

Inside Outsider Gus Van Sant

The Director of *My Own Private Idaho* Is Casual About His Sexuality, Compulsive About His Filmmaking

BY ADAM BLOCK

“Can you just refer to me as *casual* gay?” filmmaker Gus Van Sant pleads with a grin. “When I read

that I’m ‘openly gay,’ it just sounds so confrontational. And I’m not. It sounds like you’d go into a store and say, ‘Can I have a pack of cigarettes? I’m gay,’” he laughs.

The mild-mannered, unassuming 39-year-old director is a fast-rising star in Hollywood. Yet he lives far from the film capital, in decidedly unglamorous Portland, Ore. Since moving there in 1983 he has produced three provocative features that have made him one of the most celebrated American directors of his generation.

On Sept. 27 the New York Film Festival will premiere his latest work, *My Own Private Idaho*, starring River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves as two small-town street hustlers. The film will be released nationwide in mid October.

It might be tempting to cast Van Sant as a gay Spike Lee: a firebrand advocate for his oppressed community. But it’s a role the soft-spoken introvert insists he’s ill-suited to. “I’m not a spokesman, and I’m not responsible for the gay community,” he explains. “I’m alien to it. I have just allowed myself not to be closeted, but it’s hard, because it means a lot of things are expected of me that don’t have to do with the movies. And movies are really what I do.”

Van Sant grew up in Connecticut, graduated from prep school in Portland, and studied film at the Rhode Island School of Design. After a brief sojourn in Europe, he moved to Hollywood in 1977, where he landed a job as an assistant to director Ken Shapiro (*The Groove Tube*). In 1978 Van Sant filmed the unreleased feature *Alice in*

Hollywood, which he describes as “a failed screwball comedy,” his last attempt to follow a commercial formula. “I can’t do it,” he says.

The previous summer he’d worked in Portland on a left-wing documentary, which introduced him to “the stars of Portland’s underground.” Among them was Walt Curtis, a garrulous gay street poet whose memoir, *Mala Noche*, would become the basis for Van Sant’s first critical success. In 1980 he moved back east and spent three years working for his father in advertising, saving \$20,000 to finance the film that he would describe to the disbelieving as “*Death in Venice* on skid row.”

The tale of a doomed romance between a convenience-store clerk and a Mexican migrant worker became a surprise hit on the gay film-festival circuit and won the Los Angeles Film Critics’ award for Best Independent/Experimental Film in 1987. His next feature, *Drugstore Cowboy*, took the top awards from the National Society of Film Critics in 1989. With this fall’s release of *My Own Private Idaho*, Van Sant’s notoriety is sure to increase.

Next spring he’ll begin shooting Tom Robbins’s casually erotic cult novel *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, with which Hollywood has been struggling for 16 years. Then, in 1993, he’ll lens a biography of enigmatic gay artist Andy Warhol. His other planned projects include Michael Murphy’s *Golf in the Kingdom* and William S. Burroughs’s homoerotic fantasy *The Wild Boys*. “I’m scheduled for the next seven years,” he says.

This summer Van Sant sat down with *The ADVOCATE* on a number of occasions to elaborate on his life and work.

You met the gay Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini?

Yes. I was on a program in Italy with a group of film students [in 1975]. It was a month before his death. He was very precise. He asked each of us what we wanted to do in

film. I said that I wanted to translate literature into film. That didn’t make any sense to him. He said, “Why? Why would you want to do that?”

My opinion was just that literature does all of this great stuff that movies almost never get—like poetry. I wanted to get the exact feelings and nuances of my interpretations of what I was reading. I did that with *Drugstore Cowboy* and with *Mala Noche*.

***Mala Noche* is a disturbing story. Did you feel you had to tone it down?**

Well, the book is pornographic. It talks about what it feels like to stick your dick up someone’s butt, and it feels like chocolate up there. [Laughs] Emotionally the book worked, but it was hard in the film to get as far as Walt did with his language.

You made something potentially horrific familiar and even lyrical.

I like having that edge to play with. If there is no edge, you have to find something else. But that edge of going too far or not far enough is always active in these last films; that’s something I’ve worked on.

In sex scenes you need to balance the sensuousness with some note of reality. What do you hear in *Mala Noche* when they’re having sex? You hear a belt buckle hitting the ground, and steam engines. Instead of playing some beautiful music, it’s playing up the reality. That grounds it for the audiences and keeps it from becoming lurid.

Was it risky putting all your chips on this gay-themed story?

