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'IDAHO' WALKS A TIGHTROPE

BYLINE: By KENNETH TURAN, TIMES FILM CRITIC

BODY:

"**My Own Private Idaho**" is another chapter in Gus Van Sant's own private cinema. No matter what you've been used to, "Idaho" is something completely different, a film that manages to confound all expectations, even the ones it sets up itself.

Puckish, understated and almost defiantly idiosyncratic, "Idaho" (at selected theaters) is weaker on plot than writer-director Van Sant's last film, the critically beloved "Drugstore Cowboy." Even though it occasionally feels like the world's hippest shaggy dog story, "Idaho" invariably redeems itself when you least expect it. Edgily funny when boredom threatens, suddenly tender and heartfelt when everything seems to be on the surface, it may stumble and teeter at times, but it never quite loses its balance. What other film, for instance, would have the temerity to use narcolepsy (described in a huge dictionary close-up as "a condition characterized by brief attacks of deep sleep") as a central plot conceit? But one of "Idaho's" protagonists, a young man named Mike Waters (River Phoenix), turns out to be afflicted with the stress-induced malady. Like the fourth Stooge, he is prone to keeling over in the profoundest sleep at the unlikeliest moments.

Given Mike's current occupation, a gay street hustler in the Pacific Northwest, he quite understandably feels stressed out a lot of the time. But the dreams Mike has when he goes under have nothing to do with sex: what he sees are home-movie versions of the Idaho childhood he is barely out of and the mother who has disappeared from his life.

Though Van Sant is himself openly gay, there is no sense of special pleading here, only a willingness to take on material a straight director might shy away from, and a parallel freedom to deal with the clannish world of hustlers from the widest variety of very human perspectives.

On one hand, Van Sant does not shrink from describing the brutal side of the sex-for-money equation, presenting brief monologues from what appear to be real hustlers telling of their most demeaning and painful encounters. But he also is open to using some of Mike's more outlandish "dates" as the basis for comedy, including one with a tidiness fanatic (drolly done by film publicist Mickey Cottrell) who dresses Mike up as the Little Dutch Boy and has him scrub every surface in sight.

If Mike is obsessed by one parent, his best pal and fellow hustler, Scott Favor (Keanu Reeves), has his father on his mind. And the senior Favor is not just any dad, but the severe mayor of Portland, not surprisingly upset at his son's decision to hang out with the local low-lives and to take as a father figure that "whoring round man" and roguish prince of thieves Bob Pigeon (a quite effective turn by cult director William Richert).

Should this particular scenario sound oddly familiar, it's because it's based closely on the characters of King Henry IV, his son Prince Hal, and the shameless Sir John Falstaff as delineated not only in several plays by Shakespeare but also in Orson Welles' memorable "Chimes at Midnight."

It is one of Van Sant's more charmingly brazen conceits (which extends as far as having one of the characters drink a bottle of Falstaff beer) to replay much of Welles' version of the play with the words archly changed ("a fair hot wench in flame-color'd taffeta" becomes "a fair hustler in black leather") to fit the context of gay street life in today's Portland. Though the jest is undoubtedly more fun the more you know the original material, the fact that it plays at all is no small accomplishment.

If this aspect of "Idaho" (rated R for strong sensuality, language and drug use) entertains by being clever and playful, Mike's forlorn search for his mother and/or a place he can feel at home strikes very different and deeper chords. Aided by another performance of great delicacy and humor by Phoenix, Van Sant deals with loss, loneliness and romantic dreams in the most direct and natural way. If the Falstaff material is merely diverting, this touches the heart.

Holding all these elements together is Van Sant's sensibility, such an elusive thing it instinctively squirms away from any attempt to pigeonhole it. The quirkiest notions, such as having a wall of magazines with names like Male Call and Homo on the Range come to life and talk to each other or filling the soundtrack with unexpectedly mournful pedal steel versions of "America" and (yes) "Home on the Range," seem to leap unblocked right from his eccentric imagination to the screen.

Perhaps that ability to listen to and amuse himself is the key to Van Sant's success. His vision is not for everyone, and it does have the

occasional tendency to slide into self-indulgence. But if Van Sant can keep from repetitively running himself into the ground (as have idiosyncratic directors before him) there is certainly no telling what he will be up to next.

'My Own Private Idaho'

River Phoenix: Mike Waters

Keanu Reeves: Scott Favor

James Russo: Richard Waters

William Richert: Bob Pigeon

Released by Fine Line. Written and directed by Gus Van Sant. Producer Laurie Parker. Executive producer Van Sant. Cinematographer Eric Alan Edwards, John Campbell. Editor Curtiss Clayton. Costumes Beatrix Aruna Pasztor. Production design David Brisbin. Running time: 1 hour, 45 minutes.

MPAA-rated: R (strong sensuality, language, drug use).

GRAPHIC: Photo, COLOR, POTATO PALS: Gus Van Sant's "My Own Private Idaho" is an idiosyncratic look at a pair of gay hustlers, played by River Phoenix, above left, and Keanu Reeves. Reviewed by Kenneth Turan.