

GUS VAN SANT

by **Andy Bailey**

A pioneer of American independent film and New Queer Cinema in the 1980s, the Portland, Oregon-based Van Sant made his name with a run of gritty underbelly dramas featuring provocative outsider male protagonists, including the narcoleptic street hustler in *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) — an iconic role for the late actor River Phoenix — and the prescription medication hustler in *Drugstore Cowboy* (1989), which re-energized Matt Dillon's then-moribund career. Van Sant next catapulted Joaquin Phoenix and Nicole Kidman to stardom in the prescient media satire *To Die For* (1995) before directing the formulaic Miramax drama *Good Will Hunting* (1997), which turned Matt Damon and Ben Affleck into Oscar-winning overnight sensations. Van Sant toiled in Hollywood for several years, churning out his *Psycho* remake in 1998 and the urban tearjerker *Finding Forrester* two years later before returning to his indie roots with the stunning trifecta of *Gerry* (2001), *Elephant* (2003) and *Last Days* (2005), all three odes to the Hungarian minimalist Béla Tarr, with their long takes, sparse dialogue and unconventional narrative strategies. The best of these, *Elephant*, a meditation on the Columbine High School massacre, won two major prizes at Cannes in 2003, restoring Van Sant's reputation as one of independent film's most enduring mavericks. He deconstructed the Kurt Cobain mythos in *Last Days*, eliciting a great performance by slovenly indie pin-up Michael Pitt. Van Sant served as executive producer on two films from up-and-coming young gay indie directors Jonathan Caouette (*Tarnation*, 2003) and Cam Archer (*Wild Tigers I Have Known*, 2005) both of whom were discovered at the Sundance Film Festival. His next feature is the skateboarding drama *Paranoid Park* (2007), starring a cast of unknown teenagers.