

His own private Portland

Just Out talks to Gus Van Sant and friends about fact, fiction and film

by Oriana Green

He's as cryptic as fleeting clouds streaming across an expanse of sky, as elusive as film images projected on a screen. Shy and aloof, he isn't too keen on discussing himself. Humble, almost.

Gus Van Sant once told *Salon*, "There's not any reason for a filmmaker to be promoting what he does, because the film is there." And yet he agrees to talk with us in connection with his new movie *Finding Forrester*—perhaps because of his strong ties to Portland, a city he called home for the past 17 years.

Earlier this year Van Sant finally sold his notorious grand old home on Council Crest and moved to a Manhattan apartment (cozily, in the same building as Joaquin Phoenix and Casey Affleck, both actors he has directed). Yet close friends in Portland report he's already

house hunting again in the Rose City, presumably for something less rambling.

"It was a beautiful house, but Gus was out of town so much that it was falling

into disrepair," notes long-time friend and associate Scott Green, who spent time with Van Sant on his recent trip back to the city. "I could tell that he misses Portland already. I hope he gets another house here. He loves Portland and misses his friends."

Of course it's no accident that road images, travel and a search for home are recurring themes in Van Sant movies. His corporate climber dad crisscrossed the country with his family, finally landing in Portland in time for his namesake to finish high school at the elite Catlin Gabel School. With his father earning the family brioche as president of White Stag, Van Sant the younger certainly knew affluence firsthand.

Van Sant in a pensive mood inside his landmark Portland home

Which also explains his fascination with a side of life he didn't know from experience and some of his reactionary attitudes that still color his life. Pal Green is quick to depict him as someone who prefers to be seen as an ordinary guy, someone who'd just as soon tool around town in his plain-as-dirt truck as in some flashy Benz.

Not pretentious, he loves to eat breakfast at the Original Pancake House on Barbur Boulevard, and thanks to his fairly low profile, he's able to live his life without much interference from the public. "He's not a snob, not into classism," assures another friend, Portlander Heidi Snellman.

He also answers his own phone, which certainly dispels any notion of an indie director gone Hollywood. In fact, almost all of his films concern people who are marginalized economically, as if where others might see poverty he sees poetry. So what's the source of that?

"Well, I wasn't a hustler or a street person," he affirms during our recent phone interview from New York, where he's preparing for the Dec. 25 release of *Finding Forrester*. Although he does say he was influenced by living in Port-

land's Hollywood district during his lean years in the '80s and finds the world of the down and out fascinating: "Oregon was settled by drifters, people who lived off the river, like the people on Burnside.... This alternate world that's co-existing has its own rules and is adventurous in a way that the world of well-moneyed people isn't, much in the same way that outer space is a fascinating frontier."

When asked if that means he won't be making any costume dramas, Van Sant points out that Merchant and Ivory also conjure an alien world. "The general audience wants to make connection to a different world that's metaphorical to their own."

As a gay man, Van Sant has to endure endless questions about his directorial point of view. He spoke to *Entertainment Weekly* recently about the potential gay angle in his new film: "I'm sure that my sexuality plays into that kind of friendship between two [male] characters. It's sort of like a mentor-student relationship. That always has a kind of subliminal overtone for me." In the same story, *Finding Forrester* star and co-producer Sean Connery added, "On the issue of the gayness and whether that's in the movie, that's Gus' cross to bear."

"We all lived up there in Gus' house during *Idaho*," Scott Green recalls fondly of the time spent with cast members River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves

