

Document Citation

Title	Another risky road
Author(s)	Kristine McKenna
Source	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Date	1991 Oct 13
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	3
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	
Film Subjects	My own private Idaho, Van Sant, Gus, 1991

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Los Angeles Times

October 13, 1991, Sunday, Home Edition

NAME: GUS VAN SANT; RIVER PHOENIX

SECTION: Calendar; Page 3; Calendar Desk

LENGTH: 2384 words

HEADLINE: MOVIES;
ANOTHER RISKY ROAD;
AFTER 'DRUGSTORE COWBOY,' DIRECTOR GUS VAN SANT TAKES ANOTHER LOOK AT AN EDGY SUBCULTURE, THIS TIME THE
WORLD OF MALE HUSTLERS

BYLINE: By KRISTINE McKENNA, Kristine McKenna is a frequent contributor to Calendar.

BODY:

"This is a film that separates the true thinkers from the sensationalists," says actor River Phoenix of "**My Own Private Idaho**," the new movie by director Gus Van Sant, whose 1989 film "Drugstore Cowboy" established him as an important new voice in American cinema.

Starring Phoenix as Mike, a narcoleptic male hustler who blacks out when he's under stress, the film centers on Mike's misadventures as he searches for his long-lost mother with the help of his pal, Scott (Keanu Reeves), a rich kid estranged from his tyrannical father and checking out life on the wrong side of the tracks.

Opening Friday, the film is summarized by Van Sant as "a story about the search for home" however, that description hardly accounts for the commercial and artistic risks he takes with this challenging post-modern road movie.

The biggest commercial gamble he takes is in making his lead character gay, and setting his skewed version of "Huck Finn" in the homosexual street scene of Portland, Ore. For all the advances gay culture is making toward integrating with mainstream society, gay themes still aren't exactly box-office magic. Complicating things further is that Van Sant interweaves a modern-day retelling of Shakespeare's "Henry IV" into "My Own Private Idaho," focusing on the relationship between Shakespeare's Prince Hal (represented by Reeves' character Scott) and Falstaff (incarnated here as a debauched pimp played with Rabelaisian gusto by William Richert). Partially intended as an homage to Orson Welles' film interpretation of "Henry IV," "Chimes at Midnight," "Idaho" slips into bastardized Shakespearean verse for several long scenes.

And, finally, the film adheres to no clear linear narrative structure, but jumps back and forth between realism and fantasy (in one scene, a newsstand of gay porno magazines comes to life), past and present, states of sleep and wakefulness. When the narcoleptic Mike plunges into a sleep state, for instance, his hallucinatory dreams flood the screen.

Produced by Laurie Parker for Fine Line Cinema, "Idaho" is particularly noteworthy in that this is Van Sant's first film based on an original idea rather than an adaptation of an existing literary work. About that, Van Sant says "I was very happy to discover I may actually have something to say."

Critics seem to think he does. Already, "Idaho" has been hailed as "the best American film of the '90s" by American Film critic Donald Lyons and "the first Beat classic of the recession" by Interview magazine's Graham Fuller. It garnered best-picture awards at recent film festivals in Toronto and Deauville, and River Phoenix was named best actor at the Venice Film Festival. With this film, longtime teen idol Phoenix makes good on the promise of the solid supporting role performances he's been turning in since he began working at the age of 11. (Phoenix made his professional debut on the short-lived television series "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" in 1981).

In light of the critical hosannas the film is receiving, it's not surprising that Phoenix and Van Sant are in high spirits for a morning interview at a West Hollywood hotel. Briefly in town for the cast and crew screening of "Idaho," Phoenix had just gotten off a flight from Venice that caused him to miss a night of sleep, and he threatens to doze off at various points in the conversation -- the character of Mike seems to have left a lasting mark on him. Van Sant flew down from his home in Portland where he's immersed in pre-production for his next project, a film adaptation of the Tom Robbins novel "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues."

