

film

A Political Firebrand

Milk reaffirms Gus Van Sant's gifts as a filmmaker

by Gary Morris

*M*oved to San Francisco in 1988, too late to have met Harvey Milk, "The Mayor of Castro Street," who was assassinated in 1978 at age 48. But I felt his activist legacy everywhere, from the pleasure and ease of simply walking through the flourishing Castro district to witnessing the community's toughness and resilience in dealing with homophobia wherever it appeared.

When it was announced that Gus Van Sant was going to direct the biopic of this seminal gay leader, some of us were worried. The Portlander's career has been a checkered one; for every high point (*Drugstore Cowboy*, *My Own Private Idaho*), there's been a corresponding low (*Gerry*, *Psycho*), with some films (*Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*) so low that they regularly make the "worst movies ever" lists. But the recent, excellent *Paranoid Park* was an encouraging sign, and *Milk* in fact reaffirms Van Sant's gifts. This film, which opens Nov. 26, ranks alongside *Drugstore Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho* as a powerful, beautifully realized work.

Milk opens with grainy real-life footage of busts in gay bars in New York and Los Angeles in the 1950s and '60s, setting both the style and the political tone for the story to follow. But Van Sant

balances the political (via actual news clips) with the personal throughout, just as Milk tried to do in his own life. Early on we see both his funny, human side and his drive to make a difference when he picks up a trick, Scott Smith, and wistfully tells him: "I'm 40 years old, and I haven't done a thing I'm proud of."

The two move to San Francisco, and Milk, who spent years in the closet, begins the work that would at last make him proud. His arrival dovetails with a politicized post-Stonewall gay community, and no two bedfellows were ever happier as he becomes the dynamic leader and mother hen of a group of queer activists fighting for their rights.

One of the film's pleasures is the feeling of joyful camaraderie among Milk and his merry band of queens and dykes, who seem to realize they're making history while at the same time dancing, dishing and trying to get laid. Why shouldn't the revolution be fun? Of course, the fun is tempered by what we know happened to Milk and by the film's frequent insertions of authentic footage of hatemongers like Anita Bryant and John Briggs into the narrative. The film also lays out one of the more surprising obstacles Milk faced in the form of gay power brokers like David Goodstein,

publisher of *The Advocate*, who were terrified of the interloper's fiery version of gay liberation.

Milk's romances with the dreamy Smith and unhinged

Jack Lira offer fascinating glimpses into his personality, but it was his relationship with his future killer, Dan White, that resonates the most here. The film subtly portrays unexpected similarities between the two men, both community-minded and both outsiders, while also airing Milk's suspicion that White's inner demons may have been the result of being a closet case, something Milk felt he could recognize.

Van Sant expertly conjures 1970s San Francisco, aided by Dustin Lance Black's superior script. And the film gains simply by timing: It's impossible not to equate Milk and the queer community's struggle then with the present bruising fight for same-sex marriage.


But what really makes *Milk* are the performances. Sean Penn is simply stunning in the title role, alternately whimsical and self-effacing, a political firebrand and a hopeless romantic always looking for love. The versatile Josh Brolin also registers strongly as the tormented White—is there any role he can't play? Emile Hirsch and



Sean Penn delivers an alternately whimsical and self-effacing performance in the title role of *Milk*.

James Franco nicely sketch their smaller roles as, respectively, Cleve Jones and Smith, while Diego Luna is both appalling and enthralling as dizzy, maniacal queen Lira.

A curious side note: There's a scene in the film where Milk explains to some of the timid gay power brokers that putting out a flier demanding gay rights without using the word "gay" is pathetic and counterproductive. According to a production insider for *Milk*, quoted on Yahoo Films, distributor Focus Features might also be trying to "erase the gay" from its marketing campaign: "The best way to help this film win over a mainstream audience is to avoid partisanship, and the best way to avoid partisanship is to let people find out about the film from the film itself."

Avoid partisanship? In 2008? Harvey Milk, we need you! 


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