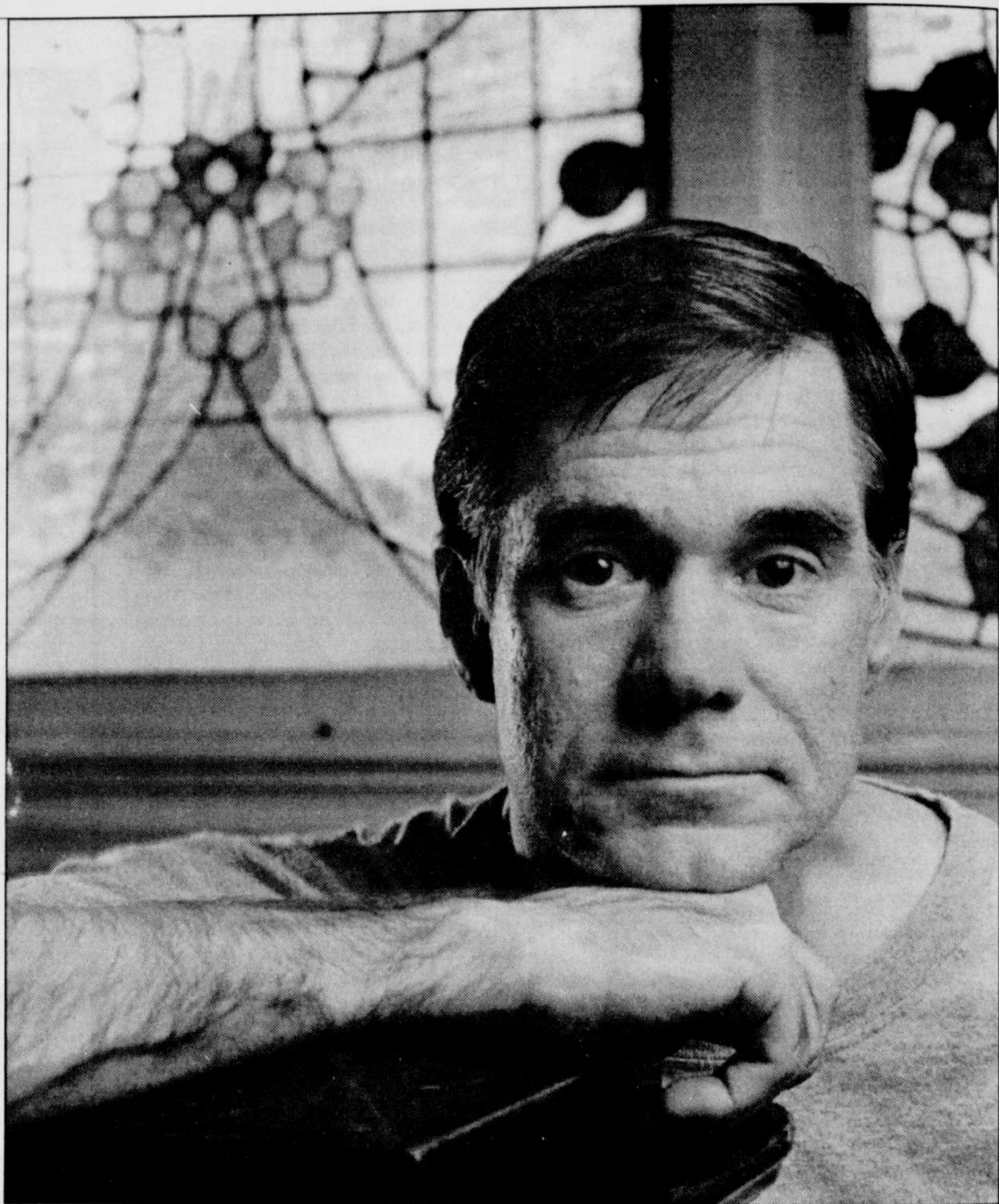


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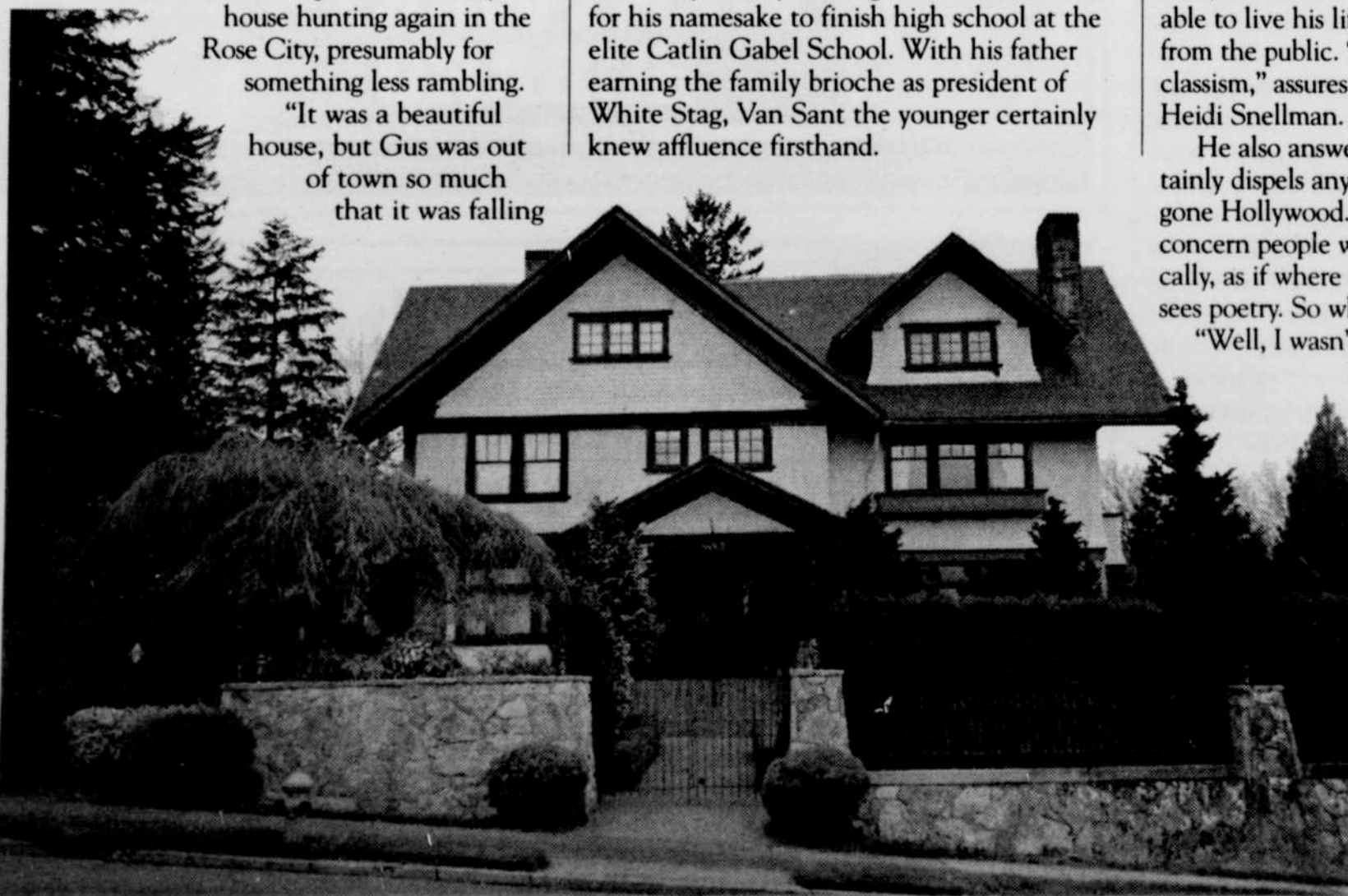


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