

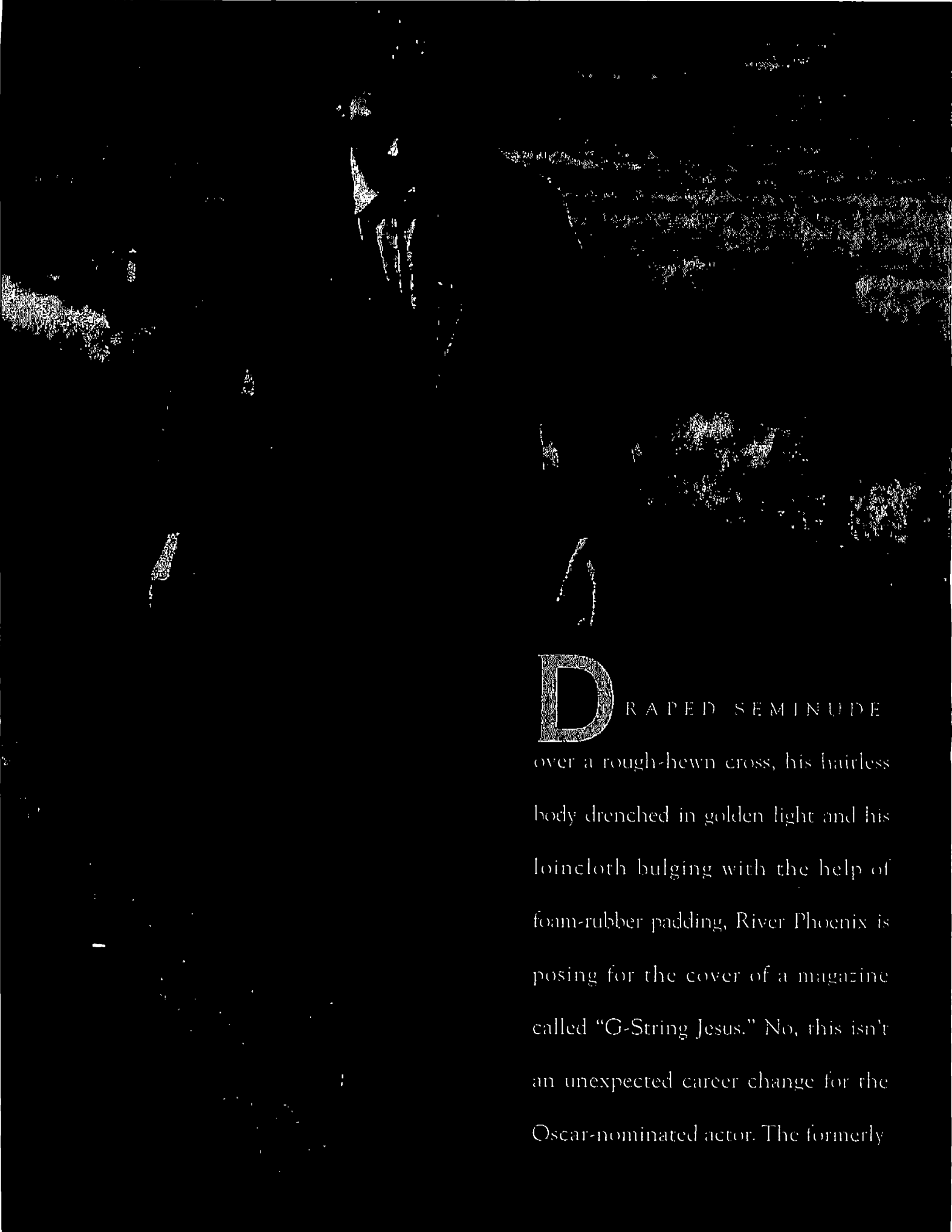
DIRECTING



*S*hakespeare
in

Gus Van Sant follows the high of 'Drugstore Cowboy' with 'My Own Private Idaho', wherein male hustlers live out a contemporary 'Henry IV'

BY LANCE LOUD



DRAPED SEMINUDE
over a rough-hewn cross, his hairless
body drenched in golden light and his
loincloth bulging with the help of
foam-rubber padding, River Phoenix is
posing for the cover of a magazine
called "G-String Jesus." No, this isn't
an unexpected career change for the
Oscar-nominated actor. The formerly

winsome star is filming a not-so-winsome fantasy sequence in which he appears as a gay porno magazine cover come to life. Welcome to the set of *My Own Private Idaho*.