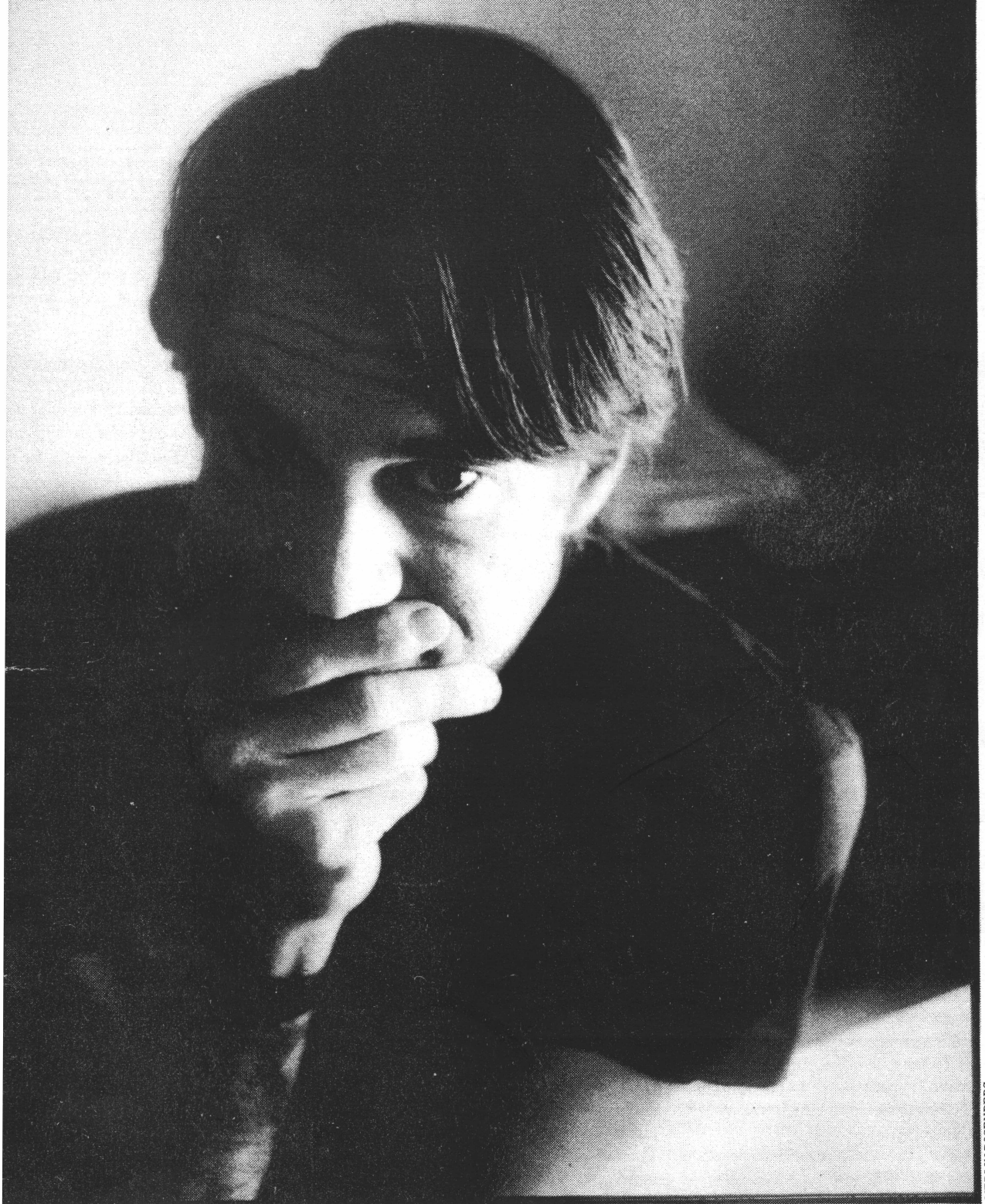
I thought that was the exact reason I should do it. It was a good story that I could do cheaply, and I knew no one else would touch it. It was this hard-hitting, hard-core gay love story. It was gay in a sense, but it wasn’t part of the gay mainstream, because Walt is really an outsider. He’s really at odds with gay society. He alienates people. He tells them that they

don’t know what they’re doing.

You don’t identify with mainstream gay culture either.

No, and I still don’t—or at least not with adult gay culture. I identify quite a bit with the punk-kid gay culture.

Maybe it’s that I was such a hermit with



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my work in the ’70s and ’80s. The people in their 30s and 40s—my generation—the gay revolution happened in their youth. And I just wasn’t a part of it. If you look at the queer punk ’zines, like *J.D.s* and *Bimbo*, you get a sense of a life-style, and it’s in revolt against that ’70s *Blueboy* magazine life-style of gay conformity.

As a person, by nature, unwilling to conform, I identify much more with the queer punks. I always fight against anything that suggests conformity, and I think the films say that too.

