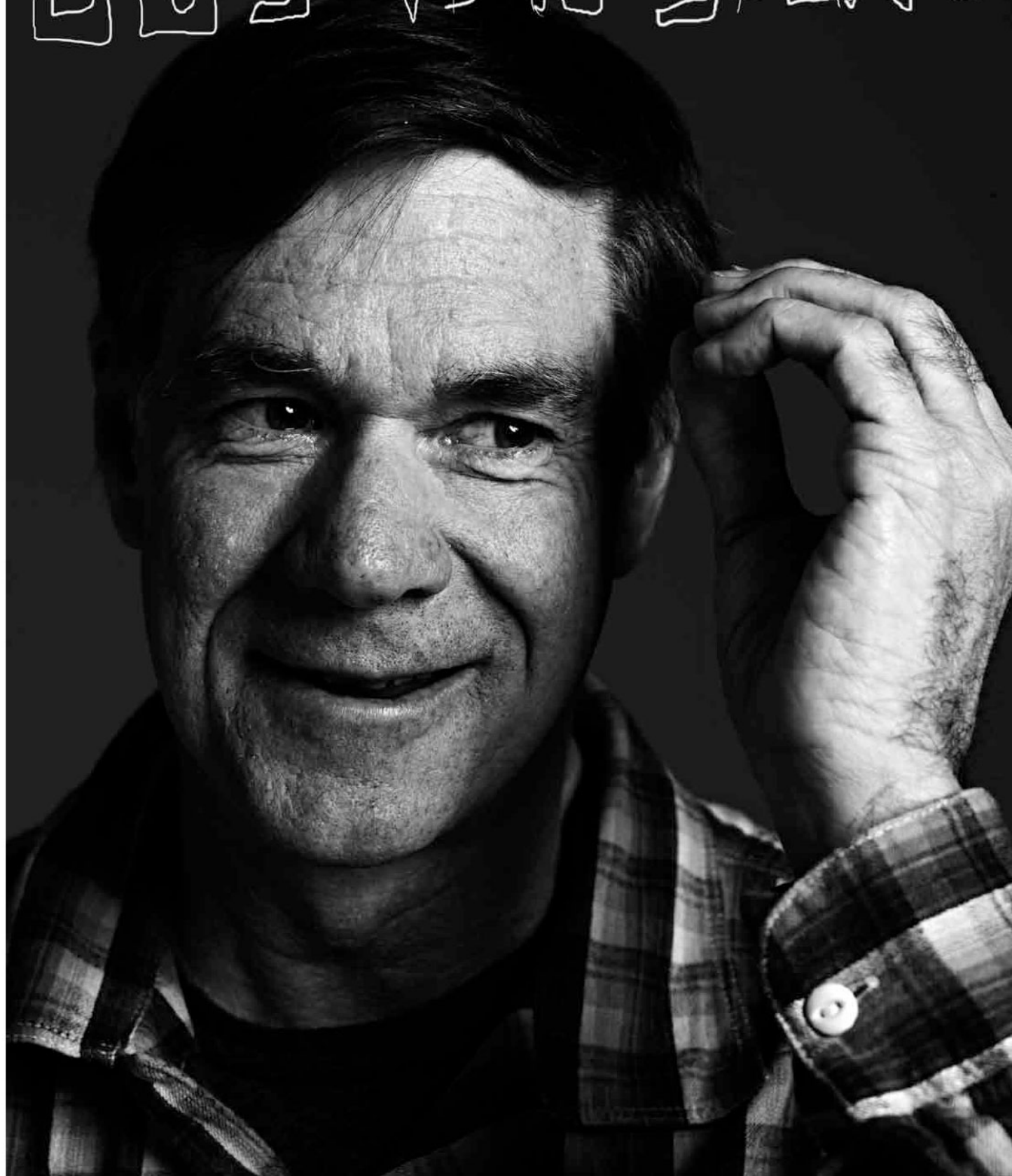


GUS VAN SANT



Nearly all filmmakers, certainly those worth discussing, have a discernible pattern of logic to their careers, whether it be thematic preoccupations, stylistic mannerisms or narrative formulas. But Gus Van Sant is remarkable for his exceptional elusiveness – just when you think he’s one thing, he branches off into the complete opposite direction, while his refusal to rationalise the behaviour of his typically wounded, dislocated protagonists parallels the conceptual artist’s *modus operandi* – an unwillingness to explain their work.

