudes peace and warmth. Not exactly what I expected from a notoriously caustic satirist who's verbally demolished everyone from Jeremy Clarkson to Donald Trump. Does he consider himself difficult to work with, I wonder?

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"[I was difficult] early on, when I didn't know what I was doing," he tells me in his deep, characteristically nasal voice, delectably stretching every vowel. "As you get older—you don't know this yet—you realise it's not just right to be nice to people, it's actually easier. I try to find the good in people and give them the benefit of a doubt." "It's such hard work though," I mutter in response.

"I know!" he exclaims. "That's why I don't do social media. Because it's dealing with people who are idiots. I know that I would waste a lot of time getting sucked into an argument with someone I don't need to argue with. There's no point, because if you want to convince someone your opinion is right, an argument will very rarely resolve something. The way to communicate with people, I think, is to tell stories. If you tell a story that moves someone, you may make them think about things in a slightly different way."

The story of Laurel and Hardy—the subject of Coogan's new film in which he plays Laurel—is one such story, I observe. Their wholesome and innocent brand of slapstick comedy feels almost alien today. "That's very true," Steve concurs. "I like that it's very un-cynical. I've done acerbic, biting, edgy comedy and it's really enjoyable. But it's only enjoyable like giving the finger to somebody is enjoyable," he laughs. "Ultimately it doesn't make you feel better. It might make you feel better in that instant and I feel that's the case with a lot of comedy, but with Stan and Ollie, it's very timeless, it sees the humanity in people, it tries to lift people up rather than push them down."

He admits that he was flattered to be considered "good enough" to play Stan Laurel. It's a challenging role which involved portraying the famous comedian as both how he was on screen and in real life. Not to mention the technically challenging dance routines, make up and costumes. Did Steve relate to Stan Laurel on a personal level?

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"I'm also not quite as disastrous as him, personally," he chuckles. "I echo him in all the characters I play. People look at me and they go, 'Oh, you're a bit like Alan Partridge,' and I say, 'Well, that's inevitable!'"

"We're in a very volatile world. There was a World War 70 years ago or so, and when we came out of that, there was a collective enlightenment about the European nations which was a global force for good. And if you fracture that and break it up, straight away we're not as good as we were?" This is the first time in the conversation that Steve sits up straight, his face agitated and his voice raised.

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