

What is Family? A Review of *My Own Private Idaho*

Richard Cornwall

What is queer family? This has been looked at by several gay writers recently, ranging from Paul Monette to David Leavitt. Gus van Sant, Jr., joins them in playing with this question in *My Own Private Idaho*. He starts by building on Shakespeare's picture of Prince Hal, his partner in dissolute ribaldry, Falstaff, and his father, King Henry IV:

*King Henry IV: O that it could be proved
That some night-tripping
fairy had exchanged
In cradle-clothes our children
where they lay,
And call'd mine Percy, his
Plantagenet!
Then would I have his Harry,
and he mine.*

*Falstaff: Indeed, you come
near me now, Hal; for we
that take purses go by the
moon and the seven stars,
and not by Phoebus, he,
'that wandering knight so
fair.' And, I prithee, sweet
wag, when thou art king, as,
god save thy grace, - majesty
I should say, for grace
thou wilt have none, -*

Hal: What none?

*Falstaff: No, by my troth, not
so much as will serve to be
prologue to an egg and
butter.*

*Hal: Well, how then? come,
roundly, roundly,*

*Falstaff: Marry, then, sweet
wag, when thou art king, let
not us that are squires of the
night's body be called
thieves of the day's beauty . .*

*Hal: Thou sayest well, and it
holds well too; for the fortune
of us that are the moon's men
doth ebb and flow like the
sea, being governed, as the
sea is, by the moon.*

This excerpt from the start of *Henry IV, Part I*, by Shakespeare, a part congenial to us who see other men as sweet and so fair, captures well the plot of *My Own Private Idaho*. Indeed, Gus van Sant makes this connection explicit in the Portland scenes in the film when Bob, who is repeatedly referred to as very round, prominently drinks Falstaff beer and all the merry thieves/hustlers speak like modern day transplants from Shakespeare's England.

Idaho shows Scott (Keanu Reeves and "Prince Hal") fleeing the smothering control of his father, Jack Favor ("Henry IV") by joining a loose group of hustlers, especially Mike Waters (River Phoenix - a nice pun van Sant got away with) and the group of thieves centered on the "whoring round man," Bob Pigeon (William Richert, who is also a film director). Scott's father, the mayor of Portland, beams his effeminate son and sends "his" police out to track down "his" son. As in *Drugstore Cowboy*, van Sant delights us with his vivid ingenuity and sheer humor, as of the police breaking in the old building where the thieves live their thespian lives. There is a mad chase round stairs and halls ending in the room where Scott is simulating fucking Mike and, as the police chief peers in the room, gradually revealing more and repeatedly, casually pulling the hairs on Mike's nipple and having Mike repeatedly slap his hand away, to the clear discomfort of the protectors of the status quo and servants of the father of the Prince on the bed.

So *Idaho* shows Scott Favor running from his father, Mr. Status Quo, but mak-

ing clear right from the start that when his 21st birthday comes "in a week," then he will want no more of this degenerate life and that he stands to inherit a fortune. Both Bob (who had a "really heavy thing" with Scott earlier) and Mike hang their hopes for future ease on getting a ride off Scott's very handsome prospects. Mike spends the movie running toward the fantasy of his mother, which is his private Idaho. This fantasy frequently overwhelms him - he becomes catatonic, rigid, falling and lying wherever he is as he fantasizes the wide open spaces of *North by Northwest*, with an undulating, two-lane road leading over the rolling hayfields toward the spectacular snowcapped mountains of Idaho. These frequent episodes of narcolepsy, of deep sleep, are his device for coping with the enormous isolation of his life as a queer kid without parents, hustling to survive. They are also the addictively erotic peaks in his life, a cinematographic perception which van Sant captures brilliantly. The scene of Mike's cuming with a trick at the start certainly rivals my best ejaculatory peaks.

The adventure of Bill and Ted, or rather Keanu Reeves and River Phoenix, starts on this pastoral road with Mike savoring dreams of his absent mother (as clouds rush overhead, van Sant's sign that a dream attack is starting and which recalls the floating objects and clouds he used to signal an altered mindstate in *Drugstore Cowboy*, and salmon futilely jumping upstream against an enormous falls). It quickly jumps to Seattle to savor Mike's life as a hustler. While there it has a wonderful sketch of a cleanliness fetishist who loves arithmetic and little dutch boys. It follows an unknown cowboy into an erotic male bookstore and gets caught on the rack of friction fiction featuring "Homo on the Range" and "Male Call" where the fetching

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