The gay son of a travelling salesman, who studied painting at the Rhode Island School of Design before the avant-garde films of Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas and Andy Warhol inspired a change of direction, Van Sant, unsurprisingly, trades in abstraction and alienation. Now 58, this most fascinating of American directors has brought his lyrical aesthetic to bear on some of the most perversely compelling films of the past 25 years, from his 1986 debut *Mala Noche* through *Drugstore Cowboy*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *To Die For*, *Elephant* and, most recently, *Milk*.

Nor is he simply a voice for skaters, hustlers, addicts and outcasts: Van Sant can also slip into the mainstream with ease, as he did with *Good Will Hunting*. He confounded critics for half a decade in an experimental hinterland that yielded *Gerry* (2002), *Elephant* (2003), and *Last Days* (2005) – a phase he attributed to his desire to “toss away hang-ups” – before rebounding into compelling narrative with *Milk*, his first overtly political gay film. And who else would, given a free studio pass to make pretty much anything he wanted in the wake of *Good Will Hunting*’s success, use that clout to compose what amounted to a \$25 million mood poem: a shot-for-shot remake of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* that Van Sant himself refers to as “a prank.” (We live for the day when a gallery finally runs the two *Psychos* side by side in one malicious installation.)

He recently allowed James Franco the right to edit together his own version of *My Own Private Idaho*, using unused footage, then accompanied it with seven of his own large-scale portraits of young men for a run at LA’s Gagosian Gallery under the title *Unfinished*. Van Sant is the consummate artist, exploring all forms of expression, and more articulate than he gets credit for (although his speech is undoubtedly punctuated with enough gaps, incomplete sentences and ums and ahs to torment a grammar fiend). His new film, *Restless*, pairs Henry Hopper and Mia Wasikowska as death-linked teen lovers (she’s terminally ill, his parents are dead, they meet at a funeral). It sounds mawkish on paper but, as directed by an astute observer of youth on the fringes, it should be anything but.

Man About Town catches up with Van Sant in LA, where he’s embarking on his latest whiplash-inducing experimental voyage: a TV series. As unlikely as it sounds, he’s executive producing and directing the eight-part drama *Boss*, about a corrupt, fictitious Chicago mayor, played by Kelsey Grammer.

So, Gus Van Sant does television... We are intrigued... Kelsey was developing the show with a screenwriter named Farhad Safinia, the guy who wrote *Apocalypse* for Mel Gibson,

and I was asked to direct the pilot. Now I’m involved in all eight instalments as exec-producer and I might direct some episodes.

Why small screen and why now? I had pitched a show with a friend a year ago called *Night*, which was an anthology of separate stories set in New York nightlife. It didn’t get picked up, but I think that was one of the reasons I got offered this. I just had never done it before and I watched other directors get involved in an exec-producer way where they help create the style of the show. That’s sort of a recent development, feature directors being involved in TV shows.

Like Scorsese with *Boardwalk Empire*... Yeah, it seems to have come about partly from the lack of interest from the studios to do anything other than, like, spectacles, so smaller stories have a place on television. And there’s this sort of unexpected and new thing where, if your show goes on for a long time, you can do things that you could never do in a feature.

Is *Boss* rolling back the curtain on big-city corruption? Yeah, exactly. It’s what you’d see if WikiLeaks got involved at the city level. *King Lear* is one of the inspirations.

Tell us how the *Unfinished* exhibition with James Franco came about. James was interested in cutting his own version of *My Own Private Idaho*. Then he had interest from the Gagosian Gallery to show it. They expressed interest in having some other works to go along with it and suggested some photographic portraits that I had done but instead I painted some new portraits.

How did Franco talk you into it? It was during the release of *Milk* and I was trying to entice James up to Portland to be part of this fundraiser [for homeless youth]. I lured him up by promising to show him the outtakes from *My Own Private Idaho*. I had heard that the film was one of the things that had gotten him into becoming an actor.

That’s a pretty astonishing display of trust. Were you at all reluctant? (Laughs.) Yeah, I was majorly reluctant! I mean there was always the idea that if it wasn’t something that I thought was... good, you know, then it wouldn’t be shown. But I had actually allowed editing classes to re-edit some of my films... And James did a really good job. It’s quite different from the original piece.

Was it painful watching the unused footage of *River Phoenix*? No, it was just really interesting. A lot of the stuff is footage that I forgot we had, you know, from the streets of Portland. I had cut down a lot of the more atmospheric footage and James took out all the Shakespearean pieces so that allowed him more time to use things we were too crammed to use.

Are you planning on showing it anywhere else? I’m not sure I want to – I’d have to talk to James about it.