On this cold November night on a soundstage in Portland, Oregon, the mood is buoyant, if just a little strained. More at home appearing in teen magazines than gay stroke publications, the 21-year-old Phoenix is slightly uncertain (and perhaps just a little uneasy) about what exactly is sexy in this male flesh demimonde.

"Was that any good? Was that right? Did you believe it?" Phoenix asks, looking down from his cross imploringly after each take.

Standing quietly beside the cameras, his scruffy army fatigues and several days' growth of beard making him look more like a vagrant than the creative center of a motion-picture production, *Private Idaho's* director, Gus Van Sant, offers gentle words of encouragement to his star. This may be Van Sant's much-anticipated follow-up to *Drugstore Cowboy*, but the 39-year-old director is running the production the same way he has always made his movies: relaxed, unhurried, low-keyed. We might be only 800 miles from Hollywood, but in terms of the usual stress that accompanies a movie shoot, we're a galaxy away.

After several takes, production assistants invade the set for some crucial alterations. Quickly, they lop the arms off the cross and scratch the "Jesus" off the magazine logo, and Phoenix assumes a less saintly pose. Watching from the sidelines, Red Hot Chili Peppers bassist Flea (who has a small role in the film) nods in approval. "They're trying to avoid *The Last Temptation of Christ* syndrome," he says.

"Both River and Keanu are taking all this really well," says a production assistant. Phoenix, done with his lurid photo shoot, triumphantly slips into a terry-cloth robe and leaves the set with a discernible look of relief. "It may sound weird, but even though we're almost done with filming, we still sort of half-expect them both to wake up and realize what kind of movie they're in."

And what kind of movie are they in? According to the director himself (whose flair for simplified answers would make Andy Warhol proud), *My Own Private Idaho* is about "looking for a home. You may not find one, but you keep looking."

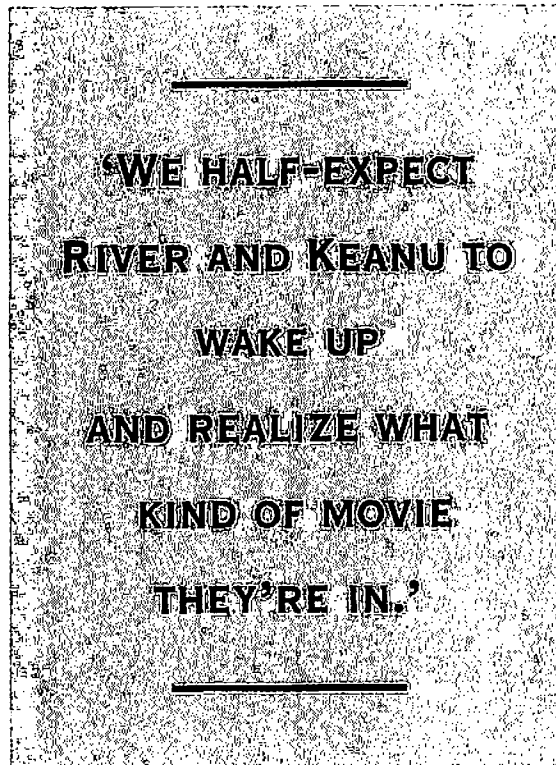
But on top of that basic theme, this \$2.5 million production has a story that sounds like John Rechy on an acid-induced Elizabethan binge: Two young male prostitutes—played by River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves—drift through the gutters and back roads of the Pacific Northwest, turning tricks and getting stoned. (That's the ordinary part.) Told

from the point of view of Phoenix's character, Mike Waters—who is narcoleptic—the film sometimes blacks out when Mike does.

