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Sex machines

Bob Crane biopic *Auto Focus* gets tangled up in videotape.
By Cheryl Eddy

“I always wanted to make an impression,” a jaunty Bob Crane (Greg Kinnear) confides early in *Auto Focus*, Paul Schrader’s biopic about the *Hogan’s Heroes* star.

Twenty-four years after his death, it has become clear that Crane’s showbiz career made far less of an impression on the public than his still-unsolved brutal murder, which has in turn been eclipsed by his well-documented, rather spectacular appetite for sex and amateur pornography. For \$3.95, any curiosity seeker can obtain a trial membership to the “XXX” section of www.bobcrane.com, a site proudly maintained by Crane’s son from his second marriage, Scotty. And anyone with cable and good timing can catch the Bob Crane *E! True Hollywood Story*. Schrader’s film, based on Robert Graysmith’s true crime tome, *The Murder of Bob Crane*, further explores Crane’s lurid life story, tracing with increasingly broad strokes his rise and eventual, pathetic fall.

Kinnear’s smarmy charm comes on a little thick in the movie’s first half, but it works for playing someone who earnestly strives to be seen as a “likable guy.” The cardigan-wearing Crane idolizes Jack Lemmon, drives a giant station wagon, and attends church with his respectable wife, Anne (Rita Wilson), and their

three little kids. It’s all too gee-whiz great — obviously, something seamy is about to wriggle into the open and leave a slime trail all over the shag rug.

Schrader — chiefly known as the guy who wrote *Taxi Driver* but also as the director of films like *Affliction* and *American Gigolo* — doesn’t wait long; soon after Crane lands the lead on the show “with the funny Nazis,” Anne confronts him about a pile of hidden porno mags. The moral downslide continues as he befriends hi-fi expert John Carpenter (primo sleazo Willem Dafoe). Soon, Crane segues from life as a complete square to making after-hours sex films with “Carpy” and a series of random women, all of whom are delighted to be knocking boots with the famous Colonel Hogan and his self-described “manager.”

Though Crane goes through two troubled marriages in the film (his second wife, Patricia, a *Hogan’s* costar, is played by Maria Bello), his relationship with Carpenter is portrayed as the most meaningful. The pals share equally proportioned libidos in overdrive — their motto is “A day without sex is a day wasted!” — as well as a passion for the latest video technology. Once Crane has tasted the luscious fruits of sin, he pauses only twice: once for a superficial

PHOTO BY FRANK MASI



Swing low: John Carpenter (Willem Dafoe), left, and Bob Crane (Greg Kinnear) tune in to T&A with their prototype VTRs in *Auto Focus*.

meeting with his priest, which is interrupted when a well-built fan wants a picture with him, and again when he catches sight of Carpy’s hand on his rear during a filmed orgy. “You’re a perv!” Crane shrieks, and flees the room.

Of course, a smidgen of residual Catholic guilt and/or homosexual panic can’t keep a sex machine down, as evidenced by a dream sequence on the *Hogan’s* set that includes Crane admitting the obvious: “All I think about all day is sex!” Crane’s post-sitcom move into the world of dinner theater, bad movies, and celebrity cooking shows takes his career down several pegs but allows him greater freedom for his swinging lifestyle; fortunately, his departure from the A-list has little effect on his ability to use fame as a chick magnet.

Auto Focus is impeccably art-directed, and both Kinnear and Dafoe have some nice moments. But the film’s structure is too tidy to

feel like it’s telling a true story. Crane’s life is boiled down to a cut-and-dried tale of a good man corrupted by Hollywood, fame, and the machinations of his leechlike best friend. The desperation of Crane’s last lonely months is telegraphed by the film’s sudden shift to handheld cameras and stark, bleached-out film stock, adding a gritty visual element that’s too obvious to be subtly effective. His violent death at the hands of an unknown assailant (the movie implicates

Carpenter, a top suspect who was eventually acquitted) is the ultimate degradation; *Auto Focus* doesn’t imply that he deserves it, but it doesn’t try to garner sympathy for Crane until it’s too late.

Of course, it’d be impossible to make a biopic that was a completely accurate, factual account of the subject’s life. But *Auto Focus* falters by not offering any insight into Crane’s eventually life-wrecking obsession with having sex and documenting his conquests. Crane’s last voice-over, presumably delivered from beyond the grave, includes a cheerful bon mot: “Men gotta have fun!” Is that a justification? An explanation? Possibly, it’s just the most succinct example of how *Auto Focus* simplifies the life of a complex man. ❖

‘Auto Focus’ opens Fri/25 at Embarcadero Center Cinema, 1 Embarcadero Center, S.F.; and Piedmont, 1834 Park, Oak. See Movie Clock, in Film listings, for show times.