

A rare moment—Van Sant doesn't like to smile in front of other people's cameras

When *Just Out* asks about it, Van Sant explains that the comment was picked up out of context from a three-hour interview—and that Connery's answer meant that his cross to bear is all the endless deconstruction of his films, hunting for gay content, not his sexuality itself. And for the record, the famously macho Connery had no problem with his director's sexual orientation.

So has Van Sant experienced homophobia in Hollywood? "Fifty percent of the people working in show business are gay.... I think they'd like nothing better than to make gay films, but people are always analyzing what will make money," he explains. "There's a new gay film on a contained budget coming out every month now, whereas that wouldn't happen 10, 15 years ago. *Parting Glances* [1986] indicated that a modest gay story could be made. If it made the kind of money that action films make, they'd be making gay films."

And can we expect another gay-themed film from him? "Yes, but it comes down to getting them funded."



Connery bonds with his director

He does, however, offer a glimmer of hope for better days ahead. "There's a gay middle class now, and if they demand that a \$50 million film be made starring Barbra Streisand, then it'll get made."

And what does he think has to happen for actors to be openly gay in Hollywood? "Actors are hard to pinpoint—struggling actors are what you want them to be—they become whatever the role demands."

One Gus Van Sant film that connects him viscerally with his years in Portland is *My Own Private Idaho*, the complex tale of two hustlers that he co-wrote with a guy named Shakespeare. (He did give the Bard screen credit for his *Henry IV* riffs.) At the tender age of 19, Scott Green lucked into a dream job on the film as assistant to the director; he also played two small roles and began to learn his craft as a still photographer on that set.

"We all lived up there in Gus' house during *Idaho*," he recalls fondly of the time spent with cast members River Phoenix, Keanu Reeves and others—all looked after by a maid, no less. Although it was a beautiful old sprawling home, the digs were decidedly downscale—think futons everywhere, not fancy schmancy.

But then Green corrects the urban legends: "All the stories you've heard are wildly exaggerated. If some of those stories were true it would've been even more fun," he says enigmatically.

According to Van Sant, his residence was also used for editing and the production office, but the frat house atmosphere "proved too chaotic," so he actually moved out of his own home and left it in the hands of his cast and crew.

Van Sant trusted his cast in other ways, Green recalls. "River had this idea that his character should fall in love with Keanu's character, so he wrote the dialogue himself for the campfire scene."

Indeed, during shooting Phoenix told his director in a story the actor wrote for *Interview*: "One of the things that I really appreciate in working with you is that in that collaborative stage you have no fear of your ego being stripped or anything."

We had to ask how he could work so intimately with all these beautiful, charismatic men and not fall in love with them a little. "All directors have to fall in love with their lead characters; the leading character is the spokesman for the universe you're making the film about," Van Sant says. "When we're

casting guys there is the extra conflict of interest of falling in love with them, but I don't allow that to happen. In France, directors say they have to make love to their actors, but they're French. I'm more Calvinist," he deadpans.

But what about his actors—does he think they fall in love with him a little? "Some have to," he admits, adding that some actors require certain behavior from a director, even tyrannical behavior. "I have to have everything peaceful and nice; I can't stand angry people working."

"When we're casting guys there is the extra conflict of interest of falling in love with them, but I don't allow that to happen."

—Gus Van Sant

Of course, after the untimely death of Phoenix in 1993, *Idaho* will forever have a bitter-sweet gloss. Longtime friend Heidi Snellman remembers, "The most unhappy I've seen him was when River Phoenix died, and that was awful."

Van Sant dealt with his grief through art—writing *Pink*, a novel with thinly veiled real-life references, about a young actor named Felix Arroyo working for a gay Oregon director. As quirky as his films, the inventive book employs many unusual stylistic devices to convey his themes of love and loss.

When asked if he was going to make a documentary of Phoenix's life, Van Sant told *Salon* in 1997: "Pink was it.... This book is very much influenced by River. It's a documentary of my life and existence through him."

At a reading of *Pink* Van Sant was asked the question everyone wants the answer to: Who drove up and rescued the River Phoenix character at the end of *Idaho*? Van Sant replied that he intentionally left it ambiguous: "I was hoping that the viewer would project themselves into the film and decide for themselves who it was."

Not satisfied with this response, the questioner asked: Who picked him up in your version? "In my version, I pick him up."

The director followed *Idaho* with a disappointing rendition of Tom Robbins' *Even Cowgirls* *Get the Blues*, which Van Sant wanted to do

because he saw it as the story of a female hero and a break from films that often objectify women. In many critics' eyes he redeemed himself with his follow-up, the Nicole Kidman vehicle *To Die For*, although its success also was credited to another strong performance from a member of the Phoenix family, this time Joaquin.