Further adding to the bizarre goings-on is the secondary plot concerning Mike's best buddy, Scott Favor (Keanu Reeves), who is the son of the mayor of Portland. Scott has turned his back on his father and his rich up-bringing to sport around with Mike and a group of homeless hustler kids. Scott has a sort of mentor-type relationship with Bob Pigeon, a fat, raucous older guy who is a petty thief and debauched ex-hustler himself—and is hot for Scott. If this is sounding like a fractured-fairy-tale version of the Prince Hal-Falstaff subplot in Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, you're right on the money.

But the Shakespearean references don't stop there. At times, these modern-day street kids slip into bastardized Shakespearean English. A Bard speech like "Unless hours were cups of sack ... dials the signs of leaping houses and the blessed sun himself a fair hot wench in flame-coloured taffeta ..." surfaces in *Private Idaho* in this slightly remodeled version: "Unless hours were lines of coke, dials looked like the signs of gay bars or time itself was a fair hustler in black leather...." Chancy? You bet.

"It could go a million different ways," Phoenix says when asked if the movie's wilder conceits will translate to the big screen. "Whether or not it works," he shrugs, "it's a really noble try." For Phoenix, as for the rest of the cast, the movie's success is not as important as the opportunity to work with Van Sant, who has arrived in the big time—with his wild side well intact.



ON THE EVENING THE TALKING porn-covers sequence was filmed, the former director of commercials is asked how *Private Idaho* is coming along. "So far," he begins, earnestly looking into mid-distance as if searching for a cue card, "it's a pretty easy-going process that ... just sort of ... goes along ... and then people ... just, like ... sort of go with it and then you end up with, like, uh, some good footage."

A silver-tongued Hollywood schmoozer he's not, but he has already proven himself to be a strong creator of images with an uncanny ability for making movies in which seemingly desperate characters are not so bad after all. *Mala Noche*, his first feature (for which he left his advertising career in New York and moved to Portland), is the tale of a skid-row liquor-store clerk's unrequited love for a tough Mexican itinerant laborer. Under Van Sant's crazy, passionate touch, the film became a funny, moody modernization of *Death in Venice* and won the fledgling director (who had made the film for \$20,000) the best independent feature award in 1987 from the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. In 1989, his *Drugstore Cowboy* depicted a gang of small-time junkie-thieves as a bittersweet, if slightly dysfunctional, American family unit. The director (himself the privileged son of a powerful garment-industry executive) took a defiantly populist look at a traditionally unsavory crew of junkies, perverts and other low-lives, a view that earned raves and big-time distribution.

Van Sant views his own success with more than a little wit, referring to himself as "the director from Sodom." But if David Lynch has become the cinematic *meister* of American Gothic and John Waters the arbiter of high-camp excess, Gus Van Sant is the latest celluloid original, the new American dreamer who somehow mixes gritty realism and gaping imagination. "Nothing much has changed," he insists with a quiet smile, "except people listen to me now—they never used to. Now, they *really* listen. They almost take notes."

WE'RE LIVING IN OUR OWN PRIVATE Idaho ... —The B-52's

The road to Idaho's cheerful saga of alienation and hallucination began 10 years ago. According to Van Sant, he found inspiration for the screenplay not only from William Shakespeare but also from such unlikely works of great literature as *Silas Marner*, *The Sartyricon* and various bits of Charles Dickens novels. "When you don't have any ideas, steal from the classics," advises the director, explaining why he first decided to appropriate the Prince Hal saga as a foundation for *My Own Private Idaho*. Many versions of this story later (at one point the script was called *Minions of the Moon*—a phrase directly lifted from the Bard), Van Sant combined it with a counterpart, the tale of Scott's friend Mike who is searching for family just as Scott is running away from one. The project came to be called *My Own Private Idaho* after Van Sant went to that state in the early '80s and (he says) everybody there was singing the B-52's song. But this is an oversimplification by a man who uses such verbal vagaries to politely avoid discussing too deeply the motives and meanings in his work.

Until *Drugstore Cowboy* proceeded to do its supermarket sweep of the film critics, however, nobody wanted to finance Van Sant's Shakespearean street

Keanu Reeves (left) and Phoenix get a chance to abandon their public image in Van Sant's gritty fantasy.