Having gone their separate ways after sharing the intense experience of shooting a film together, Phoenix and Van Sant are clearly happy to be reunited, and they fall easily into the kind of sparring repartee and needling that only good friends can indulge in. Their personalities bounce off one another in a surprising way. Though Van Sant is older than Phoenix by almost 20 years (Van Sant is 39 and Phoenix 20), Phoenix is the more confident and outgoing of the two. Van Sant is a reserved and extremely modest man prone to digressing into complex conversational abstractions punctuated with droll flashes of black humor; Phoenix has the explosively upbeat disposition of an indefatigable optimist. Squirming around on the sofa like a restless 5-year-old, he's a disarmingly warm and open young man. When Van Sant comments midway through the interview that Phoenix "is one of my very favorite performers," the young actor breaks into a broad smile and says, "Aw Gus, I can't believe that. That's just so nice!"

As in his debut film of 1987, "Mala Noche," and "Drugstore Cowboy," the world Van Sant presents in "My Own Private Idaho" is populated with outsiders driven by private obsessions who band together to form alternative families as they search for refuge from deep-seated internal conflict. Van Sant refers to that imagined refuge as "home."

"Ideally, home is a place you can always return to where everyone loves you and you love everyone and it's peaceful," says Van Sant of the psychological locus of his film. "I don't think anyone actually finds that -- I certainly haven't -- but I think it's what we're all searching for."

In "Mala Noche" and "Drugstore Cowboy," Van Sant suggests that the sensate realms of drugs and sex provide a temporary "home" for some people, and he says that, yes, he does feel that "physical sensations transport us to other places. Mike, for instance, periodically retreats to the alternative home of narcolepsy and he drifts in and out of imaginary landscapes that are a little dark, but are also profoundly peaceful. We all have an alternative universe in our heads that we dip in and out of -- but, unfortunately, we don't have a great deal of control over shaping what that universe is."

The physical universe Van Sant sketches in "Idaho" -- the underbelly of Portland where hardened street kids struggle to make a buck off lonely johns -- is a harsh one that may be a bit startling to some moviegoers, as the gay world is rarely so graphically depicted on screen.

"I read an item in Variety today that describes 'My Own Private Idaho' as 'a film by Gus Van Sant about homosexuality,' " says the openly gay Van Sant with frustration. "That's like saying 'Jungle Fever' is a film about the black experience -- it's such a limited view."

Asked if he feels the press has played a role in perpetuating the ghettoization of gay culture, Van Sant says: "For decades, they refused to acknowledge it at all, so of course the answer is yes. AIDS has changed societal attitudes toward homosexuality -- the emergency of the disease has brought people together, and it's now a topic where it didn't used to be mentioned at all. Gay culture is now in the process of emerging, and the job of how to integrate it into mainstream society has fallen on some unsuspecting people -- like the press."

"Why doesn't the press make a fuss over the fact that the central characters in other films are het-erosexual or celibate?" asks Phoenix. "This is not a statement film about homosexuality. The characters in the film are completely at peace with their sexuality, and their sexuality is a minor element in what these characters are going through -- one is dealing with his estrangement from his father, the other is searching for his mother."

"It doesn't annoy me that the press makes an issue of the sexuality in the film," Phoenix continues, "because that needs to happen for gay culture to integrate into mainstream society. However, it still strikes me as strange that anyone could have any moral objection to someone else's sexuality -- it's like telling someone else how to clean their house. Speaking for myself, I had no second thoughts about playing this part," says Phoenix, who is not gay.

It has been pointed out by some critics that Van Sant is able to romanticize the outsiders' world of drug addicts and male hustlers because he's never had to live in it (Van Sant was born in Louisville, Ky., the son of an apparel company executive, and had a privileged upbringing). He disagrees.

"I don't think I've romanticized this world, nor do I find it in need of romanticization because it's not depressing to me. These characters live in a world with highs and lows just like any world, and the beauty of their world is the same as the beauty of any world . . . just the beauty of life. Nor are these characters any lonelier than anyone else -- I think people are all pretty lonely. I can only speak from a man's point of view -- maybe it's different for girls -- but men, by nature, are lonely."

"Gus presents his characters and the world they live in without judging them -- that's something I really noticed in 'Drugstore Cowboy,' " interjects Phoenix. "He shows the ups and downs in the world he's presenting, and you can trust the narrative balance he builds into the film."

While Van Sant's matter-of-fact depiction of the gay world will reveal how far movie audiences have come in regards to an enlightened view of homosexuality, his fractured mode of storytelling -- which leaps in and out of the world of Shakespeare -- challenges the viewer's grasp of narrative structure.

