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Writer and director's latest opens Idaho International Film Festival

By Dana Oland - doland@idahostatesman.com

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It's an iconic film sequence from a Paul Schrader's "American Gigolo," a film that became emblematic of 1980s narcissism, emotional unavailability and appealingly shallow masculine charm.

It's a hot night in Los Angeles. Richard Gere as Julian Kay, the devastatingly gorgeous anti-hero of "American Gigolo," dresses for a night out. Revved up on cocaine, he sorts through his closet filled with Armani suits, drawers filled with layers of silk ties and shirts, until he finds the right look for his evening out.

Flash forward 20 years to another opulently furnished closet — more silk ties, shirts and cashmere scarves — only this is an undressing scene.

Woody Harrelson is Carter Page, a sophisticated Washington, D.C., socialite in Schrader's "The Walker." He finishes his evening and removes all the fashionable accouterment of his profession ...

"... and we end with him taking off his hair," Schrader said, with as close to a giggle as a man can get who's been called one of the most important filmmakers of his generation in America.

"I knew aficionados would make the connection, so we thought we'd give it to them," Schrader said from his office in New York City.

His film "The Walker," starring Harrelson and a bevy of legendary Hollywood leading ladies, will open this year's Idaho International Film Festival on Thursday at the Egyptian Theatre.

This is by far the most prestigious opening film the festival has presented, according to Bruce Fletcher, who programs all the films for the annual Boise festival. "This is as big as it gets," Fletcher said. "It's a serious drama from a director who really understands redemption. It's a great film from the reigning auteur of male panic. When I found out it was a possibility, I seriously went after it."

The film is now playing in Britain. It made its North American premiere at the Toronto Film Festival two weeks ago. It will screen in Boise before it opens nationally Dec. 7.

Schrader has written and often directed some of the most powerful films of the last 30 years — including writing the screenplays for "Taxi Driver," "Raging Bull" and "The Last Temptation of Christ," all directed by Martin Scorsese.

A walker is a man of a certain age and usually of a certain sexual preference who escorts the wives of rich and powerful men who are too busy, or uninterested in the opera or benefit of the week on the social calendar, Schrader said. Though they've been around since society was new, the term was first used in the 1980s to describe Jerry Zipkin, a socialite who often accompanied the likes of Nancy Reagan and Betsy Bloomingdale.

The dressing and undressing sequences provide symmetry for a tetralogy — a somewhat obscure one — based on a character arc that spans four films, 40 years and four different characters who share particular traits, Schrader said.

Schrader calls it his "Lonely Man" series.

It started in 1979 with Robert De Niro's angry cabbie Travis Bickel in "Taxi Driver," and includes

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Kristen Scott Thomas and Woody Harrelson star in Paul Schrader's "The Walker," a continuation of a character study Schrader started with Travis Bickel in "Taxi Driver."

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Go see 'The Walker'

7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 27, Egyptian Theatre, 500 W. Main St., \$10 movie only.

Opening night gala: 8 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 27, at Bardenay, 610 Grove St., Boise. \$20 single, \$35 couple for "The Walker" movie and gala at the Egyptian box office.

Advance festival all-access pass: \$100; mini-sampler, \$25, at IdahoFilmFestival.org.

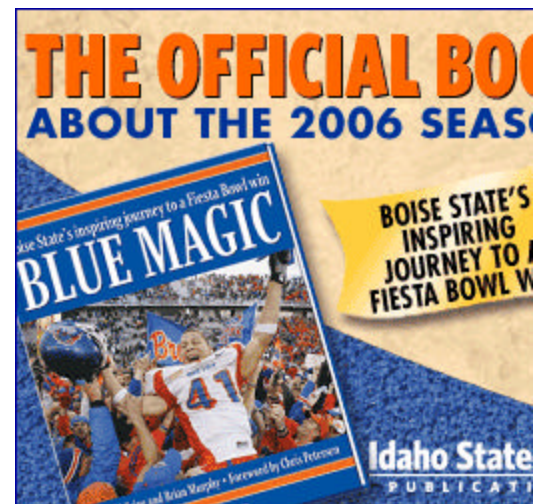
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Gere's narcissistic Kay in "Gigolo," (1980), Willem Dafoe's anxious, drug-dealing John LeTour in "Light Sleeper" (1992) and ends with Harrelson's superficial Carter Page in "The Walker."

"It's sort of that same kind of character, at age 20, 30, 40 and 50," Schrader said. "They're about these odd sort of service occupations: a taxi driver, a gigolo, a drug dealer and a society walker, these kinds of lonely men on the fringes of society, peeping in to other people's lives. It's a very loose-knit tetralogy, but in my mind there's a connection."

What Page really is, is superficial, a social attribute he plays by choice.

"It's a protective coloring in a way. He wears his superficiality the way others would wear armor."

Then of course the world conspires to test his superficiality as he goes down a similar path as Kay. When his closest friend (Kristin Scott Thomas) becomes entangled in a murder scandal, he offers to cover for her and finds himself the chief suspect and a sudden social pariah. His lawyer accuses him of being naive, to which he replies, "I'm not naive; I'm superficial."

Schrader's next film "Adam Resurrected" is based on an Israeli book about a former circus performer (Jeff Goldblum) who is spared the gas chamber in a World War II concentration camp. He becomes a ringleader at an asylum for Holocaust survivors.

"The Walker," for all its star power — Kristen Scott Thomas, Lily Tomlin, Lauren Bacall and Defoe — is "still a chamber piece, a character piece," he said. " 'Adam' is much bigger."

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