

Until recently, when John Benjamin Hickey looked back at his days growing up on a 350-acre cotton farm in Plano, Tex., just north of Dallas, he admits that "all I remembered about the place was wanting to leave." But it turns out some of us can go home again. Last year Hickey returned to his origins to star in the quirky drama *Finding North* (opening June 4 in New York), and he was glad for it. "I saw the state with completely different eyes," he says. "I realized my roots are buried there."

film

John Benjamin Hickey says his role in *Finding North* helped him get back to his roots

By Michael J. Giltz

Call it celluloid therapy. In *North*, an audience pleaser at last summer's Outfest gay and lesbian film festival in Los Angeles, Hickey plays Travis, a dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker who plans to kill himself after his lover dies of complications from AIDS. Travis is shaken out of his doldrums after he discovers that his Texas-raised beau has left him audiocassettes that guide him—and a big-haired bank teller (Wendy Makkena)—on a touching scavenger hunt through the Lone Star state.

For Hickey, it all hit home. As a gay adolescent, "I felt slightly displaced in Texas," says the actor, 35. While his brother went on to become a full-fledged cowboy, Hickey hightailed it to New York midway through college to try acting. It was a smart move, for he

went on to win an Obie award in 1994 for his turn as Arthur in Terrence McNally's *Love! Valour! Compassion!* one of the signal gay plays of the '90s; he also tackled the role on the big screen.

Now Hickey's career is one busy barbecue. He's still panting from his exhilarating stint alongside Natasha Richardson and then Jennifer Jason Leigh in the smash-hit Broadway revival of *Cabaret*, in which he played

Cliff, the bisexual lead loosely based on Christopher Isherwood. "There was no set, no real props," he says. "We all just had each other. I think I'm still a little hungover from that."

But with two major movies in the can, who has time to recover? In *The General's Daughter* (June 11), starring John Travolta and Madeleine Stowe, he plays a military lawyer who may be gay, and in this fall's thriller *The* ▶

Finding himself

BARBARA BRONIKER



Heading *North*: Makena (left) and Hickey

Bone Collector, with Denzel Washington and Angelina Jolie, he's a doctor who's "a cross between Jack Kevorkian and John Boy Walton."

While his wattage in Hollywood may be increasing, the people back in Plano have never exactly been blinded by the light. "I've always gone home as my mother's son or my brother's brother," he says. There's no feeling of resentment, however, for he realizes now that "Texas is a great fucking place. People are so nice, and it's very quiet." After filming *North* in the north Texas college town of Denton, he says, "I was like Sandra Bullock [who bought a home in Austin after filming *Hope Floats*]. I wanted to get a little place there."

For now, though, he's staying put in New York's Greenwich Village, where he just bought a studio. "A miniloft is what I like to call it," the single Hickey says with a sigh. However, he does find himself "needing to get out of the city now and then."

If he wants a Plano fix, he can always reminisce with old pal—and *North* screenwriter—Kim Powers. "It turns out Kim's from a town called McKinney, which is right next door to where I grew up," says Hickey. "When I told him my aunt had a little Merle Norman shop that she ran out of her house, Kim just turned white and said, 'That was two doors down from my house!'"

Despite the friendship, Hickey didn't assume he was a shoo-in for the movie. "I thought they would try and get a big name to do it," he says. "And I'm sure they probably did try." He lets out a hearty, big-as-Texas laugh. "Then it came back my way." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post and Entertainment Weekly.