

## Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot

Director Gus Van Sant has crafted an immense variety of films in the last 30 years, from small indies to major studio properties. In his latest, "Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot," he is back in mainstream Hollywood with a gutsy biopic based on the life of edgy cartoonist John Callahan, an unrepentant drunk and ne'er-do-well whose life turned around at 21 when he became a paraplegic after a vicious car crash.

Callahan (Joaquin Phoenix), a drinker since he was 13, is a bum and a slob when he hitches up at a bar with the loudmouth Dexter (Jack Black) on a colossal bender in his hometown of Portland. He ends up in the hospital after a car accident that leaves him barely alive and without feeling in his lower body (while Dexter escapes unhurt). Upon his release, he only reluctantly enters treatment, but with encouragement from girlfriend Annu (Rooney Mara), whom he met in the hospital, he begins attending AA-sponsored group therapy at the home of Donnie (Jonah Hill), a group leader who becomes his sponsor. Ornerly and eccentric, John defies treatment by continuing to drink and to live riskily—as when he speeds around in his wheelchair—and to offend his fellow group members, a most disparate lot.

Uncertain how to adapt to his disability, Callahan stumbles upon a gift for drawing nervy, impudent cartoons that get ready laughs, and he ultimately gets published locally. He thus achieves a discipline he has never known and finds romance with Annu, gains a bevy of new friends, and is even able to track down and forgive the obnoxious Dexter, who was responsible for his crash. His work gains a national following and a richer life.

Callahan's real-life story is made-to-order for Joaquin Phoenix. The much in-demand actor, though rarely sympathetic on screen, has shone great range in the last 25 years, playing both clueless types (as in "To Die For," his first work with Van Sant, and "The Master"), as well as nasty swine ("The Gladiator" and "The Immigrant"). Yet he has been perhaps most commonly cast as a very flawed, if semi-aware, wastrel, one given to rough living and raw emotions (e.g., the recent "Irrational Man" and "Inherent Vice"). In "Don't Worry," Phoenix finds a persona that suits these traits, a profligate whose life is completely upended and yet ends up making effective comic use of his own crushing disability. Phoenix is both convincing as the inveterate drunk as well as the artist redeemed through his snarky sensibility. The only dissident note to his characterization is a misbegotten orange wig.

Phoenix is nicely seconded in "Don't Worry" by Jonah Hill as Donnie, a soft-spoken and enigmatic trust-fund boy who mixes his Liberace ways with some surprising spine to keep his charges on the right track, a track he himself, as an alcoholic, tries to maintain with increasing difficulty. His Donnie is hard to read, a bit mysterious, but an intriguing contrast to the crass Callahan.

*(The film is rated "R" for language and sexual situations and runs 113 minutes.)*

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