



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# My Own Private Idaho

At the opening of Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, we look down a very long stretch of two-lane highway, bisecting the desert scrubland, curving upwards as it disappears into the distant mountain haze. Like a shot, River Phoenix skids into view. His cheek, with its ragged blonde sideburns and faint tracing of acne, is disorientingly close. It's like waking up with a stranger's head shoved against your own. Phoenix coughs; you can feel his breath in your ear. Phoenix plays Mike, a narcoleptic gay hustler whose parentage is as incestuous as that of Faye Dunaway's sister/daughter's in *Chinatown* (1974). But since Mike's origins are below the poverty line, this is no Greek tragedy, just an extra Oedipal wrinkle in an already disenfranchised existence.

*My Own Private Idaho* shifts fluidly between close-up and panorama, intimacy and distance, symbiosis and alienation. While there is something of Godard in Van Sant's depiction of sex as labour and/or theatrics, his films are associative rather than didactic, closer to Pasolini's in their blend of neo-realism and poetic lyricism. The influence of the European art cinema notwithstanding, Van Sant is a distinctly American filmmaker with an extraordinary sense of place. Like the David Lynch of *Eraserhead* and *Blue Velvet*, Van Sant uses elements of Hollywood psychodrama and American avant-garde trance film to explore the subjectivity of young men coming of age.

Mike and Scott (Keanu Reeves) are part of a gang of street prostitutes who hang out in a derelict hotel. Their leader is Bob Pigeon (William Richert), a fat, beer-guzzling chicken hawk who's got a thing for the narcissistic Scott. Bob and Scott act out their relationship as Shakespeare's Falstaff and Prince Hal, challenging each other to ever greater heights of bowlderised verse. Scott has also fallen into the habit of taking care of vulnerable Mike, whose narcolepsy endangers not only his income, but his life.

Threaded with home movie images (no filmmaker has ever been better than Van Sant at forging and integrating these), *My Own Private Idaho* is a crazy quilt of family romances. Everybody is either looking for or escaping from their families, organising new families, or pouring over photographs of other people's families. Mike's sadistic brother/father has a mail-order portrait business in which people send him their family snapshots to be copied. 'I like to have them around. They keep me company', he laughs, waving his bottle at the grotesque array. And in the campfire scene, Mike prefaces his lovelorn confession with the agonised question: 'Do you think I'd be different if I'd had a normal Dad?' 'What's a normal Dad?,' shrugs Scott, the sophisticate.

Deeply regressive, Mike's desire for family is for the safety of the mother's body; his narcolepsy is his defence against the agony of his childhood abandonment. Anything that reminds him of his lost mother triggers a violent psychosomatic reaction. He shakes so much he looks as though he might explode, and then keels over in a stupor. Because he short-circuits before he can connect past and present, he remains as asocial as an infant, and in that sense, innocent. *Idaho's* fragmented editing style – its heterogeneous visual associations and dense layering of spoken word, concrete sound and music – evokes Mike's confusion of inside and outside, past and present.

## **Gus Van Sant on 'My Own Private Idaho'**

*Do you like My Own Private Idaho? Do you go back to see your movies?*

I love this movie, it's my favourite. I've seen it probably ten times and it's much better if you see it more than once. There are all sorts of things that become apparent on multiple viewings – I still see stuff that I didn't know was there: serendipitous things that are there for a purpose, that are put in, ultimately, by my subconscious. Because when we're making the film, we're not doing it intellectually, or at least, I'm not.

The other day I got a fax from Simon Turner, who does Derek Jarman's soundtracks. It was in a kind of child's handwriting – I guess that's how he writes. He had written 'My' and then 'OPI' and then the next sentence started with a 'C', which is like 'myopic': That's exactly how the character of Mike is seeing things – myopically, and I had never noticed. I had some rub-on letters from when I was a kid and I had made a cover for the script with different-sized letters. It came out *My Own Private Idaho*: and I started thinking that the character's id was part of his insatiable need to be loved, the beast within him that he doesn't really know about, but that drives him.

A certain contingent of street hustlers I met, boys of his age, were looking for guidance and attention from men. Sex was something they did, but it was unimportant. What was really important was sometimes control and sometimes attention and focus from somebody who could be like their dad. That sort of thing, I guess, would come from the id.

