

WHILE MOST OF THE FILMS AT OUTFEST

are of the boy-meets-boy or girl-meets-girl variety, there is one feature showcasing the romantic trials of a man and a woman. *Race You to the Bottom*, by 28-year-old first-time feature director Russell Brown, examines a young successful gay man and his best girlfriend who both have their own boyfriends yet are in the midst of a torrid affair—with each other.

Nathan (Cole Williams of *Harry and Max* and ABC's *8 Simple Rules*) is a travel writer who takes his best girlfriend Maggie (Amber Benson, who broke hearts as Willow's lesbian love interest on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) on a work trip exploring the wineries of Napa Valley. But once they've kissed their respective boyfriends goodbye, they start taking gulps of each other bigger than any glass of vino.

A quick side trip to visit Maggie's married friends gives Nathan a chance to show off his salacious side by seducing the husband just because he can. Nathan soon devolves into a pompous monster and the once smitten lovers turn their verbal venom on each other.

"He's intentionally not a likable character, but it's what he's going through and who he is that I think are interesting," says Russell Brown. "He thinks he has everything going for him, but in his personal life he still has a lot of things to figure out."

Maggie isn't too far behind (in the race to the bottom) as Nathan's tart-tongued sparring partner. With words as weapons, they tear emotional wounds that threaten to sever their friendship. It's a portrait of a disintegrating relation-

A BITTER MOUTHFUL

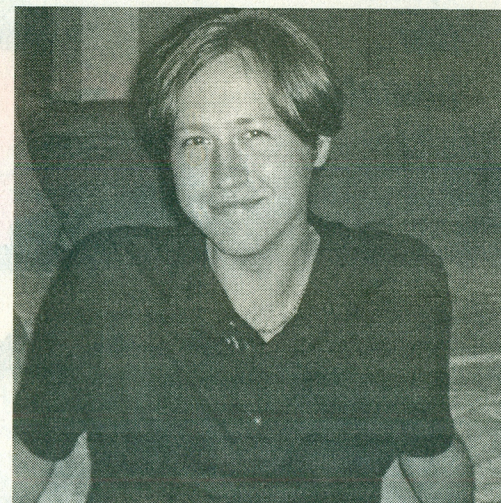
Out director Russell Brown's *Race You to the Bottom* explores a girl-guy friendship gone sour

ship that was partly flawed from the beginning.

"He wants to think he's a lot better than he really is and she'll call him out on this," Brown says. "She's the person who tells him the truth about himself, and that's part of what he likes about her and part of what really pisses him off in the course of the movie."

Finding the perfect Maggie was the easiest part of casting, according to Brown. "The first words out of (Benson's) mouth were 'I love your script but I hate the ending,'" he recalls. "She was fearless and smart and she told me why she didn't like it and that's exactly what the character would have done." On the flip side, finding the perfect Nathan nearly delayed the production. "Cole was staying in my guest room and we talked about casting all the time but he always looked too young," Brown says. "We were five days out and were going to shut down the movie because I couldn't find anyone for the part. Then he cut and dyed his hair and he looked older. When he read the dialogue, he just understood how to do it."

The wine country setting invites inevitable comparisons to Alexander Payne's *Sideways*, but Brown had the script written before he'd even heard of last year's critical



BROWN: His film is doused in red wine.

darling. He spent summers growing up in Northern California and thought it would be an ideal romantic setting to contrast the characters' rising tensions. For a dialogue driven movie, nothing fuels a good fight like an endless supply of red wine. —JAY WEBB

***Race You to the Bottom* screens Mon., July 11, 9:30 p.m. at the Laemmle Monica, and Tues., July 12, 8 p.m. at the Regent Showcase.**