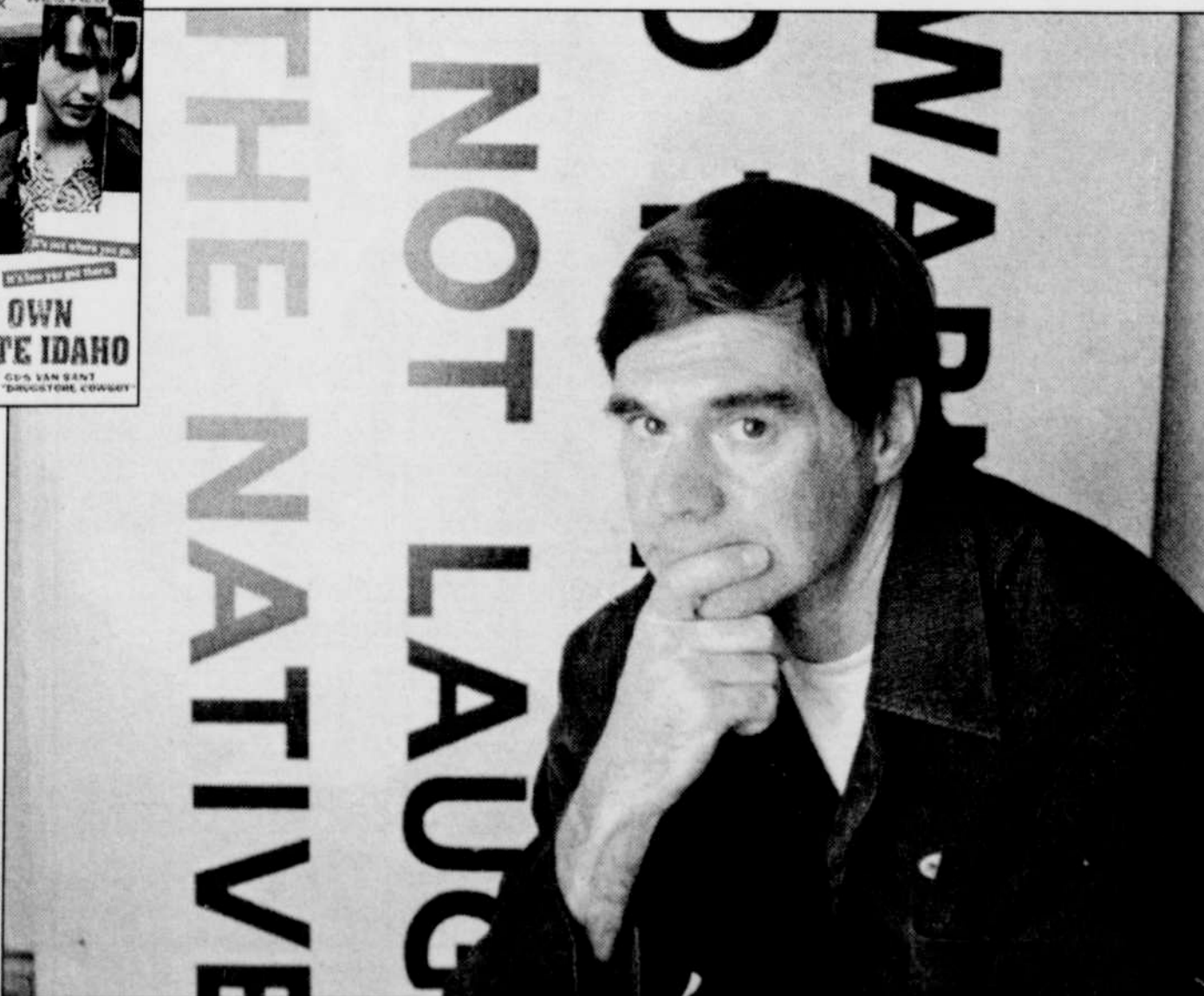
Van Sant rode that wave to his biggest hit to date, *Good Will Hunting*, complete with the big-time Oscar Experience. Buddy Scott Green was also along for that ride as the director's assistant.

He remembers the set as being typically laid back, except when star Robin Williams entertained them between takes. "He'd start improvising and have the crew peeing their pants."

Continued on Page 26



PHOTOS BY SCOTT GREEN



One of the many props Van Sant has kept is this sign from *My Own Private Idaho*: "Warning to tourists, do not laugh at the natives"