*I read in an interview with you that the campfire scene was rewritten by the actor, River Phoenix.*

The character wasn't originally like that: originally, he was more asexual. I mean, sex was something he traded in, so he had no real sexual identity. But because he's bored and they're in the desert, he makes a pass at his friend. And it just sort of goes by, but his friend also notices that he needs something, so he says we can be friends and he hugs him. But River makes it more like he's attracted to his friend, he's in love with him. He made the whole character that way, whereas I wrote the character as more out of it, more myopic.

*Now, it's all about unrequited love.*

It's about abandonment, yes.

*What about the Shakespeare? What do you think it does to the film?*

I had three different screenplays and segments of each were mixed and cut together. There was one whole screenplay that was just a modernised version of *Henry IV*. I thought it was interesting that Shakespeare was writing about similar characters to the ones I was writing about – I realised that while I was watching Orson Welles' *Chimes at Midnight*. Then I also had a short story I had written about Ray and his cousin Little George. Ray was a hustler but Little George was just on the street. The story was told through Little George's eyes; he had narcolepsy. They went to Mexico and Ray fell in love with a girl and had to ditch Little George. And then there was a third script about Mike and Scott, but with less of Scott – he was Mike's friend but he wasn't a rich kid and I don't think they went on a trip and there wasn't any Shakespeare. So the three scripts were put together and I thought we'd cast street kids and see if they could connect with the Shakespearean words and make any sense of them. So the final version still had one foot in Shakespeare, but now I'm casting Keanu Reeves. So I thought of it as characters who are speaking in their own secret language when they're together – it's their way of having fun.

**Amy Taubin, *Sight and Sound*, January 1992**

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## MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO

*Director:* Gus Van Sant  
*Production Company:* New Line Cinema  
*Executive Producer:* Gus Van Sant  
*Co-executive Producer:* Allan Mindel  
*Producer:* Laurie Parker  
*Line Producer:* Tony Brand  
*Unit Production Manager:* Paul Hellerman  
*Production Co-ordinators:* Amanda Brand, Mary Ann Marino  
*Location Manager:* Sara Burton  
*Production Assistants:* John Brown, Matt Ebert, Chris Lowenstein  
*Post-production Assistant:* Teresa Tamiyasu  
*Research Consultant:* Jake Culver  
*Assistant Directors:* Kris Krengel, David Minkowski  
*CASTING:* Sandy Collister  
*Screenplay:* Gus Van Sant  
*Additional Dialogue:* William Shakespeare  
*Directors of Photography:* Eric Alan Edwards, John Campbell  
*Special Photography:* Bruce Weber  
*Visual Effects Co-ordinator:* Thomas Arndt  
*Visual Effects Crew:* Chel White, Steve Warner, Janet Karecki, Kathleen Nichols, Laura Di Trapani, Karen E. Hout  
*Mechanical Effects:* Illusion Works, Joe Henry Schmeer, Venora Debrowski  
*Editor:* Curtiss Clayton  
*Production Designer:* David Brisbin  
*Art Director:* Ken Hardy  
*Set Decorator:* Melissa Stewart  
*Set Dresser:* Daniel Self  
*Richard Waters' Paintings:* Anton Kimball  
*Lead Scenic Artist:* Anne Hyvarinen  
*Storyboard Artist:* Arnold Pander  
*Costume Designer:* Beatrix Aruna Pasztor  
*Key Make-up:* Gina Monaci  
*Titles:* Chas Bruce  
*Music:* Bill Stafford  
*Yodeler/Accordion:* Sandy Gernhart  
*Vibraphone:* Richard McNutt  
*French Horn:* Dorothy Rust  
*Whistler:* Donald Granger  
*Saw:* Richard Meyers  
*Violin:* Hollis Taylor  
*Viola:* Kim Burton  
*Cello:* Lori Presthus  
*Dulcimer/Synthesizer:* Jamie Haggerty  
*Hurdy Gurdy/Tar:* Jean Poulot  
*Banjo:* Elliot Sweetland, Elliot Letcher, Vernon Dunn  
*Recorders:* Bruce Van Buskirk  
*Pedal Steel Guitar:* Bill Stafford  
*Music Arranger:* Bill Stafford  
*Additional Music Arranger:* Jean Poulot  
*Music Recording:* Scott Hybl, Rob Farley  
*Sound Recording:* Reinhard Stergar  
*Music Re-recordists:* Paul Sharpe, Bill Sheppard  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* Kelley Baker  
*Sound Editors:* Peter Appleton, Patrick Winters, Michael F. Newman

