

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Gus's Van Sant-hood</b>
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Source	<i>Pacific Sun</i>
Date	2003 Feb 5
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Van Sant, Gus
Film Subjects	Gerry, Van Sant, Gus, 2002 Drugstore cowboy, Van Sant, Gus, 1989 My own private Idaho, Van Sant, Gus, 1991 To die for, Van Sant, Gus, 1995 Mala noche, Van Sant, Gus, 1985

The Pacific Sun (Marin Co., CA), February 5, 2003

# Gus's Van Sant-hood

*Pacific Film Archive  
honors quirky indie  
king with retrospective*

**BY STEPHANIE VON BUCHAU**

**G**us Van Sant is not your typical indie filmmaker. Yes, he recycles his own experiences—he's openly gay and has used drugs—but the shallow, cliché-level that most self-indulgent indies operate at has never been visible even in his most austere films. We get the chance to compare Van Sant's work this month when Pacific Film Archive not only premieres his new feature, *Gerry*, but offers a four-day retrospective of the filmmaker Judy Bloch calls, "Our own private auteur."

That's a pun, of course, on *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), Van Sant's most ambitious film and one that attained cult status after the OD death of its star, River Phoenix. It was only Van Sant's third feature—preceded by *Mala Noche* (1985) and *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989) and followed by his most coherent, mainstream movie, *To Die For* (1995), Nicole Kidman's first brilliant acting job in American films.

It was also the only of his features not written by Van Sant; Buck Henry did the cartoony, yet hilarious script, which may explain its right-on social satire of celebrity culture. If you've never seen this movie in which Kidman plays a small-town TV anchor with ambitions so big they include seducing a dimwitted high school kid (Joaquin Phoenix) to kill her boring husband (Matt Dillon), this is your chance. As Kidman puts it, "What's the point of doing anything worthwhile, if nobody is watching?"

The movies Van Sant writes—and I haven't seen *Gerry* yet, which opens here in early March—have a less lacerating, more personal aura. They are movies of the heart—a damaged organ, to be sure, but beating hopefully in the breasts of even the most down and out. *Mala Noche* (which screens Feb. 11) is about a cheerful young homosexual in Portland whose optimism helps thwart the worst aspects of street life. His problem is that he is obsessed with homophobic Mexican youths and the results are both funny and painfully sad. Shot in b&w, it supposedly cost \$25,000 to make, but that may be an indie myth.

*Drugstore Cowboy* (screens Feb. 12) also stars Dillon—Van Sant loves beautiful young actors, which may be his personal hangup, but it's to our benefit—Kelly Lynch, James LeGros and Heather Graham as a druggie "family" that robs drugstores to feed its habit. It's been called "non-

judgmental," but I found it pretty pro-drug (at least honestly assessing the appeal of illegal substances). It's also gritty and basically unpleasant to watch, especially if you've had friends OD.

Feb. 13 is the premiere screening of *Gerry* (2001), starring Matt Damon and Casey Affleck as a pair of guys who get lost in the desert. The film is said to be "smothered in landscape." Since Damon and Affleck have co-writing credits, I imagine at least some of this existential film is improvised. Van Sant is scheduled to attend the screening.

*To Die for* and *My Own Private Idaho* screen on Feb. 14. The latter, though by no means a perfect film, is my favorite Van Sant movie because



Keanu Reeves and the late River Phoenix in *My Own Private Idaho*.

the stretch is so enormous and because it stars River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves, whom Jason Sanders calls "poster boys of disaffected charm and ambiguously defined sexuality."

Phoenix plays a street hustler with narcolepsy, dreaming of being reunited with his missing mother. Reeves is a pretend-street kid, actually son of Portland's mayor, who may be turning tricks because he enjoys it or just to embarrass his father.

Van Sant ups the ante by introducing a Falstaffian figure who urges the boys to great hedonism, while being patronized by Reeves. In other words, Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, with Reeves as Prince Hal. It is an intelligent, ambitious idea that stretches the typical soft porn-drug induced indie "realism" to something more than the sum of its parts. Phoenix and Reeves are wonderful, while the beautifully photographed dream-images tell us that Van Sant has more on his mind than dope and sex. \

*PFA Theater, 2575 Bancroft at Bowditch, Berkeley. Call 510/642-1124 for program information or 510/642-5249 for tickets.*