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HEADLINE: To sleep, perchance to dream . . . - Cinema

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BODY:

MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO (18) MGM Shaftesbury Ave, Screen on the Green, Camden Plaza

HIGH HEELS (18) Lumiere, Gate, Screen on the Hill

NECESSARY ROUGHNESS (12) Plaza, MGMs West End

FREEJACK (15) MGMs West End

BRANCHES OF THE TREE National Film Theatre Each time we see a film there are black spaces the human eye never registers: tiny pauses, perceptual 'cat naps', when the projector goes dark between moving frames. Gus Van Sant's dazzlingly original film **My Own Private Idaho** is about a boy who keeps falling asleep. Mike (River Phoenix), a male prostitute, suffers from narcolepsy, a tendency to go into sudden sleeps like seizures. Each time he wakes up a new frame of his story has been racked into view. Wittingly or not, the film offers itself as a metaphor for cinema. And throughout its haunting tale of lost love and homeward longings it is one of those rare Hollywood movies modernist enough - or postmodernist - to wear its conceits and devices in plain view.

The film bares its aesthetic plumbing in the disruptive editing and the party games with visual illusionism; including a hilarious scene in which the pin-up males on a shop's magazine covers 'come to life' and chat to each other. It hauls into view thinly disguised chunks of Welles's Chimes At Midnight, alias Shakespeare's Henry IV, to illustrate the filial triangle involving Mike's friend and fellow rent-boy Scott (Keanu Reeves) with his Mayor father and roistering surrogate father (William Richert as an Oregon Falstaff). And it turns Mike's own search for his parents into an eccentric dream-odyssey somewhere between Twin Peaks and Van Sant's own last film Drugstore Cowboy.

The director sounds the film's keynote of tender surrealism at the start, with a flashbacking fantasy montage. Mike is shown asleep on a lonely country road; then Mike's face is shown grimacing with passion as he 'climaxes' with a client; then this memory cues a shot of a wooden homestead, his childhood home, tumbling from the sky onto the very tarmac where he lies.

Slowly, in this 'gay' movie that makes no fuss whatever about its gay background, we piece together dreams and reveries and encounters. Mike's unrequited love for Scott is sewn into images of mock-sacred passion (a Pieta posture in a narcolepsy fit) and then stammered out touchingly by a midnight campfire. Scott's own macho high spirits - he is a heterosexual in hustler's clothing - find their Hal-like home in the Falstaff subplot. And everywhere Van Sant presents the mystery of 'home', that most achingly undefinable word in the language, through a variety of filters: from the backwoods-sentimental ('Home on the range' twanged out on a musical saw) to the comforting fantasies of sex to the looming parental shadows who never quite coalesce into a definable Mum and Dad.

Even sleep - the emotional punctuation marks of Mike's narcolepsy fits - seems like an oblique, absent-minded quest for rebirth. When his body wakes time has moved on to a new reality and Mike himself has often been moved on by a friendly Scott to a new 'birthplace'. In one scene he wakes in the centre of town under a statue of America's early settlers with the stirringly ambivalent inscription 'The Coming of the White Man.

' How often does a mainstream American film ask you to bring your thinking cap with you? How often, having done so, does it keep taking it off and playfully throwing it in the air. For My Own Private Idaho is no ponderous movie cryptogram but a celebration, often funny, of cinema's own expressive athleticism. That freedom of movement is not arbitrary: it is a reflection of life's own bewildering cross-knitting of past and present, seeming reality and evident illusion. Indeed only decades of narrative spoonfeeding have made a film like My Own Private Idaho require the epithet 'surreal' rather than 'real.

' What level of reality Pedro Almodovar's High Heels belongs to I have no idea. The wacky Spaniard who gave us Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown here gives us a film seemingly designed to keep audiences on the verge of narcolepsy.

The story must have come from some dusty drawer marked 'last-resort plot premises.) becomes entangled in the murder of her husband and the jealous sexual intrigues of her mother. Meanwhile the friendly young investigating Judge with the false beard looks suspiciously like the beardless drag artist we first saw providing Miss Abril with lingual services as she hung from the ceiling in his dressing room.

An everyday tale, you will gather, of media and showbiz folk. Unfortunately Almodovar fails to see the ludicrous side of it, which is astonishing for a director who seldom sees any other side to a story..

What ever happened, one asks, to the witty, maze-like insanity of Senor A's early films (Dark Habits, Matador) or the open-plan farce of Women On The Verge? Here one comes out humming the furniture - candy-coloured sofas and tutti-frutti cushions - and wondering why its aesthetic tunefulness has not spread as usual to the rest of the film.

As Cincinnatus was called from his plough, so ageing American film heroes are called from the farmlands to become great statesmen or sportsmen. In Necessary Roughness Scott Bakula is the 34-year-old retired footballer summoned from his turnip patch to captain a Texas university football team. Urged on by foulmouthed trainer Robert Loggia and stressed-out manager Hector Elizondo, swallowing nitrate pills like Smarties, he must turn a losing team into a winning one.

Will he? Will the sun come up tomorrow morning. Punch-drunk with cliches, the film staggers up and down its chosen playing field with little idea of where it is going and less idea of why. Wait, or not, for the video. Stan Dragoti directed.

Geoff Murphy of Utu and Young Guns II directed Freejack, but I doubt that he would want it to loom large in his career profile. Emilio Estevez and Mick Jagger hunt each other through futuristic New York (2009 AD), watched by psychotic billionaire Anthony Hopkins. There are many car chases, explosions and violent deaths and the plot is all about reincarnation, clearly a sunrise industry in this society. I most warmed to the nun played by Amanda Plummer. On being slapped in the face by a baddie she meekly quotes Jesus's words about turning the other cheek; then she says 'But he wasn't talking about dickheads like you' and knees her assailant in the groin.

Such a contrast to the world of Indian director Satyajit Ray. I could have done with a car chase, mind you, or even a runaway rickshaw, in Branches Of The Tree. This deeply talkative drama about family guilt and redemption is on the chairbound lines of Ray's recent An Enemy Of The People. There are grace notes recalling the old mobile mastery: sudden gentle swirlings of the camera, a bright montage of morning activities. But mostly this is less like a movie than a diagram for one, sketched by a great seer of the cinema now succumbing to stiffening artistry.

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