In doing *Drugstore Cowboy* after *Mala Noche*, were you avoiding being slated

I said it was going to be easy to do the sex stuff.”

Common wisdom holds that it can hurt an actor’s career to play a gay character. How did Phoenix and Reeves react to that prospect in *My Own Private Idaho*?

They didn’t care. Keanu was gung ho. River was more curious and cautious. He was thinking about all of the things that he has to deal with as a star, like *If I do this, will the weird guys who write me letters that they want to put a chain saw up my butt be more excited and write more letters?*

I told them that I wasn’t going to make them suck anybody off. [Laughs] No, I didn’t say that. I said it was going to be easy to do the sex stuff; it wasn’t going to embarrass them.

They were both facing associations with characters who trade in gay sex, but they were written with the standard hustler “I’m straight” attitude. So they were able to assume an identity.

You let Phoenix rewrite the campfire scene, where his character admits that he loves Scott?

Yeah. Those were River’s lines. I let them rework that scene without me. And it was really weird when we shot it, because I saw them do something that I’d done within the last year, where I told a friend that I loved him, and he said, “Wow, don’t say that. That stuff turns me off.” And I said, “But anyway, just so you know,” and had him finally go, “OK, OK, come over here,” and pat the ground.

When they were playing it, I thought, *This is so good. It’s so much like the same thing that I’ve been through.*

As a gay director, do you find it curious that it was a straight actor who made his character explicitly gay?

I think that has more to do with River’s politics and mine than River’s straightness and my gayness. He is a great politician, and as he came into this project I think he said, “OK, who is this guy? This guy is gay, and I’m gonna play him as a gay guy.”

I came in and said, “Hey, this guy is confused; I’m gonna play him confused.”

These are two different interpretations that, because of the public, can be interpreted politically. One is politically correct.



Gus Van Sant (left) directs River Phoenix (center) and Keanu Reeves in *Idaho*. The actors accepted the roles of male hustlers without the trepidation most stars would have.

The other is politically confused. And I think that applies to me. [Laughs] I’m politically confused. River is very politically right-on.

Do you feel you were politically educated by Phoenix?

I was enlightened, yeah. I thought that was a neat thing that he did.

Was that characterization the one you wanted but felt you didn’t dare write?

No. If I’d wanted it, I would have just put it in. See, I’m more interested in the mixed messages of the characters—the street hustlers—as I see them. Because I don’t see them as gay or straight. The ambience of those guys is that they don’t know. Maybe they just haven’t found out, but they’re not that positive.

Do you identify with their ambivalence?

Yeah, I guess I do.

When did you realize that you were at-

tracted to other guys?

When I was 12. My best friends were talking about this new game—they’d discovered that they could spy on girls and see them dancing in their underwear. And I said, “Great. Why don’t we go to Erie’s? We can watch him.” And they said, “What? Why?” That was the first time that we didn’t all want to do the same thing.

And did you acknowledge it to yourself?

No. Not for a really long time—like forever. Not until I was 30. Until then I just had girlfriends, but I was always super attracted to guys.

Are you attracted to straight men?

Yeah, and that’s the whole answer. That’s the deal: I’d rather hang out with straight guys and not get any sex than hang out with gay guys and get sex. Sometimes, every now and then, I score.

For you to make it with a guy, does he have to be straight—at least in fantasy?

“I relate to the Wild West; they had gay gunslingers.”

I don’t think so. I’m just still not really comfortable with the terms *gay* and *straight*. I think it’s good to have the terms, but then there is a lot of importance put on them—like it’s either one or the other. And you have to decide right now, or they’re gonna blow your head off. There is no graciousness on either side.

See, the thing is, you say what you like, and everyone assumes you’re joining something. And I’d rather not join. But people think that if you don’t join, you’re lying or something.

Homosexuality is already politicized by society. As soon as it’s a part of your life, and you say that—

—then you’re no longer an individual.

But who is responsible for that? Is it the queer kid who is told that his inclinations are sick and illegal? Look at Hollywood and its failure to portray gay characters as anything but pathetic or monstrous. Hasn’t Hollywood been incredibly homophobic?

I don’t know. I can disagree with that. It’s just that Hollywood isn’t political. The films it produces aren’t political. They have to sell them, and America isn’t going to buy a gay film.

Aren’t you trying to prove that wrong?

But I’m not planning on America buying it. I’m just pushing the edge. I’ve been able to go by my own thing. I’m not a big corporation like the studios. My films don’t need to gross \$100 million, and the studios’ do.

They recognize America’s Victorian morality, and they conform to that consciousness to sell. Homosexuality is not tolerable in a society that’s designed to have the man of the house live with his family and conform with his neighbors. I don’t think that consciousness always existed in America. I think that industrialization brought centralization: people having similar jobs, homes, and opinions. I relate to the wild West; they had gay gunslingers, and it was really wild.

