

**FILM**

# Gus, anonymous

The Portland director reaches back to his indie roots with *Gerry*

BY LISA BRADSHAW

Gus Van Sant moved back to Portland in 2002 after a two-year stint living in New York. It seems that for laid-back, queer, independent film directors (we lured *Far from Heaven's* Todd Haynes, too), Portland is just a little more comfortable.

"I think it's the same thing that keeps other people here," Van Sant says. "There's a lot of new people who've come here since I've been gone. It's incredible." But not off-putting. "Actually, you know, I have just as good a time being here, if not better."

He certainly seems comfortable enough padding around his loft in the Pearl District barefoot, posters of teen-agers cast in his just-wrapped latest project—shot in Northeast Portland—on the walls. Unmatched furniture is casually scattered around the large, one-room space. There's clearly a penchant for guitars (I count six); otherwise, anyone could live here.

The director's new release, *Gerry*, starring Casey Affleck and Matt Damon, opens March 21 at Cinema 21. A far cry from Northeast Portland, Van Sant, Affleck and Damon wandered around with a small crew in Death Valley, Utah and South America to film this somewhat eerie tale of two guys who get lost on a day hike.

The story is based on the trio's own script (or, rather, lack of script) and will delight Van Sant fans who think his Hollywood films (*Good Will Hunting*, *Finding Forrester*) have sold him out.

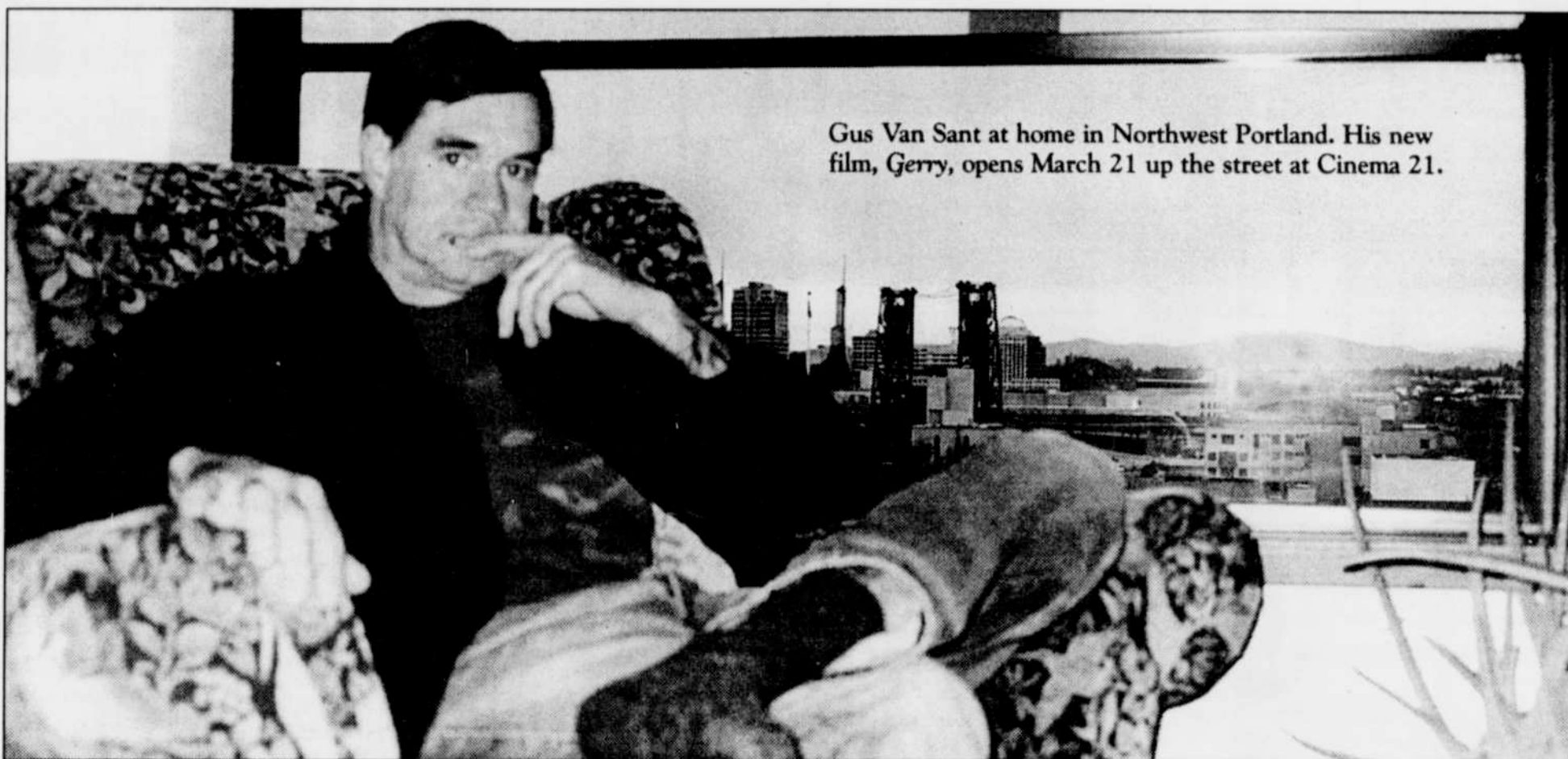
**Lisa Bradshaw:** You've received criticism from fans of your earlier work regarding your Hollywood films. How do you choose your projects?

**Gus Van Sant:** The ultimate thing that guides me [are] things that I really like.... The first three films—*Mala Noche*, *Drugstore Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho*...were bunched together with the same point of view; they were Portland street stories. *Good Will Hunting*, you know, the characters were still street characters from South Boston. The only difference was up until then, they were all anti-heroes; they were all nefarious characters that were not heroic types.... I'd never had a straightforward kind of positive, uplifting story.... I didn't know whether I needed to be speaking from the point of view of an anti-hero to really make a film.