IT IS ANOTHER, LESS JOVIAL, NIGHT ON location with *Private Idaho*. Holed up in a trailer on a downtown Portland street, Keanu Reeves is nervously awaiting his call onto the *Private Idaho* set. He sits brooding in the cramped quarters that this low-budget production calls a dressing room, the cold and rainy night outside matching the mood he's in at the moment. The scene he is about to shoot, a climactic one in which his character turns his back on Bob Pigeon (played by *Winter Kills* director William Richert) and the ragtag gang of street kids of which he has been a member, seems to be one source of his ire. But there are other things that are working the 26-year-old actor's nerves: Reeves usually plays goofy, lovable types, but his *Private Idaho* character is a calculating male prostitute operating in the sleazy world of the street. "It's challenging," says the actor, "in that it's a part that needs..." Reeves' voice trails off and he fixes the interviewer with a helpless look.

He's better on the subject of his collaboration with Van Sant. "Gus is really incredible to work with," here, he again begins to lose steam "... nonjudgmental ... cool." But things go from vacant to almost violent on the next query. Reeves, who the night before was seen shrieking in dude-esque disgust when he accidentally leafed through one of the real male

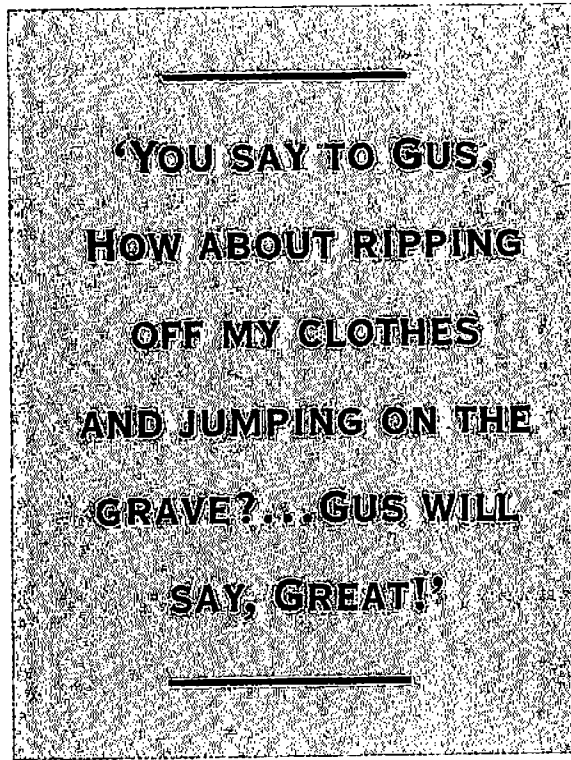
epic. And even then, those who suddenly beat a path to his door wanted him to make *their* pictures, not his. Laurie Parker, whose relationship with the director began when she worked on *Drugstore* as an executive in charge of production for Avenue Entertainment, and who is now *Private Idaho*'s producer, recalls that "After *Drugstore*, he was offered a couple of big-budget projects with big movie stars—all of them studio films—but Gus just wanted to make this movie."

magazines used as props in the talking porno-magazine shoot, now recoils when asked how he prepared for his hustler role. "I didn't have to suck dick, if that's what you mean!" End of interview.

Van Sant thinks his stars are coping with the subject matter very well. Pointing out that he doesn't think that the characters are really gay ("They're ... whatever street hustlers are"), he adds that for Phoenix and Reeves, "It's a political act to do

a film like this. They're handling it very well for being obviously straight."

Private Idaho's young male cast did take pains to research the seamy milieu of street hustling for several weeks before shooting began. "I spent quite a few hours on the street in Portland between eight and four in the morning," says Phoenix. Under the tutelage of several of Van Sant's own real-life street buddies (the director makes no secret of his own gayness or his interest in the tough, street-wise homosexual environment romanticized in the works of John Rechy, Jean Genet and William Burroughs), Phoenix, Reeves and fellow *Idaho* castmember Rodney Harvey learned how to spot potential clients cruising in cars along the streets of Portland's tawdry Old Town district and what to say after the strangers pulled over to strike a deal. Recalls Phoenix, "The next step would be to just open the door and get in. That's when we'd tell them to fuck off." More than one of the rejected johns, after coming so close to picking up boys who bore such amazing resemblances to River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves, found rejection extremely hard to take. Phoenix recollects one man who just kept circling the block yelling, "But I'm so lonely!" after the let-down.



