

Boy meets boy

By Paige Powell and Gini Sikes

In *My Private Idaho*, River Phoenix and Keanu Reeves portray a pair of teenage prostitutes, each of them more victim than vulture. Phoenix is a narcoleptic, Mike, who dozes off at dangerously inopportune moments as he searches endlessly for his long-lost mother; Reeves is a blue-blooded runaway, Scott, who turns tricks as an act of rebellion against his father. ♦ *Idaho* is the story of a rich boy who falls off the hill and a kid on the street, ♦ says its writer-director, Gus Van Sant. ♦ I saw a bit of the hill in Keanu's personality and a bit of the street in River's. They played out those extensions of themselves. ♦

It makes sense that Phoenix and Reeves, briefly teamed in Lawrence Kasdan's *I Love You to Death*, should resurface together in Van Sant's twilight America. Although both have starred in mainstream hits - Phoenix in *Stand by Me* and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and Reeves in the *Bill and Ted adventures* and *Point Break*, for example - they have specialized in playing outsiders. Alienation has meant success. Reeves's Holden Caulfield-like pothead in River's *Edge* brought him a flurry of acclaim that has never abated; Phoenix's performance as the son of radicals in *Running on Empty* earned him an Oscar nomination at seventeen.

Reeves is the first to arrive for dinner at Suite 55 in the Chateau Marmont on Sunset Boulevard. He looks a bit dazed from a run-in with the paparazzi at a Hollywood screening. ♦ I just stopped on my bike to ask the guard, like, what movie was playing, ♦ he says. ♦ And suddenly all the guys around me are yelling, 'Keanu, look up!' ♦ Did he? ♦ No way, man. I beat it out of there. It was weird. ♦ He grins, and then offers to grate some Parmesan cheese for the pasta, first asking what side of the grater to use. Soon Phoenix shows up. Immediately, he's at Reeves's side in the kitchen, peeling garlic. Within minutes, though, the two escape to the balcony. Phoenix lights up a Camel. He cocks an eyebrow: ♦ Doesn't figure, huh? ♦ Then he exhales. ♦ I know. I should quit. ♦ Suddenly he and Reeves are off, excitedly exploring the possibility of doing Shakespeare together. They stand nose to nose - Phoenix newly bleached blond a part of his bid to play the young Andy Warhol in a future Van Sant biopic, Reeves dark-haired and tanned - like positive and negative images of each other. They sustain their banter throughout the meal, as one interrupts the other, but only to complete his thought.

GINI SIKES: Keanu, you've said you accepted a part in *Idaho* first, hoping River would do the film too.

KEANU REEVES: No. We were always together.

RIVER PHOENIX: He was lying. We were doing *I Love You to Death*, and we both got the *Idaho* script. We were driving in a car on Santa Monica Boulevard, probably on the way to a club, and were talking really fast about the whole idea. We were excited. It could have been like a bad dream - a dream that never follows though because on one commits, but we just forced ourselves into it. We said ♦ O.K., I'll do it if you do it. I won't do it if you don't. ♦ We shook hands. That was it.

PAIGE POWELL: River, what were the challenges you were faced portraying a character who suffers from narcolepsy? When I first saw your narcoleptic attacks on film, for in tenth of a second they could have been perceived as comic. Then they seemed painful. It's clear that they come out of nowhere. How'd you know how to do that?

RP: Mainly from Gus's descriptions of what Jake would do. Jake was a narcoleptic in Portland who worked with me [on this aspect of the part]. I spent a lot of time talking to him about why narcolepsy happens. I understood it completely from the medical and scientific standpoint, thought they don't know exactly what it is. But when I was with Jake he never had a narcoleptic attack in front of me. After I'd done a few of the fits, Gus said they were exactly the way Jake had them.

KR: Do you think this film will cause narcolepsy? I mean, should parents watch out for their children?

RP: I would definitely stress that viewers should all be very aware of the catching nature of narcolepsy.

KR: Should viewers wear special glasses?

RP: It's like the eclipse. If you look at it too long, you might get it.

PP: While we're on the subject of research, did the two of you hang out with the street kids in Portland?

RP: Totally.

KR: Yeah, a little bit.

GS: Were there ever times that you felt that asking street hustlers for information was somehow exploiting them?

RP: I think they were flattered that their story would be told.

KR: No, man. I don't feel that this story is a contemporary tale of the street. It's not current in the places or the language. The only ways this story in contemporary is in a larger sense, in its emotions and perhaps what goes on inside of some people.

PP: Aren't emotions timeless?

KR: Exactly. But I'm talking about how they're manifested in language, or, you know, in anything that people are doing. I'm just saying this film is not representative of the street scene in Portland.

RP: That's very true. If a kid from Portland saw this movie, he wouldn't think it was Portland street life. But our responsibility to go as deep as we can and to explore all the directions that might even be *suggested* in a script. Just so we have all the bases covered. Our research was extracurricular it wasn't necessarily needed.

GS: Describe how you went about researching the lifestyle of street hustlers.

