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Gus Van Sant: Making films about outsiders

Unlike many gay filmmakers, Van Sant is not interested in making gay movies that appeal to a heterosexual audience

BY DELL RICHARDS

Filmmaker Gus Van Sant, 36, burst on the national scene with a flurry of accolades. Newsweek called Van Sant's latest movie, *Drugstore Cowboy* "extraordinary"; the Los Angeles Times dubbed it "electrifying." Even the staid and somber The New York Times hailed Van Sant as one of the up-and-coming generation of new directors.

But articles full of applause left out two essential details.

Van Sant isn't a novice; he's been making movies since he was 12 years old.

And he isn't part of the straight, Hollywood mainstream. He is gay and his first film was gay.

Without these two facts, it is almost impossible to understand why Van Sant's films are so good or why he makes the movies he does.

Being gay, Van Sant understands people who do not fit into the mainstream. As an outsider himself, he is willing to tackle subjects other directors wouldn't dream of taking on.

"Most of my films fall into an area that's never been touched or mentioned except in news articles or documentaries," said Van Sant.

Drugstore Cowboy, starring Matt Dillon and Kelly Lynch shows the underbelly of society, the people Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign could never reach — four unemployed addicts who rob pharmacies to support their drug habits.

Drugstore Cowboy is Van Sant's first feature to get nationwide distribution and the second to garner well-deserved praise.

Although most people don't know it, Van Sant's first full-length drama, *Mala Noche* won the 1987 Los Angeles Film Critics Award for the Best Independent.

But the nitty-gritty movie also angered many in the gay community for its choice of subjects — a gay man whose unrequited love for a heterosexual makes his life miserable.

"Why doesn't he make films about healthy gays?" was the familiar refrain.

Sensitive to the criticism that's been leveled against the movie, Van Sant explains that politics and art cannot be mixed. When they are, he said, art loses.

"Unfortunately, politicians don't have any grasp of art. My films are very realistic, extremely realistic," said Van Sant.

"The guy doesn't have any awareness of anybody except himself. Being like he is, he is completely alone — while the whole thing about gay America is that you're NOT alone."

Gay critics questioned why, at this point in time, Van Sant chose to make a film about a "homosexual" — someone who hasn't come to terms with his sexuality — rather than a "gay" — someone who is proud of his sexual orientation.

But this isn't the first time the extremity of his vision has gotten him into trouble.

Even though gay writer Larry Kramer had been talking to Van Sant about turning his

play *The Normal Heart* into a movie, the idea was dropped once Kramer and the producer had actually seen Van Sant's work.

"My films show a real severe world," said Van Sant.

Nonetheless, Van Sant believes that his films will eventually make a difference — for gays as well as other outsiders.

"If I tell things the way I see them, eventually it'll help," said Van Sant.

Unlike many gay filmmakers, Van Sant is not interested in making gay movies that appeal to a heterosexual audience.

"I don't want to propagandize being gay to the straight world," said Van Sant.

"Some films actually do — say *The Life and Times of Harvey Milk* — but mine don't."

Van Sant wants to make films for a gay audience but he also wants to deal with problems the gay community is facing.

The 1985 *Mala Noche* provided him with such a subject — one that wasn't being dealt with by the major studios — one Van Sant found very compelling.

"Hollywood wasn't making any films about gay characters but there was a gay audience that wanted these kinds of films," said Van Sant.

Van Sant had attended early gay film festivals and was appalled at the movies shown because organizers had so little to choose from.

"At the earlier festivals, they had to show old Tennessee Williams movies."

His next project, *My Own Private Idaho*, is about two street kids who use homosexual prostitution to survive.

"It's about kids who are homeless, kids who need attention," said Van Sant.

"It investigates the world of male street hustlers — the 14- to 21-year-olds. It's about trading sex for money, about monetary needs and emotional needs — the absent father syndrome."

The upcoming film raises questions the gay community has yet to answer.

Van Sant's next project bears more resemblance to the late gay filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder than contemporary gay directors.

This film won't rely on melodrama given Van Sant's desire to play on rather than reinforce stereotypes. But it will deal with a strata of homosexual society rarely seen by most gays — the homosexual underworld peopled by sailors and ex-cons.

"It's a world which is simultaneously macho and straight — at the same time it's not," said Van Sant with another laugh which says that he knows he is being complicated but that he doesn't have any other way to explain this strange phenomenon.

And Van Sant believes in telling it like it is, no matter what the subject — or the occasion.

Though Van Sant downplays his own roots, his adolescence was as far removed from the streets as anyone can get. He was born in Connecticut and moved to Portland — where he still lives in an apartment today —



in high school. As an adolescent, he says he was a cross between an artist and a nerd.

His family was well off, his father a manufacturer whose lines of men's and women's clothing sell in department stores nationwide.

It was his family's wealth that gave Van Sant the opportunity to start making movies at an age when most adolescents have to be content watching them on television.

He financed his first movies by working as a sound man in Hollywood. He made the \$25,000 needed for his first feature by working in a New York advertising agency.

"I worked as an agency producer, doing TV commercials," said Van Sant.

Van Sant claims that making movies isn't expensive — at least in the beginning. His film shorts — which cost about \$50 each — bear this out.

"You can take a role of Super-8 in to be processed for \$5," said Van Sant.

That's how he got his start and that's what kept him going until he got out of college in 1975.

But it was during college that he began cutting his artistic teeth — and developing his aesthetic — on the hot filmmakers of the day, Jonas Mekas, Jack Smith and Ron Rice.

"I was about 16 years old when I got real interested in the New York underground movement," said Van Sant.

That experimental influence is central to the look and feel of his films. In *Drugstore Cowboy*, Van Sant makes a joke out of the use of hand-held cameras that these filmmakers pioneered. But he actually shakes the camera so that the picture flies around wildly. While it is a spoof, it's also homage to the 1960s film underground that Van Sant's films resemble.

Thus, the most telling trait in Van Sant's work is not only his aesthetic but his humor.

The last line of the credits of *Drugstore Cowboy* — a movie that was filmed in the seediest parts of his home town, in places most people would never see — states in typical wry, Van Sant manner, "Filmed on location in beautiful Portland, Oregon."

And it is this ability to use irony as well as compassion that makes his films so palatable — even when the subject is as distasteful as drug addicts, street hustlers or neurotic homosexuals.

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