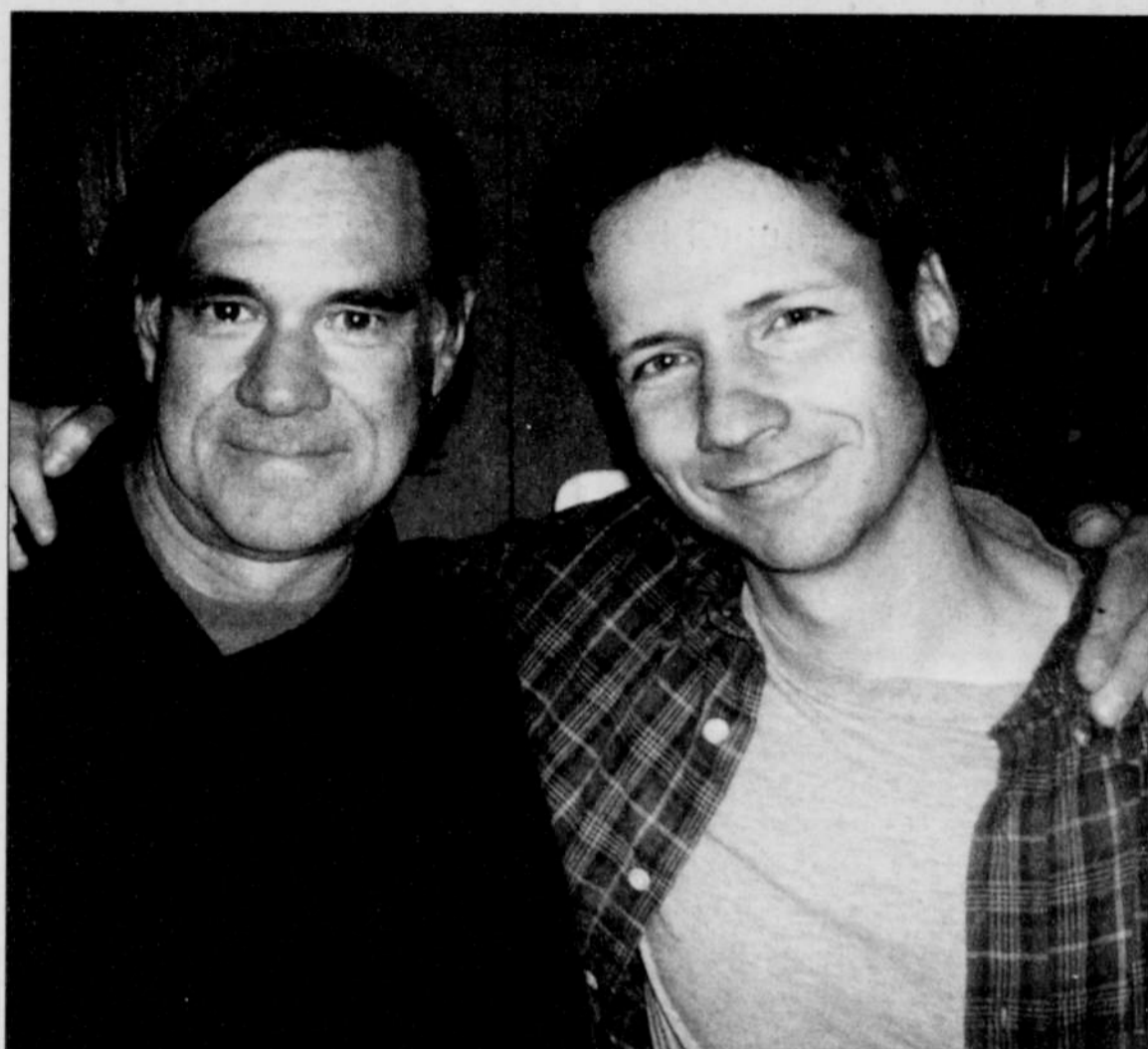


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Mitchell catches up with fellow queer filmmaker Gus Van Sant after the Portland premiere of *Shortbus*.

And if you think about it, 95 percent of the sex in *Shortbus* is unsuccessful and ridiculous and slightly desperate.

It's funny how many people say: "It's not what I expected. It's more emotional and funnier than I expected." I thought, "Isn't that an odd statement?" Surely in their own lives sex is connected to emotions and vulnerability and humor. If it's not, doesn't that say something about your life? Or about American cinema, because it doesn't show that. Laughter is a way of diffusing tension about things we find irrational. A sense of humor is one of the top things that most people search for in a relationship. That's what lasts. The bodies don't.

SB: Are there other American films that you think are really honest about sex?

JCM: Well, there's honesty about sex without explicitness. There are lots of interesting movies about relationships coming out of American cinema. As far as being very explicit, I can't think of any that I liked that were American movies.

And very few movies outside America, too. There have been dozens of films that have used real sex in the last 10 years out of Europe. It's a genre like musicals. But all of them are negative about sex. I understand it, because the directors are working some shit out. Guilt. Abuse. And often they're doing it in an honest and powerful way. A film like Catherine Breillat's *Fat Girl* is brilliant. But that isn't the kind of film that I wanted to make, though I admired it and was very affected by it. There's so much darkness in the world. You've gotta have a little mercy.

SB: Are you hitting any distribution problems?

JCM: Well, we thought we would. Cannes was our premiere. All the distributors were there. We were positive that no major studio would be involved with this because they're all signatory MPAA. They're sensitive to boycotts and all that. But we had 12 offers from independent distributors just in the U.S. alone.

SB: And you got a standing ovation at Cannes.

JCM: Yes, at 2:30 a.m. I had actually fallen asleep. It was a good way to wake up.

SB: How did you film the sex scenes?

JCM: I asked the actors what they wanted, and they usually wanted minimal crew and the cinematographer. We tried to keep the cameras as far away as possible.

SB: Were the orgy scenes choreographed?

JCM: I put couples and partners in certain spots, and they discussed sexual safety issues between themselves. Some were pre-existing couples, so that was already inherent in the relationship. Emotional safety was important, too. I asked if they wanted me to leave the room, but they always wanted me right there instead of far away at a monitor.

SB: Did any of your actors get cold feet?

JCM: There were definitely nerves, but no one didn't want to film a scene. We all worked through it. We had been working together for a long time. It was just a matter of talking through it or taking Viagra or whatever it took. It was usually more about "Can I perform?" rather than "Will I be seen?"

SB: Obviously *Shortbus* alone will not change our culture, but in the long run how can we arrive at a place in American society where we're not so tied up about sex?

JCM: I have no idea. All I can do is make my little thing for a few people, and hopefully it will encourage other people to examine language of sex or any other thing that we as a culture are afraid of. **10**

STEPHEN BLAIR is a Portland freelance writer. Two of his favorite films about sex are Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* and Bruce La Bruce's *The Raspberry Reich*.

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