

Gus Van Sant's *Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot*: The truth hurts

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Directed by Gus Van Sant; written by Van Sant, Jack Gibson and William Andrew Eastman, based on the book by Jack Callahan.

The most recent film by veteran American director Gus Van Sant is *Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot*, about quadriplegic (although he did regain some use of his upper body) cartoonist John Callahan (1951-2010), based on the latter's memoir. The title refers to one of Callahan's comic efforts: the words are spoken by the leader of a posse that has come across an empty wheelchair obviously abandoned by their human prey in the middle of the desert.

We see the fictional Callahan (Joaquin Phoenix) from different angles and in different circumstances, both before the auto accident that resulted in his paralysis at the age of 21 and afterward, as he attempts to deal with severe alcoholism and struggles to make his way as a cartoonist.

There are interesting things about the film, and less interesting things. Van Sant is at his best when he depicts the everyday life of his generally unusual or marginalized characters in a realistic fashion (*Mala Noche*, *Drugstore Cowboy*, *My Own Private Idaho*, *To Die For*, *Paranoid Park*, etc.). He is at his weakest in his more abstract or "high-concept" moments or films, such as *Good Will Hunting*, *Psycho*, *Elephant*, *Gerry* and others.

Callahan, we learn, was adopted. He repeats several times in the film something he clearly cannot get over: "I know three things about my real mother: she was Irish-American, she had red hair, she was a school teacher. Oh, yeah. And she didn't want me. Okay. Four things."

We see Callahan already in his wheelchair hanging out with a number of local skateboarders, with his long-suffering attendant, Tim (Tony Greenhand), and we see him participating in his first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting presided over by Donnie Green (Jonah Hill).

Callahan drank heavily before his devastating accident.

He explains, "The last day I walked, I woke up without a hangover. I was still loaded from drinking the night before. ... I knew I had an hour or so of grace before the nervousness of withdrawal symptoms set in."

The car crash comes at the end of an evening of heavy drinking in various locales, alongside a new acquaintance, Dexter (Jack Black). In a voiceover, Callahan observes drily, "Dexter had mistaken a Con Edison light pole for an exit and slammed into it at 90 miles an hour."

Callahan goes through lengthy, excruciating medical treatment. Relatively unfeeling doctors give him the horrifying news about his condition. He meets Annu (Rooney Mara), a young Swedish woman, in the hospital. He tells her plaintively: "I just feel like I'm not gonna have any future. And the doctors don't tell me anything, but it looks like I'm just gonna be like this for life. I can't understand this."

Eventually, he adjusts somewhat to his new situation, equipped with an electric wheelchair in which he whizzes a little recklessly around his Portland, Oregon neighborhood. Callahan (the self-described "neon cripple from outer space" with "electric orange" hair) becomes part of Donnie's group therapy session, along with a number of other wounded souls (played by, among others, veteran German performer Udo Kier, musician-singer Kim Gordon and singer-songwriter Beth Ditto).

In a vision, he sees his biological mother, who he has not been able to track down. She tells him forthrightly, "You are a good person, John. You can help yourself. You can stop drinking, and you can become happy and healthy. I know you're calling for me. I love you. Just please don't call me a tart." Callahan stops drinking, and comes to terms with some of those who have tormented him or whom he has tormented. The lovely Annu even reappears, as a delightfully outfitted Scandinavian Airlines flight attendant.

Callahan's blackly comic cartoons begin to win

admirers, as well as detractors. One of his comic drawings, entitled “Thanks Evolution,” depicts—ascending up a slope one after the other—some sort of underwater unicellular organism, a fish-reptile, a dinosaur and a “caveman.” At the top of the hill, a man holding an award aloft proclaims, “I’d like to thank all those who made it possible for me to be here tonight.”

The real Callahan died at the age of 59, from the long-term effects of his physical affliction.

Don’t Worry, He Won’t Get Far on Foot, at its strongest, is life-like: uneven, perplexing, surprising, tense, complex.

Joaquin Phoenix, who often tries too hard and ends up giving a mannered performance, is more relaxed and convincing here. And often, genuinely amusing. Jonah Hill continues his (so far quite successful) quest to be taken seriously as an actor. His Donnie Green is a wealthy, gay young man, with a Tom Petty look, prone to dispensing wisdom from Lao-Tzu, but also capable of considerable hard-headed realism (“Go to meetings, don’t drink, read the book”). There is something disturbing about his presence because he has many irritating and even retrograde characteristics, but despite or through all of that, Hill manages to communicate an almost unbearably intense level of care and concern.

Van Sant is an odd figure. He has some of the qualities of the truly significant radical gay filmmakers of the 20th century (Visconti, Pasolini, Fassbinder)—a genuine matter-of-factness and lack of self-absorption about his homosexuality, a fascination with the lives of the not-so-well-off, a combination of unsentimentality and romanticism—but of course without the left-wing politics and historical sense of those figures.

This lack creates gaping holes in his work, which tend to be filled up, almost by default, with banalities or, seemingly, whatever happens to be in the air. There is no other way to explain an entire film as unsuccessful as *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, the occasional smarminess of *Good Will Hunting*, for example, or the accommodation in *Don’t Worry* to Alcoholics Anonymous “spiritualism” and a great many commonplaces about “forgiving oneself” and “taking personal responsibility.” Van Sant’s characters’ lives, personalities and situations tend to be more interesting than their ideas.

But there are some genuinely bright spots, including his earliest films. Van Sant’s first important work, *Mala Noche* (*Evil Night* —one of the great Spanish painter Goya’s *caprichos* is entitled *Mala Noche*), centers on a Portland liquor store clerk in love with an undocumented

Mexican boy. Various misadventures take place in black-and-white. Love is largely thwarted. The setting is Portland’s skid row.

Speaking of that film, in a 2009 interview at the British Film Institute, Van Sant explained: “Portland’s very small, and the old town area was a place that I’d been many times, but it wasn’t a world that I particularly knew—the world of migrant workers that were in Portland. In the summers, they would stay in the old hotels and they’d work out in the fields. This was in 1975. Buses would come in and take workers out into the fields, and they’d send the money home to Mexico. Some of them would, instead of going home for the winter, they’d try to brave it. But there was no work in the winter and the younger guys, like the ones in the film, got into trouble because there was nothing to do and they were bored and they’d wander around the city without any work, just waiting for spring, so they could work.” The down-and-out “beatnik lyricism” of *Mala Noche* (in one critic’s phrase) is very pronounced.

In *Don’t Worry*, some of the most memorable and unassuming moments involve Callahan’s well-meaning, somewhat ineffectual attendant, Tim (“I signed up to be your attendant, not your slave. I told you I f***ing hate it when you give me orders”), and a group of skateboarders (non-actors) who are only on the screen for a couple of minutes. The adolescent awkwardness, athleticism, decent intentions and scruffiness of these street kids says something about the population as a whole and Van Sant’s essentially benevolent attitude toward it.

The film’s final exchange occurs between Callahan and them:

“The truth...”

“Yeah, the truth hurts.”

“Yeah. Yeah.—[chuckles]—Unfortunately.”



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