

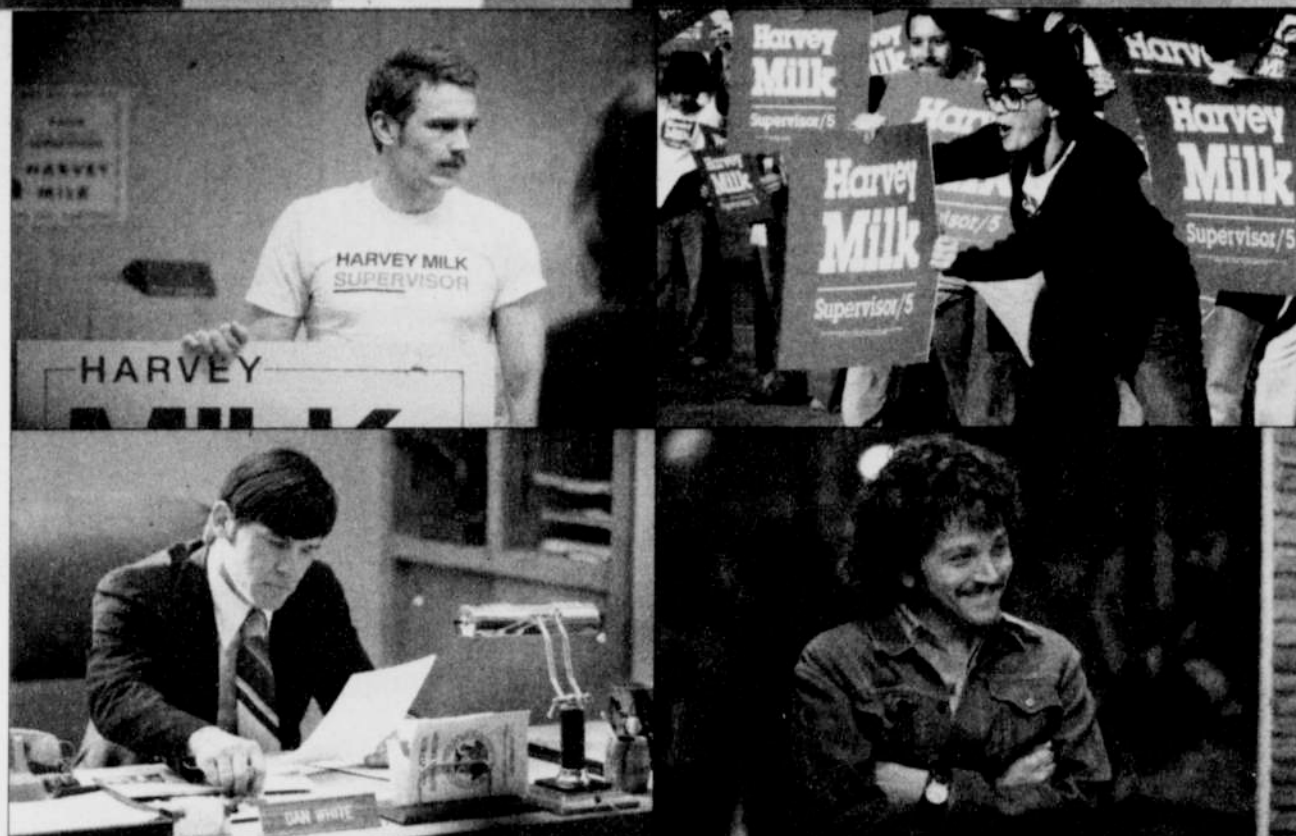
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when I was put on the project. So I wanted to do a draft, and I did one with Becky Johnston [*The Prince of Tides*], who is also a well-known Hollywood screenwriter.

The thing about the Franzoni draft, and the thing about our new draft that Becky wrote, was that they seemed to be so much into the Sidney Lumet style like *City Hall*—really an interesting boilerplate story. It might as well have been called *City Hall* instead of *The Mayor of Castro Street* because the Castro Street itself was its own animal.

I felt like we needed way more “gayness” in the story. [Laughs] That’s really what it came down to. It was a Warner Bros. film starring Robin Williams, and it was a \$40 million project, which [today translates to] \$80 million. The idea of making it more gay was frightening to [the studio]. It was weird because it was originally a \$40 million Oliver Stone movie with Robin Williams, and all of a sudden it was morphing into a \$40 million movie with Robin Williams with Gus Van Sant making it more gay. That wasn’t in the plan.