*Walla Group:* Scott Patrick Green, Jessie Thomas, Mike Parker, Shaun Jordan, Bryan Wilson, Kelly Brooks, Wade Evans, Vana O'Brien, Eric Hull  
*ADR Recordists:* Forrest Brakeman, W. Wayne Woods  
*Foley Recordist:* W. Wayne Woods  
*Foleys:* Karen Karbo, Steve Miller  
*Ultra Stereo Consultant:* Bruce Murphy  
*Animal Handler:* Anne Gordon

## Cast

River Phoenix (*Mike Waters*)  
Keanu Reeves (*Scott Favor*)  
James Russo (*Richard Waters*)  
William Richert (*Bob Pigeon*)  
Rodney Harvey (*Gary*)  
Chiara Caselli (*Carmella*)  
Michael Parker (*digger*)  
Jessie Thomas (*Denise*)  
Flea (*Budd*)  
Grace Zabriskie (*Alena*)  
Tom Troupe (*Jack Favor*)  
Udo Kier (*Hans*)  
Sally Curtice (*Jane Lightwork*)  
Robert Lee Pitchlynn (*Walt*)  
Mickey Cottrell (*Daddy Carroll*)  
Wade Evans (*Wade*)  
Matt Ebert, Scott Patrick Green, Tom Cramer (*coverboys*)  
Vana O'Brien (*Sharon Waters*)  
Scott Patrick Green, Shaun Jordan, Shawn Jones (*café kids*)  
George Conner (*Bad George*)  
Oliver Kirk (*Indian cop*)  
Stanley Hainesworth (*dirtman*)  
Joshua Halladay (*baby Mike*)  
Douglas Tollenen (*little Richard*)  
Steven Clark Pachosa (*hotel manager*)  
Lannie Swerdlow (*disco manager*)  
Wally Gaarsland, Bryan Wilson, Mark Weaver,  
Conrad 'Bud' Montgomery (*rock promoters*)  
Pat Patterson, Steve Vernelson, Mike Cascadden (*cops*)  
Eric Hull (*mayor's aide*)  
James A. Arling (*minister*)  
James Caviezel (*airline clerk*)  
Ana Cavinato (*stewardess*)  
Melanie Mosely (*lounge hostess*)  
Greg Murphy (*Carl*)  
David Reppenhagen (*yuppie at Jake's*)  
Tiger Warren (*himself*)  
Massimo De Cataldo, Paolo Pei Andreoli,  
Robert Egon, Paolo Baiocco (*Italian street boys*)  
Mario Stracciarolo (*Mike's Italian client*)

USA 1991 104 mins

The screening on Wed 23 Feb will be introduced by  
BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair

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## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

**Brokeback Mountain** Wed 9 Feb 17:45 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality  
Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair); Mon 21 Feb 20:25  
**Go Fish** Wed 9 Feb 20:40; Sat 26 Feb 18:20  
**Rope** Thu 10 Feb 18:30; Tue 22 Feb 14:30  
**Victim** Thu 10 Feb 20:40; Sun 13 Feb 13:00; Mon 21 Feb 18:00  
**Desert Hearts** Fri 11 Feb 20:40; Wed 16 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Head  
Librarian Emma Smart)  
**My Beautiful Laundrette**  
Sat 12 Feb 18:20; Tue 15 Feb 20:45; Sat 19 Feb 20:45  
**The Handmaiden (Ah-ga-ssi)** Sat 12 Feb 20:10; Sun 27 Feb 17:50  
**Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit)** Sun 13 Feb 15:20

**A Fantastic Woman (Una mujer fantástica)**  
Sun 13 Feb 18:40; Tue 22 Feb 20:50  
**Maurice** Mon 14 Feb 18:00  
**Beautiful Thing** Mon 14 Feb 20:30  
**All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre)** Wed 16 Feb 21:00  
**Young Soul Rebels** Thu 17 Feb 20:45  
**Mädchen in Uniform** Fri 18 Feb 20:30; Sat 26 Feb 16:00  
**Rent** Sun 20 Feb 18:10  
**My Own Private Idaho** Wed 23 Feb 18:00 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality  
Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair)  
**Moonlight** Thu 24 Feb 14:30; Mon 28 Feb 20:45  
**To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar** Fri 25 Feb 20:45  
**The Watermelon Woman** Sat 26 Feb 20:30

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