ONE AFTERNOON ON A BREAK from shooting, Flea is talking about the difference between Van Sant and other directors. "When I was working with [Back to the Future director Robert] Zemeckis," he says, "the only thing you could say to him was, 'Is my mohawk dyed the right color?'" But the rocker, whose head has been shaved close to the skull and bleached a brutal shade of blond, contends that with Van Sant, an actor's input can go a few steps further. For instance: "You can say to Gus, 'How about ripping off all my clothes and jumping on top of the grave?' and Gus will say, 'Yeah, that's great!'"

"The style of this one is not imposing limitations," Van Sant points out. This free-form approach to the often by-the-book art of moviemaking has allowed actors to come up with their own lines or actions, which they have then run by Van Sant for his approval, such as Flea's unscheduled striptease on a grave. It also means that the composition of each shot is more or less decided on the spot. Says Van Sant, "The way I'm working, I decide when I get there. To storyboard this one would have been really imposing. In order to do that, you always have to know that when a character walks into a room, he has to turn right, walk to the window and then go out the door, right? But then the actor can't run into the room, run around in a circle three times and jump out the window, 'cause that's not on the storyboard."

Private Idaho's arresting visual idiosyncrasies permeate every facet of the story. Whenever Phoenix's character suffers a nar-

coleptic episode, the action becomes infused with fantasized visions and the locations shift abruptly. "Everybody on the crew has had to accept that we're doing this film a bit differently from the traditional way," says Eric Edwards, one of *Idaho*'s two directors of photography. He describes working with Van Sant as a form of "unlearning," through which the filmmakers abandon accepted methods to do things from a fresh point of view. Edwards promises that the film's abrupt cutting from one place or action to another—for portraying the narcoleptic experience—will reinvent this editing style, long considered anathema by all but the most avant-garde filmmakers. "Jump cuts here are a plot device," he says.

The Shakespearean aspect runs deeply through *Idaho*, as Bard references turn up in subtle ways throughout the film—from Falstaff beer ads to the Elizabethan-influenced costumes of some of the street people. And a strangely medieval ambience is embodied in one of the film's most starkly unique central sets, the Derelict Hotel.

In this fantasy-tinged realm, best described as a flop-house Marienbad, dogs and cats freely roam the halls and each room has a peculiar feel all its own. It is here that the crew of homeless folk live in a sort of twilight zone outside the reality of present time. David Brisbin, *Idaho*'s production designer, created the disjointed feel of the place by using five decrepit buildings around the Portland area to approximate its otherworldly dimensions.

"This hotel is meant to be a once-grand and fabulous place remodeled in the '60s, using really terrifying colors—ugly brown and horrible oranges—and coffee-shop spaceship lightbulbs, with just a bit of the Shakespearean effect pasted over the top," says Brisbin, who was also responsible for the rain-splattered world of *Drugstore Cowboy*. "If you think of the design aesthetic Denny's Meets Shakespeare," he says, "you get a pretty ... vibrating mix."

THERE'S A SIGN ON THE BACK DOOR of Gus Van Sant's 1908 home that reads: Back-door Guests Are Best. At the moment, however, the three-story Victorian mansion is packed with cast members sleeping off the previous night's festivities. The only person not in residence on this Saturday morning toward the end of the shoot is Van Sant himself, driven out of his newly purchased Portland abode by the need to get some quiet time away from the six-day-a-week schedule. Since Reeves, Phoenix, Harvey, Flea and their retinue of girlfriends and buddies moved in, jam sessions, with all the young cast members banging away on guitars, bass and drum machine, have been a nightly occurrence, filling the basement till the wee hours of the morning with clamor. But rather than protest the din, the good humored—if somewhat sleep-deprived—proprietor has taken refuge in his old apartment, which he still maintains in the city.