"Film language has been around for long enough that audiences can identify formats quickly," says Phoenix, "and our visual sophistication has evolved to the point that we can handle a non-linear narrative like this."

"I don't see the Shakespearean passages as disrupting the story of Scott and Mike -- rather, they make the point that what happens to these two people has been happening to people for centuries," adds Van Sant. "I find it comforting that the same stories repeat themselves over and over, and I wanted to underscore the timelessness of the story Scott and Mike are enmeshed in."

"I don't think the Shakespearean dialogue will go over people's heads either," he continues, "because you don't have to know the classics to understand how this dialogue functions in the film. People who hang out a lot together often develop a kind of private language and that was another thing I was trying to show by having them fall into Shakespearean tongue -- I wanted to underscore the sense of camaraderie these people share and to show how separated they are from 'normal' society. I've altered Shakespeare's verse pretty playfully and some people who know Shakespeare might find delight in the way it's been altered, but there will probably be others who'll object to what I've done."

While the Shakespearean passages have left some critics scratching their heads in confusion, most reviewers so far have praised Phoenix, who's also receiving excellent reviews for his work in the recently released film, "Dogfight."

"River and Keanu were my dream choices as far as casting and I must say, I was surprised they agreed to do the film," says Van Sant.

"Because of the nature of the story and the budget we had to work with (\$2.5 million), I figured they'd say no. My story was really enhanced by their abilities as actors too. River, for instance, made his character more complex and much funnier than he was on the page."

In preparation for the part, Phoenix visited Portland's gay street scene where he befriended a few hustlers.

"In talking to these guys, I discovered there's a big difference between being gay and being a hustler," he says. "Sex is a hustler's job and is a way to make a living rather than an expression of desire. Some guys do love it, others love it but are in denial about it, and others hate it. A lot of hustlers are very prejudiced against gays -- they call them 'fags' with disgust. But these kids go to a new town, they're broke and they've done it before, so they do it again. They simply go somewhere else in their heads while it's happening."

Another part of Phoenix's preparation included studying the performance by German actor Bruno S. in Werner Herzog's film "Stroszek."

"I love that character for the way he takes everything so seriously, and the way he has his own abstract view on everything," says Phoenix. "He's a man who has to live simply because if he didn't his head would blow up -- the world is just too compacted and heavy for him. People like Bruno S. sense the weight of the world with unusual intensity, and that's something I wanted to convey about Mike."

For passages of the film involving narcoleptic episodes, Phoenix attempted to more or less sleepwalk through scenes. "I'd stay asleep until just seconds before the camera would roll," he recalls, "then I'd stagger onto the set and do the scene in a half-sleep state."

Though the film tends to function as a frame around Phoenix's dazzling performance, Van Sant points out that he actually identifies more with the Keanu Reeves character, Scott.

"Scott's on a pretty weird trip and sometimes I can relate to that," says Van Sant with a cryptic chuckle. "In fact, this movie itself seems like a metaphor for the character of Scott in that it's a Hollywood film that goes into places that aren't too well traveled by industry movies."

Though Van Sant feels a bit out of his element in Hollywood, he seems to have a future there. He's scheduled to do a film biography of Andy Warhol for Universal following the completion of "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues" for TriStar -- a film that represents a major shift in perspective for Van Sant.

"I'll be going from the all-male cast of 'Idaho' to an all-female cast," says Van Sant. "In preparing to do 'Cowgirls' I've been surrounding myself with women and have been talking to women about women a lot. I've concluded that women are smarter and more in tune with the universe -- this is probably a matter of biology because they are the birth-givers."

Asked if he has any trepidation about embarking on two major projects in an environment that's notoriously hostile to iconoclastic visionaries such as himself, Van Sant says: "People who are used to controlling money want people to work for them and to do what they say, and that's not a problem I've completely gotten around. Yeah, I got the money to make 'Idaho,' but I really had to fight for it."

"You have to kick some ass to make a film like this," Phoenix excitedly concludes. "You really gotta' shoot some people's feet off!"

GRAPHIC: Photo, COLOR, Keanu Reeves, above left, River Phoenix in "My Own Private Idaho"; New Line Cinema; Photo, COLOR, below, Phoenix and Gus Van Sant, director of the \$2.5-million film. "I was surprised they agreed to do the film," says Van Sant. ROLANDO OTERO / For The Times