To them it wasn’t really more gay—they used the word “personal.” They thought that making it more gay was making it “smaller”—and it probably was. Even today, there’s a question: Does that make it smaller, less successful with the audience?



Clockwise from top left, *Milk* stars James Franco as boyfriend Scott Smith; Emile Hirsch as AIDS Memorial Quilt creator Cleve Jones; Diego Luna as boyfriend Jack Lira; and Josh Brolin as assassin Dan White, who would later claim in court that junk food exacerbated his wild mood swings, a legal strategy that came to be known as the “Twinkie defense.”

JR: Since this is your first film with gay subject matter since the early 1990s, have you noticed a big shift in Hollywood thinking since then? Did financing come easier, for example?

GVS: No. Well, there’s somewhat of a shift. *Brokeback Mountain* was kind of like a milestone. There hasn’t really seemed to be any indication that, because of movies that have been made, that gay protagonists sell a lot of tickets. I guess it’s still a niche market. *Brokeback Mountain* was the

one that dispelled that, but for some reason that I don’t know about, it didn’t give birth to a lot of new gay-themed subjects.

When we were making *Milk* and were looking around for money, I was astonished because I learned from the press that there weren’t really any other projects in the works that had gay characters or gay stories. I had thought that *Brokeback Mountain* would make at least five or six new projects appear, and there just weren’t any ones that were

being shopped around as somewhat large movies.

The business also more and more is becoming not about drama itself, much less gay characters. They would much rather do an action movie.

JR: What was it like working with Sean Penn?

GVS: His reputation has been in the lineage of [Marlon] Brando. He knew Brando, and he also knows [Jack] Nicholson—Brando being the elder generation and then Nicholson being the middle generation and then Sean being the younger generation. They recognize each other as kind of handing down the laurels of “best actor in Hollywood.” They recognized him as one of their own. They’re artistic geniuses. It was an interesting and exciting adventure.

JR: You seem to have no problem convincing heartthrobs like Keanu Reeves and James Franco to strip away their inhibitions and take on gay roles. Do they ever come to you with questions about the authenticity of their portrayals?

GVS: No, actually, they never ask me. One of the things they need is somebody to watch them, so that they know that they’re being monitored and that they’re playing to somebody and not just the camera. So they just learn to read whatever my reactions are. Somehow it works out between them and I—I don’t know, it sort of goes beyond questions and answers. It’s more like gestures. [Laughs]

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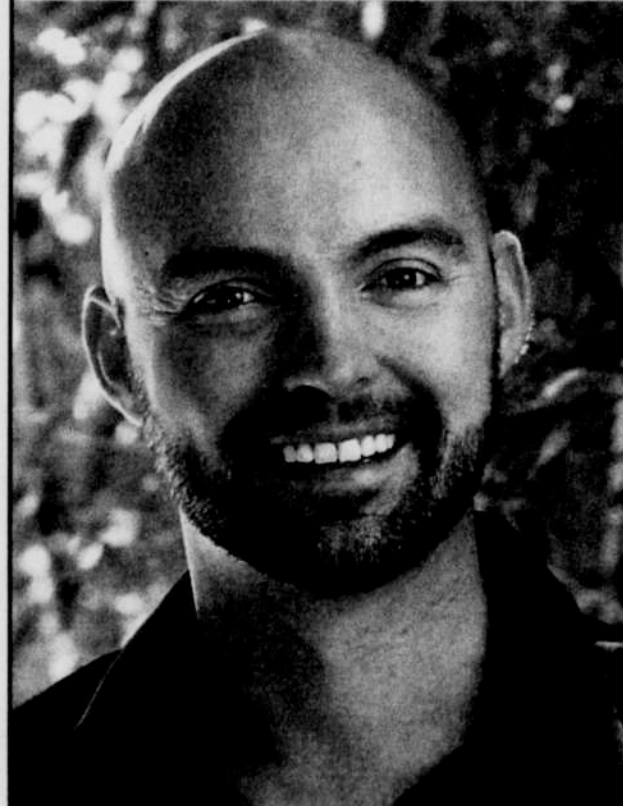
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