

Movie Review: 'Paranoid Park'

by Lee Grant

Director Gus Van Sant is a voyeur, hovering cinematically over the lives and lithe bodies of adolescent boys.

In "Paranoid Park," it was just a matter of time until the teenage skater at the center of the story (a long way from the rock star of Avril Lavigne's "Sk8ter Boi") would end up in the shower. In this case, the scene is less blatant than the two deadly Columbine-like high schoolers in "Elephant," who hop under the water together.

'PARANOID PARK' - Gabe Nevins and Lauren McKinney star in the drama 'Paranoid Park.' CNS Photo courtesy of MK2. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Is Van Sant, whose career spans the Oscar-nominated "Good Will Hunting" to "Last Days," a depressingly dull take on the late Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the great rock band Nirvana, teetering on the boundaries of pornography?

Not at all. In fact, he's got something to say about kids growing to manhood in broken families, amid sterile malls and uninspiring teachers.

In the case of "Paranoid Park," set affectionately in the rainy, overcast beauty of Portland, Ore. (as was the recent horror show "Untraceable"), Van Sant focuses on 16-year-old Alex (Gabe Nevins, an amateur cast after a view of the boy's MySpace page), whose family is deteriorating and whose girlfriend (Taylor Momsen from TV's "Gossip Girl") is pressuring him for sex ("Do you want to get the condoms after school?"). It's a chance for both to lose their virginity.

When it happens, Alex, a lonely, daydreaming kid, doesn't seem interested. Is it a Van Sant fantasy?

Based on a young adult novel by Blake Nelson, much of the "Paranoid Park" action takes place at Portland's famous Burnside Skate Park (nicknamed "Paranoid"), a kind of teenage wasteland. It's there the movie ignites. Cinematographer Christopher Doyle, working in both Super 8 (the format of most specialized skateboarding films) and 35mm, captures the ballet of kids weaving up and around this urban concrete playground.

When Alex hesitates at being "ready" for the skating challenges, a friend says, "No one's ever ready for Paranoid Park."

The movie's undercurrent is the accidental death of a security guard at Portland's dank freight yards after Alex and an older, creepy guy who hangs out at the park take off for a train-riding adventure.

The next day at school, he gets yanked from class for a police interrogation conducted by Daniel Liu, a real-life Portland cop, who attempts to rattle him with specific questions about just what kind of sandwich Alex ordered at Subway. It's two amateur actors in a realistic jab-and-feint conversation.

When it comes to the lives of teenagers, Van Sant's work can be compared to that of Larry Clark (his more equally divided between boys and girls than Van Sant's male-centric resume), the director of "Kids," "Bully" and "Wassup Rockers" (2006), a warm and frightening tale of young Latino skateboarders from South-Central Los Angeles on a daring road trip to Beverly Hills. It's a more engaging picture than "Paranoid Park."

Van Sant is taken with long tracking shots - a clutch of boys drifting slow-motion-like down the corridors of their high school; Alex seemingly hiking forever through a meadow on his way to a spot near the ocean, where he scribbles deep thoughts in a journal.

Film students might admire Van Sant's technical style - immense stretches of silence, awkward improvisational dialogue, his use of music like Billy Swan's "I Can Help." But there's a price to pay.

"Paranoid Park" is only 84 minutes, a long, slow 84 minutes, with delusions of grandeur.

"Paranoid Park." Running time: 1 hour, 24 minutes. Rated: R. 2 1/2 stars.

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