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25 years of film

Little City, Big Spirit

For a burg of its relatively petite size and stature, Portland is a haven for queer cinephiles of all stripes

by Christopher McQuain

I wrote my first film review for *Just Out* about 10 years ago; Todd Haynes' glitter rock epic *Velvet Goldmine* was the subject. Little did I know that I would continue to write on film for *Just Out*—unique in queer media anywhere, I now realize better than I did then, for its personality, relevance, boldness and vision—this far down the line, or that Haynes himself would soon be calling the Rose City home.

Long before I attempted my own foray into writing, however, I was a defiant filmgoer and *Just Out* reader (“defiant” because most movies, let alone semimonthly queer periodicals, were strictly contraband in my fundamentalist Christian home). Experience had thus shown me time and again how remarkable a place Portland was to have grown up gay and cinephilic. I look back now and realize how privileged I was to have initiated my first sexual and cultural experimentations in an environment that, surprisingly for a burg of its relatively petite size and stature, offered so much nourishment and opportunity for someone like me.

Objectively speaking, it's clear that Portland is a haven for queer cinephiles of all stripes. Whether one looks at our preponderance of independent, queer-friendly film venues or our disproportionate concentration of internationally celebrated queer filmmaking talent, the richness of the city's film scene is a self-evident delight, yet another bragging point when doing the boastful-Portlander thing for our friends and family from other, lesser cities.

However, in hopes of offering a more personal, close-up (and, I hasten to add, ultra-subjective) view from the place where my own experience as a young gay Portlander intersects with our fair city's long-standing hospitality toward its queer citizens and its movie lovers, I humbly offer these particularly vivid cinema-related snapshots.

Autumn 1991

The year of *My Own Private Idaho*, both in the cinema world and in my own life. The film is still widely discussed and acclaimed, but this evening, it's an event, and my heart is racing. I'm 15, and an older friend whose support during my coming out has already been invaluable takes me to see Van Sant's film on its opening night. It's the first “gay movie” I've ever seen. It's playing at KOIN Cinemas, which at that time occupied the same rarified position—arthouse central downtown—that Fox Tower does now, and the theater is sold out, the first time I've ever seen such a crowd. We're lucky to get seats, and we have to sit in the very front row, craning our necks to see, all of which only adds to the film's mystique.

The buzz and anticipation for *Idaho* has been building; I know from advance publicity that River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves play Portland-based male prostitutes and that local home electronics magnate (and late-night television ad star) Tom Peterson is in it. There are murmurs and cries of recognition as our characters' dramas unfold in and around recognizable landmarks; raucous laughter greets one character's put-down of Beaverton.

Nothing, however, could have prepared me for the Campfire Scene. If you've seen the film, you'll never forget it: While on a road trip and huddling over a fire they've built, Phoenix, as a vulnerable gay young man, bravely confesses his love for his friend Reeves, who is only as gay as it takes to piss off his rich father, the mayor. The offer is tenderly yet unmistakably rejected by the Reeves character. It is utterly heartbreaking. I'm moved to tears so quickly, it's embarrassing. I lie awake all night making myself ache by replaying the exchange over and over in my head. (I still tear up every time I see it.) Before I knew who



Keanu Reeves (left) and River Phoenix play Portland-based male prostitutes in Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*.