Had you ever considered using the footage yourself in a director’s cut of *My Own Private Idaho*? Actually, yeah,

I did. After I started using longer takes, probably like in 2001 around the time I was making *Gerry*, I realised I could go back and edit the movie that way. Most of my movies are shot using long takes so I thought I could actually just use single angles rather than intercut them and it might be something. But I didn't.

So, *Restless*... What was the hook to take it on? I felt it was a really strong piece about something that I'd never really done, this sort of strong love story. I guess all the films I've done have a love story in them but this seemed to be uniquely about these two characters and I just thought, "This is cool, I should do it."

A teen romance involving terminal illness does sound potentially crass... would you call *Restless* an old-fashioned tearjerker? It has an aspect of that. There's definitely very sentimental moments.

Given that Ron Howard and Brian Grazer were producing, did you have to rein in your artistic instincts? Where do art and commerce meet on *Restless*? Well, it's really Bryce Dallas Howard's project – Ron's daughter. She's friends with the screenwriter Jason Lew and Ron was originally going to direct but I think they decided to farm it out to somebody like me (laughs) because it was perceived as less obviously commercially, um... I guess the term would be manipulative. It's all to do with the construction of the screenplay.

Given your knack for casting interesting and often inexperienced young actors, how did you settle on Henry Hopper? I think I may have seen a photograph of him and then he came into one of our casting sessions and became one of the people that we liked the most. The character is somewhat obsessive and Henry can play that really well. He reminded me quite a bit of his father a long time ago, although that happened more when we filmed than at the audition. He seemed really experienced, but I think it was mostly his character. And I liked very much that he was Dennis Hopper's son.

Did you know Dennis? I never worked with him. I offered him the Falstaffian role in *My Own Private Idaho*, but he said he wanted to play one of the younger guys. And I'm not sure if he was serious or not (laughs). He said, "I can play one of those guys, man!"

***Restless* follows *Milk*, which was your most accessible film since *Good Will Hunting*. Are you seeking to re-engage with mainstream Hollywood these days?** It always depends on which projects and who's interested in it and stuff, but yes. Right now, I don't have anything lined up.

Weren't you supposed to be adapting the memoir *How Starbucks Saved My Life* with Tom Hanks? That's not happening anymore. We did a screenplay but we couldn't bring it together. It was one of those stories that sounded fantastic as a pitch, but never really worked as a fleshed out feature. I actually quite liked the screenplay but I guess the consensus was that we weren't able to tap into what we thought we heard in the pitch. People got disappointed with what was there.

What about your long-planned adaptation of Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*? We're still working on a screenplay.

...with Dustin Lance Black? Gustin Nash (the screenwriter for *Youth In Revolt*) is writing it now. Biographies are tricky. *Milk* was biographical and that took a long time too. *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* is just one of those stories that's so big, as was *Milk*, it's hard to find the central ideas that kind of encase the rest of it. We're still working on it. Dustin wrote a first draft, but it's hard to get around the idea of the Johnny Appleseed of LSD. You need a certain amount of money to do it, and the people that have the money are like, "OK, that's not going to sell."

Robert Pattinson said you were his dream director for *Twilight: Breaking Dawn* and apparently you met with Summit Entertainment execs. What happened? I wanted to do it but I didn't get it.

What was interesting about *Twilight* for you? It was this big piece of popular entertainment that I'd never done. I knew there were going to be lots of other people involved in the project, but I'd never done anything like it before, and I wanted to try. I'm not sure how close I got. I was disappointed but these things come and go. There are a lot of projects that I haven't gotten where I think, "Maybe there's a reason why."

When I interviewed Zac Efron last summer, he was effusive about you, saying that he felt you understand his challenge as a teen superstar trying to transition to adulthood in a way that no one else did. Do you see yourself as a mentor for young Hollywood? Yeah, actors are always looking for something, especially if they're coming from a super-commercial area, they're looking for something that maybe they're interested in themselves or something that breaks out of the mould of their previous work. So yeah, I do meet a lot of young actors and actresses that are interested in the stuff I'm doing.

Do you enjoy playing that mentor role for them? Well, I don't know how much advice I can give them, because it's really hard. They're in the same position as everyone, which is, "Where am I going? What should I do? What will my next project be?" Everyone faces that dilemma.

There's no magic answer... Eventually you just have to decide. I used to have a list of all the films that I was planning to do – this was back in the early 90s – and it was sort of the same as the list today. In other words, *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, *The Mayor Of Castro Street* which was the Harvey Milk story, and three others. They were all really big and they were all being worked on but none of them actually happened. I always experience that and I think the same is true whether you're an actor or director. Everyone should have a list, and you can't have just one because sometimes a single idea will take 20 years to do.

MATT MUELLER