RP: I entered it through friends of Gus's who were already on the street, Scott and Gary. Gary died in a car wreck recently, from what I heard; God bless his soul. Being anonymous also helped us, I think.

GS: They had no idea you two were actors researching a role?

RP: No, no. It was all in character. We were just hangin'. If anything, they thought, This is another cat who is trying to take my spot on the street. There was a little curiosity, but never any animosity of jealousy. Because it's a brotherhood on the street, man. You all watch for each other's backs. Because no one wants to see anyone get stabbed.

GS: So nothing was set up?

RP: Some street kids came over to Gus's house, and we met different people at different places.

It was staged in that sense. But the actual street stuff was just us, working on our own time. Like guerillas. *[laughs]* It was very sensational for us. I thought our main problem was to find out if we would be the real guys. Gus's choice was to use real street guys or us, so Keanu and I felt a great burden. We wanted to believe in this script and work out the problems.

GS: Both of you are very popular among adolescents. In particular, teenagers seem to relate to you, Keanu, because of your Bill and Ted persona. Was there any kind of concern in your camp, from, say, your agent or manager, that playing a male prostitute would hurt your image?

KR: Hurt my image? Who am I - a politician? *[laughs softly]* No. I'm an actor. That wasn't a problem. But shooting was a very intense experience. I had just finished *Point Break* and was still into my character. I felt a bit of anxiety about *Idaho*. I was overwhelmed at what I had to do - it was like, Oh, no! Can I do this? I was afraid. But Gus and River made me fit in. Said, Let's do one bitching movie. I don't know about you, River, man - but I was introduced to so many elements through the guy I was playing. Real people. My imagination. Gus's interpretation. Shakespeare. It was rich! And it was just bottomless, man. You could go as far as you could go, you know?

GS: I remember reading an interview with Robert Downey Jr. after *Less Than Zero*, where he said he was afraid people would harass him because of his character. Has anyone reacted strongly to your roles?

RP: Fuck them. That's all I can say. A big capital F and a U-C-K, and then THEM. T-H-E-M.

KR: Get a clue, man.

GS: So you haven't had any negative-

RP No. I get negative shit all the time. I don't care.

PP: Do you think anyone would have taken this script ten years ago?

RP: Porno stars maybe. Like maybe one of Warhol's crowd.

PP: Joe Dallesandro?

RP: Possibly one of those cats.

GS: One of your co-stars is a Warhol actor - Udo Kier, from *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, Which brings me to a prurient question

KR: It's your job!

GS: How comfortable were you guys filming your three-way sex scene with Udo?

RP: Well, I really didn't help matters. While we were doing our scene I said, Just think, Keanu. Five hundred million of your fans will be watching this one day. Like a stupid idiot. I made him feel completely self-conscious. But Keanu rose above it. Gus scolded me endlessly the night after.

KR: Did he really?

RP: Yeah. He scolded the shit out of me. I almost cried. That was terrible of me. I was just trying to break the ice. You know, I thought it was humorous - I was trying to save Keanu from being freeze-framed by twelve-year-olds at home!

KR: Thanks, brother.

RP: Later on, Keanu was filmed naked with the beautiful Chiara [Caselli, who plays Scott's Italian girlfriend, Carmella]. That scene was really a drag. He was having a great time with this girl, but it was freezing cold and they were dying. So I think they were more worried about the temperature than the nudity. That took five hours.

GS: The scene you did with Udo must have been easier simply because you two were already good friends. How did you meet?

RP: Actually, I met Keanu thought my ex-girlfriend Martha [Plimpton] while they were doing *Parenthood* - they were sucking face regularly. My brother, Wakim, otherwise known as Leaf, was also in it. So, Leaf and Martha were his buddies before I was even a friend of his. Then I met up with him on *I Love You to Death*. And I liked the guy. I wanted to work with him. He's like my older brother. But shorter.

PP: Keanu, Scott is a rich kid who wallows in the gutters to rebel against his father, who's the mayor of Portland. Gus based Scott on Prince Hal in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* plays

KR: Yeah, but in the Shakespeare world, Prince turned out to be a good king. To avoid internal strife he gets into these wars. All the dukes and lords were pretty happy because men were going off to die for a noble cause and people were being fed. But in *Idaho*, Scott is not connected to the people. He's got his own agenda. He just dogs everybody and goes his own way. So he doesn't have, like, the noble aspect. In the end, his father was very compassionate and concerned. Perhaps that's what makes it a modern tale.

GS: Were you concerned at all that Mike speaks in street vernacular throughout the film, whereas Scott goes in and out of Shakespearean verse? Did you think you switch in speech might seem jarring, Keanu?

KR: The Shakespeare stuff was an aspect of the script. Gus said it was something to do and to think about it. So that was my game. I wasn't worried. It just seemed challenging and interesting to me.

RP: I was afraid of it not working.

KR: For me?

RP: No, for the entire film. I felt we needed to very clear on how we set up the transition scenes between the mock Shakespeare stuff and the docudrama street stuff. There needed to be stepping stones to those scenes - so it wouldn't be like jumping from black and white to Technicolor. It was important to organize our thoughts and to support Gus stylistically.

