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Toronto IFF
2002

SPECIAL PRESENTATION

139



Auto Focus

Paul Schrader

USA, 2002

107 minutes ■ Colour/35mm
Production Company: **Focus Puller, Inc.**
Executive Producer: **Trevor Macy, Rick Hess, James Schamus**
Producer: **Scott Alexander, Larry Karaszewski, Todd Rosken, Pat Dollard, Alicia Allain**
Screenplay: **Michael Gerbosi, based on "The Murder of Bob Crane" by Robert Graysmith**
Cinematographer: **Fred Murphy**
Editor: **Kristina Boden**
Production Designer: **James Chinlund**
Sound: **Mike Baumann**
Music: **Angelo Badalamenti**
Principal Cast: **Greg Kinnear, Willem Dafoe, Rita Wilson, Maria Bello, Ron Leibman**

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Production: **Focus Puller, Inc., 1149 North Gower Avenue #212, Los Angeles CA 90038 USA. T (323) 785-2270 F (323) 785-2277**

The life of actor Bob Crane is a tragic example of an American success story gone horrendously wrong. After working as a popular radio host and making a number of appearances on television, Bob (gamely played by Greg Kinnear) is eager to jump-start a Hollywood career. In 1965, he lands the lead role on the television series "Hogan's Heroes." His sudden celebrity and unthreatening, "likeable-guy" personality open a lot of doors, which his new buddy John Carpenter (Willem Dafoe, in an energetically creepy performance) walks him through.

Working from Robert Graysmith's ambitious biography and leading up to an account of Crane's unsolved murder in 1978, master storyteller Paul Schrader brings us a dark, fascinating film about a man destroyed by the very compulsions he refuses to acknowledge. Schrader's films are peopled with characters possessed by self-defeating desires and *Auto Focus* may be his most vivid depiction yet of the way these problems take over the lives of individuals too naive or obsessed to find a better path.

Fervently believing all along in his nice-guy status ("I don't drink, I don't smoke..."), Bob is ferried onto a circuit of sexually promiscuous late-night parties by Carpenter, who mediates Bob's initial discomfort by putting a piece of new technology in his hand – a video camera. Too ingenuous to notice that one-night stands are turning into orgies, or that his home life with his wife (Rita Wilson) and kids is slipping from

his indifferent grasp, Bob moves into a state where the day is a mere transition to the exploits of the night.

Schrader's corrosive reflection on Hollywood myth includes eerily hilarious recreations of scenes from "Hogan's Heroes" that jar – and then blur – with the surrealism of Bob's after-work life. As vicious cycles repeat themselves, the bright colours of the sixties give way to a darker palette. Schrader's well-honed sense of irony and tragedy shines through as he rips into the task of capturing Bob's unstoppable downward momentum. As one would expect from this distinguished director, *Auto Focus* is a mesmerizing experience.

■ Piers Handling



Paul Schrader was born in 1946 in Grand Rapids, Michigan and earned his Master's degree from UCLA in 1970. After writing the script for Martin Scorsese's Academy Award®-nominated *Taxi Driver* (76), he directed his first feature film, *Blue Collar* (77). Selected filmography: *American Gigolo* (80), *Cat People* (82), *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (85), *The Comfort of Strangers* (90), *Affliction* (97), *Forever Mine* (99) and *Auto Focus* (02).

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