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A Columbine story worth the retelling

Actors, victims seem like kids we know

By Ruthe Stein
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

There's a heartbreaking innocence to the early scenes of "Elephant" showing high schoolers acting goofy and self-absorbed as only kids that age can be. Watching is hard because we know where the movie is headed — "Elephant" conjectures what might have happened at Columbine High School the day when two boys went on a shooting spree.

Because the Columbine massacre was so widely publicized and the details are so horrific, many people may feel they don't want to see anything more about it. I understand this feeling; I felt the same way going into "Elephant."

But the movie, which won two top prizes at Cannes, turns out to be a spellbinding piece of filmmaking. The ending is preordained to be violent and painful. But that's not why "Elephant" stays with you. Writer-director Gus Van Sant ("Good Will Hunting") has created a haunting elegy on the unpredictability of life. Never knowing what the next minute might bring is the elephant in all our lives.

The movie has the dramatic impact of "The Bridge of San Luis Rey." The girls flirt and the jocks strut, and the audience wonders who among them will be in the wrong place at the wrong time and wind up taking a bullet.

The two killers are shown at target practice and watching videos of Nazi Germany. But aside from their obvious hatred of the popular kids, there's no attempt to understand what drove them to such an insane act, the movie's one serious flaw.

"Elephant" opens with John (John Robinson), an impossibly blond and beautiful youth, demanding that his alcoholic father (Timothy Bottoms, one of the few recognizable actors in the cast) let

him drive. A car wreck is the worst John can imagine on his way to school. Another student, talking to a friend about getting a driver's license, says, "I just want to live to get my license," with no sense of what those words mean.

Cinematographer Harris Savides underscores the sameness and aimlessness of their days with long tracking shots of students walking down endless hallways. Rather than being boring, these shots are hypnotic.

Van Sant has an ability to bring out hidden depths in a young cast, as he showed in "My Own Private Idaho" and "Drugstore Cowboy." In "Elephant," he worked almost entirely with nonprofessionals. Because they have yet to develop actorly mannerisms, they seem like kids we might know. In many cases, Van Sant has let them use their own first names for their characters, furthering the impression that they are playing themselves.

Brittany Mountain, Jordan Taylor and Nicole George hit a believable note as pals who spend all their time talking about boys. They continue their patter in the rest room while vomiting up their lunches so they don't gain any weight.

As the killers, Alex Frost and Eric Deulen have an appropriate blankness of expression. They display creepiness even before you realize what they're up to.

Van Sant was brave to make this movie, and I can imagine that many people tried to talk him out of it. Filmmakers should respond to what happens in the world around them. That so few do makes Van Sant's achievement all the more impressive.

► **Advisory: Extremely violent scenes.**

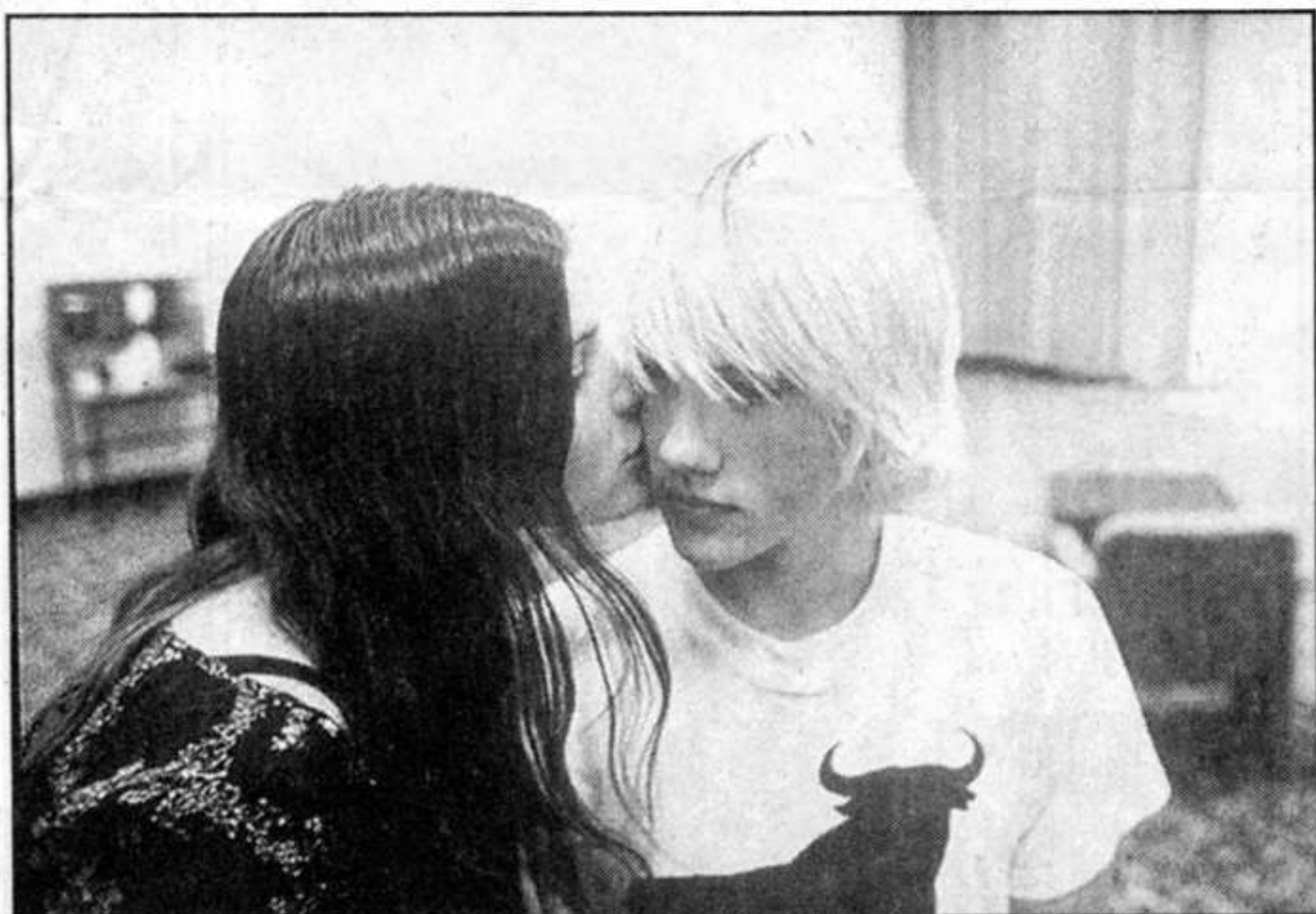
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Elephant:

Drama.
Starring
Alex Frost,

Eric Deulen, Brittany Mountain, Jordan Taylor, Nicole George, John Robinson, Timothy Bottoms. Directed by Gus Van Sant. (R. 81 minutes. At the Embarcadero. Opens Nov. 14 at Rafael Film Center.)



Innocence shattered: Alicia Miles and John Robinson in "Elephant"