KR: I wasn't aware of all the different styles going on in the film initially, though. You were looking through the camera a lot more than me.

RP: It was more of my duty in the character of Mike to be concerned with the directorial perspective. I was aware of how my narcolepsy would affect the narrative, how the random narcolepsy fits would affect the viewer. I'm glad that it didn't turn out to be a tale through my narcoleptic vision. But it was something I had to take full responsibility for, and it made me ask all these questions. Even when I wasn't involved with the scene, I had to be aware of it to some degree so that I could make myself match up to everything.

PP: The thing I like so much about Gus and his work is his compassion. *Mala Noche* just ripped my heart out. In *My Own Private Idaho*, he's dealing with the search for home and family. Was that theme important to you in deciding to do this film?

KR: Oh, not for me.

RP: I have really strong feelings about the search for home and mother. I thought it was very, very touching. You just knew that someone who could come up with this premise would have something to back it with in terms of knowledge and experience. Which Gus has.

PP: What was it like working with Gus as a *person* - living in his house, on location, and so on?

RP: Gus has those qualities that we all need to get back. Open eyes, open ears, a kid's stream of consciousness. You know, the things kids do - like putting their fingers up strange pipings in the house or acting all soft because they've screwed up and Mom's mad at them. That's Gus. Just being a kid. He was very collaborative, completely wide open. It was like a family operation -

co-op style.

GS: How did you two manage on the set?

RP: Every morning, Matt [Ebert, production assistant] woke us up by singing show tunes. He'd drag us by our ears down to the van.

KR: No, man. I was always there, prompt and ready.

RP: But he had to drag *me* by the ear down to the van. I'm very stubborn about getting up in the morning.

KR: Yeah, man. But I knew that Matt would grab me by the ear, too, so I'd just hang out.

RP: Yeah, Keanu would wait downstairs with his script in hand, ready to get in the van, and I would be upstairs fumbling for my clothes, although I usually sleep with my clothes on.

PP: Gus was pretty spontaneous about what scenes you shot each day, wasn't he?

RP: I have no clue. I don't know when he fuckin' decided to shoot what or where or when or why, man.

PP: Well, when you woke in the morning didn't you know what scene you were going to shoot?

KR: Generally, yeah. I'm sure that was other people telling Gus, ♡You need to know what you're going to do tomorrow.♡ I don't know if that was necessarily his personal impetus, but I think the machine was asking him what we were going to do so that we could be ready.

PP: The movie starts in Portland, moves to Idaho, then to Italy. While filming sequentially, did anything develop that you couldn't have anticipated at the beginning?

RP: The campfire scene was definitely a combination of Keanu and me working together off-set, fucking around with improv, talking about our characters. Getting deeper into it, we discovered a lot about our relationship within the film, and by the time we were ready to shoot the last scene in the States, we had enough insight to go a hell of a lot deeper than the script ever told us it would.

GS: That's the scene where Mike tells Scott that he loves him.

RP: There was a lot of deep love [in the film]. You don't know until you see the dailies whether it comes across or not. But because we shot in sequence, we were watching the film unfold before us, and when that scene came around we could just, like, ad-lib it.

PP: That scene is very similar to the one you did in *Stand by Me* -

RP: The confession scene. It's also similar to a scene in *Running on Empty*. Gus did see both movies, so maybe he sampled them.

PP: When I visited the set in Italy, I noticed that you were both always really sweet. You'd have gone without sleep and be really tired, yet were always considerate to the hotel clerks, limo drivers. Everyone.

RP: Oh, yeah. We're great guys. We really are wonderful people. I think Keanu and I are the nicest guys on the planet - with the exception of George Bush and Ronald Reagan.

KR: They are the *sweetest* guys! They're good to their clan. We should say thank you now that we have the opportunity. ♡Thanks, guys!♡

RP: [laughs] I'm sorry. You gave us a compliment.

PP: O.K. But it's true - you did seem to demonstrate a genuine consideration for anyone you worked with on the set.

RP: But seriously, we know what it's like to be on the bottom. The Lord Jesus Christ has given us a chance to be on top. So we're not going to abuse it. We're going to be very thankful for it and gracious about the luck that we have in our positions. We're very lucky young men. We do what we want, we get to be creative and make money.

KR: Right on brother. Right on.

GS: So what else are you guys doing now?

RP: I want to buy a 16mm camera. I'm not committed to the idea of being a filmmaker, but I'd like to try some shorts. I really like documentaries. And I want to drive through the mountains where I used to live when I was doing this TV series [*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*] when I was twelve. I'm going with my girlfriend.

KR: Every moment is precious. I'm trying to travel. I want to go to Paris. It's probably just a pipe dream. I'd like to read some books. Take some voice lessons.

GS: To do more Shakespeare, perhaps?

KR: Um, who knows? I really would like to do Shakespeare with River. I think we'd have a hoot. We could do *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Romeo and Juliet*.

RP: I'll be Juliet.

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