Though Van Sant comes from wealth, this home reflects a distinct lack of interest in its trappings. Instead, it looks more like an avant-garde frat house, decorated with only the barest

necessities mixed with quirky earmarks of personal humor and style. In the foyer, one of Van Sant's own oil paintings, a pastel still-life of UFO-like sombreros hovering over a desert, is dwarfed by a sculpture that looks like an orange dumpster spewing picnic table and benches out of its top. In the large kitchen, featuring two restaurant-quality stoves (he doesn't cook), stacks of head shots compete for table space with the salt and pepper shakers. In the otherwise cavernously empty living room, one moth-eaten couch is accompanied only by a broken-down hi-fi perched precariously on a folding chair, its needle still resting in the groove of *The Velvet Underground—Live*. Downstairs, amid the disarray of discarded musical instruments, a script for Van Sant's next film, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, with the words *rough draft* on the blue cover, lies casually on the carpet.

AT VAN SANT'S NOT-SO-PRIVATE sanctuary, a rough assemblage of footage from the film is screened. Seated around a Steenbeck editing deck (the basement also houses Van Sant's production company and editing facilities), film editor Curtiss Clayton threads the machine with several *Idaho* scenes. Obviously in the very early stages of editing, the footage we see looks, well, like how you might expect a film about two street hustlers who sometimes talk in Shakespearean English and have a lot of disorientingly trippy adventures would look—not a little weird. In one bit, Reeves confronts his powerful father, looking and sounding like a street kid from the San Fernando Valley who suddenly slips into pseudo-Shakespearean: "In my youth," he says, "I have wandered irregularly."

In another clip, the film's narcoleptic point of view shows Phoenix waking up in the middle of the countryside in Idaho, then passing out again, followed by a few murkily lit seconds of him being robbed in an alley somewhere far removed from the setting seconds before, only to black out again and *shoom!* There he is again, coming to on yet another stretch of long, lonely country road. After this bewildering bit—all of two minutes long—my companion delicately asks editor Clayton, "Is that ... in sequential order?" Smiling, Clayton replies that it is. No one says a word, but the feeling in the room at that moment goes something like: *I hope this thing works.*

Maybe it won't. Maybe *My Own Private Idaho* will be an insane mess, with inscrutable jump cuts and a Shakespearean angle so off-base, the Bard himself will come back to haunt Gus Van Sant. But then again, Van Sant has pulled off an 11th-hour miracle in the editing stage before. One member of the *Idaho* production who'd worked on *Drugstore Cowboy* said that when *Drugstore* wrapped, his impression, based on the raw footage, was that the film was not going to work. In postproduction, however, Van Sant turned it around.

Whether or not *Idaho* sinks under its mountain of concepts and conceits, Van Sant's career will continue in ascending fashion. This fall, Van Sant will begin to shoot his screen adaptation of Tom Robbins' *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* with a cast that will likely include the heady triumvirate of Uma Thurman, Jodie Foster and (gulp) Madonna. And after that,

he is scheduled to do a film biography of Andy Warhol, a subject that seems particularly well suited to Van Sant's pop sensibility.

However *Idaho* is received, the unassuming but undaunting director will go on. In one of the movie's early scenes, the dreamlike image of salmon valiantly fighting the white-water currents of an Oregon river serves as a metaphor for the persistence of the human spirit, fighting against the odds. It could also describe the spirit of the director himself. As Laurie Parker describes it, "In the scene, the salmon keep going up and up and up and every time they leap, they fall back down. You



Bard of the Rose City: Van Sant (seated) has now shot three feature films in his home base, Portland, Oregon.

might never see them get over the falls, but you know that they make it." In Van Sant's cinema of dreams and derelicts, you're assured that the one person who will continue to go against the tide is Van Sant himself. "There's lots of ways to make a movie," he shrugs, "I like my own." 4

Lance Loud lives in Hollywood and has never appeared on the cover of a male porno magazine ... not on the cover.