Does that excuse the tedious tendency to

cast queers as villains and psychopaths?

I think that this is just Hollywood exploiting the public’s fear of the unknown. Homosexuality is the unknown to the masses, because probably only 10% of them are homosexuals, and 9% of those are unacknowledged. So it’s a dramatic device that might change if people weren’t so uninformed.

But isn’t that a legitimate creative challenge? It seems aesthetically as well as politically passive to just accept those prejudices as givens and then to exploit them.

That’s true. That’s sort of my impetus, like in having a gay character.

You’ve been working on the Warhol script. Do you think he’ll qualify as a sympathetic gay protagonist?

I doubt it. He’s too weird. [Laughs]

You’ve been asked to do a public-service announcement against fag bashing for the Anti-Violence Campaign.

Yes, but I haven’t seen a script that’s really ready. I’d like to write my own and direct it. I was going to do one for Portland’s League for Human Dignity. My idea was to show two skinhead boys making out. That’s a confrontational-type thing; it only aggravates the people you’re trying to reach. But maybe it doesn’t. Maybe it’s all right. The fight would come down to putting them on the air, which would be a good place to fight. Right? You can show people kissing on TV. Why not these?

Did you give much thought to how *My Own Private Idaho* should be marketed?

That is pretty much in New Line’s [the distributor’s] hands. I think it would be odd to pigeonhole it as a gay film.

No. I meant have you come up with an advertising line?

Well, I guess I’d want *Idaho* to have a tag line like “He ain’t heavy, he’s my lover.” Or maybe “One’s gay. The other isn’t.” [Laughs] But I didn’t suggest anything. I don’t think they were really looking for a tag line like “Feel the heat!”

I told them that I wasn’t going to make them suck anybody off.

as a “gay filmmaker”?

No, because I had been shopping *Private Idaho*, but no one would touch it. So I found these two stories by James Fogel and wrote the scripts. I really liked *Satan’s Sandbox* better than *Drugstore Cowboy*. It was about gay identity and had a gay role for Matt Dillon. He would play this kid who is gang-raped in prison and falls in love with a transvestite. Matt liked it, but it was a bit risky.

But Avenue Films finally approved *Drugstore Cowboy*?

Yeah. I had wanted Tom Waits for the part, but they didn’t feel he was a big enough draw. Finally, I was able to offer it to Matt, and he said yes.

If that was hard to sell, *Private Idaho* must have been even tougher.

Right. They’d read the script and say that they just didn’t get it—“hustlers and Shakespeare?” [Laughs] Those films all combined fantasy elements I made up with explorations of parts of society I hadn’t seen in movies. *Drugstore Cowboy* was about addicts but not about scoring and staying high—just the life of these interesting characters.

Idaho is about male street prostitutes. Again, it was something that films wouldn’t touch—even the documentary *Streetwise*. That’s always left out. People don’t want to see it. The idea of young guys having sex with older guys for money—it’s like off the scale of life!

Do you have any sense of how Phoenix’s and Reeves’s teenybopper fans will respond to them in these roles?

No, I don’t. It’s kind of an experiment. I’m sure that some people will be aghast. But I thought that about *Mala Noche* and *Drugstore Cowboy*. I’ve still yet to see people flee the theater. They do that with *Poison*—stomp out. I hope it doesn’t happen with this film.

Where do you think you’ll find your audience?

At lesbian and gay film festivals! Boy, are we gonna be broke if that turns out to be our audience!

Do you think that if *My Own Private Idaho* is a success, it will be easier to get financing for other films that treat homosexuality in a matter-of-fact way?

Yeah, and that might happen, but again, this is a film about street hustlers. So they’ll probably go, “What does a film about a gay couple in Long Island, a gay doctor and lawyer, have to do with *Private Idaho*?” So what might happen is that just street hustlers will be considered acceptable. That’s how Hollywood works. They’re real specific.

You have faced a lot of skepticism in making your last three films.

There was always a challenge, and I like that. In those films it rested with the identity of the lead character—not his character, but his occupation or his obsession. In *Mala Noche* it’s an obsession. In *Drugstore Cowboy* it’s obsession and occupation. In *Idaho* it’s their occupation—their activity.

Those identities are a challenge. Otherwise, those portrayals of those characters wouldn’t have the same edge. Because, ultimately, *Idaho* is just a buddy movie, and *Drugstore Cowboy* is cops and robbers. You could change a few things and not have that challenge.

What has been good about my approach is that if the film is successful, it’s successful in its own right. Because part of it is just people’s perceptions. I get a kick out of people who think I’m nuts. I just like that. ▼