A lot of the time, I'm choosing something because I've never done it.... But it went against the grain of people who do know your history.... I was breaking whatever form people were expecting in an effort to see if I could make a popular piece that was not about me...the idea of having an identity as a particular kind of filmmaker—I'm not sure I really agree with it. I want it to be sort of anonymous. At least I think I do. [Smiles]

**LB:** You used to have a thing for Matt Dillon; now you seem to have a thing for Matt Damon. What is it about those two guys?

**GVS:** I like them as lead characters.... Am I supposed to say, like, I'm in love with them? [Smiles] I'm in love with all my lead characters.... And on their part, too; they generally want to be in love with the director. It's sort of like they're being admired by the camera...it's something they're after as screen personalities. So hopefully the director is the person who's admiring them.... It's like a love affair, sort of.



Gus Van Sant at home in Northwest Portland. His new film, *Gerry*, opens March 21 up the street at Cinema 21.

PHOTO BY LISA BRADSHAW

**LB:** You went from big budget on your last two films back to a smaller budget on *Gerry*. Which is more difficult?

**GVS:** It's harder when you have a huge crew because the crew has to do their job...and they're a problem, you know, because you can't tell them not to do their job. I mean, you can, I guess, but then they would just be sitting around. So if you don't hire them in the first place, then you've kind of, like, got something going.... All I notice is that it just takes a lot more time.

**LB:** So you shot this film with no script, right?

**GVS:** That's also easier. It's more, maybe, intense...you're doing a lot more thinking on the set.... The thing about having a script

is...you're basically reproducing the script—that's your daily job.... There's not really any time to create anything new...it's usually the way films are made. But all those ideas of "this is usually the way to do it" are kind of watch words.

On *Gerry*, the three of us were writing—Matt, Casey and myself—writing or coming up with ideas...it's sort of like you're creating it as you're going.... We didn't really know what exactly we were going to be doing.

**LB:** The film is so convincing at making these guys seem lost, I wondered how you kept from actually getting lost.

**GVS:** Generally, we're always near a road. I did get lost in location scouting, though. Not lost, exactly, but stranded. I had a...fan belt

break. We were scouting in the Death Valley area, and I really didn't think I was going to make it to the main road without passing out, and I thought if I passed out I would just sort of, like, bake [pauses] and die. I got very scared. I made it, but I didn't think I was going to make it.

**LB:** In the film, both characters are named Gerry. Why?

**GVS:** They aren't really both named Gerry, they're just calling each other Gerry. The best word for it is "fuck-up."...So they're calling each other fuck-up.... It's a word that they—Matt and Casey—use in real life.... "Gerry" became a term for something that was...not put together well or messed up...an unsound idea or an unsound concept or person.

## REVIEW

**GERRY**  
Cinema 21, March 21 to 27

Gus Van Sant's latest movie, *Gerry*, starring Casey Affleck and Matt Damon (and only Casey Affleck and Matt Damon) ought to put to rest those ideas that the Portland filmmaker has left his indie roots behind.

Shot in the American West and Argentina with no script and a crew of 30, this minimalist, yet strikingly beautiful, film follows two guys who head out on a day hike (with no water or sun protection or anything else beyond the clothes on their backs) in an unnamed desert area.

Choosing an alternative path to other tourists, they soon become completely lost and unable to backtrack. They wander around ever-changing landscapes in ever-changing times of

day and night, barely speaking to each other and becoming, with the audience, more and more panicky about how this story will end. And that's it.

Van Sant cites Hungarian director Béla Tarr's cinematic style of long takes as a major influence in creating *Gerry*, which employs four- or five- minute continuous shots with no dialogue. This is certainly not commercially advantageous, but it's worth it for an audience willing to endure the grueling, demanding journey with Matt and Casey.

By the time the boys shuffle into the white, industrial landscape of Utah's salt flats ("almost like a heaven," says Van Sant), they're barely alive, but you'll be energized by what movie-making can offer. *Gerry* is one of the best films you'll see this year.

—LB



Casey Affleck (left) and Matt Damon choose the road less traveled in *Gerry*

**LB:** This film seems like an allegory about two average guys choosing the road less traveled and then making their way through difficult landscapes, trying to survive in a harsh world.

**GVS:** It's easy to read into it or have it be a symbol for life, a lifetime...the selection of the actual story, you know, you start seeing the vastness of the actual idea of these two guys getting along and not making it or...making it. That whole idea invites all of these symbolic and metaphoric things. It promotes that; and we're trying to...encourage people to read into it and not discourage them to read into it by telling them what to think.

**LB:** Last fall we interviewed Todd Haynes who said he didn't think of mainstream, formulaic film as "gay movies." Do you think *Gerry* is a gay movie?

**GVS:** He would say yes because it doesn't fit into the industry standard of making a movie. He doesn't want to see a movie that does fit into that standard without criticizing the standard because he's very much into...subverting some of the same things that I'm into subverting, which is...how you're communicating to people with film.... There is a kind of industry standard way of dealing with the vocabulary of a film. He doesn't want to use that vocabulary because it's not only a straight vocabulary, it's an industrial revolution vocabulary. It's a really old, antiquated beehemoth and, like, useless.

**LB:** This year you're both nominated for an Independent Spirit Award for Best Director.

**GVS:** We're competing, yeah. I think he's gonna win, though. [Laughs] I just can't imagine that I would win.... And, you know, I want to see him win, too. I'm a really big fan of his films. [F]