



Milk

Director: Gus van Sant
Country: USA
Date: 2008

A review by Phillip French of *The Observer*.

Three of this week's leading movies involve tension and suspense, but in each case the audience knows the outcome before they enter the cinema: the July plot against Hitler failed; David Frost elicited an admission of culpability from Richard Nixon; on 27 November 1978, aggrieved former cop and politician Dan White walked into City Hall and assassinated San Francisco's mayor George Moscone and elected supervisor Harvey Milk. Milk plays on this knowledge and uses it to give the death of its protagonist a sense of tragic inevitability.

The movie begins with newsreel of Dianne Feinstein, the California senator who presided on Tuesday over the post-inauguration lunch in Washington, announcing in her capacity as president of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors the deaths of Moscone and Milk. We then see Milk (Sean Penn) sitting at a kitchen table taping a message to the world to be released in the event of his murder, which is used as the film's narrative spine.

Finally, the movie refers to Milk's love of grand opera with its romantic sense of impending death and, towards the end, we see him watching the finale of Puccini's *Tosca* where the heroine discovers her lover has been killed and throws herself from the battlements as the snarling villain looks on.

The movie has a highly romantic view of Milk, introducing him in 1970 on his 40th birthday, picking up Scott Smith (James Franco), a handsome man half his age, on the New York subway. Milk is a sweet-natured closet gay with a secure job in insurance. Smith is in flight from the oppressive, homophobic world of Mississippi. They become lovers that night and decide to flee to a more hospitable town, San Francisco, where they embark on the hippie lifestyle, bearded and long-haired.

What we then see is the course of the gay revolution in San Francisco through the career of Milk. Shot in a grainy fashion, it's often difficult to distinguish between new footage and archive material. Director Gus Van Sant, working from a screenplay by documentarist Dustin Lance Black, operates in a different style from his recent pictures, the chilly, detached, almost abstract *Elephant*, *Last Days* and *Paranoid Park*. Milk is warm, emotional, politically committed.

We know that Milk gained leadership experience early in life serving as a naval officer attached to submarine command during the Korean War, that he was a successful, ambitious businessman in New York and that he learnt a good deal about theatre while working with Tom O'Horgan, the great director who enjoyed success both off-Broadway and with major commercial shows like *Hair* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Dramatising Milk's life, Black and Van Sant see these qualities developing as Harvey goes into business in San Francisco's Castro district, running a camera shop with Scott, recruiting gay people to support their own enterprises and then becoming a flamboyant leader, wielding a bullhorn at impromptu meetings and merging street theatre and street politics.

Penn gives a nuanced performance of winning charm and through the personality of Milk the movie makes electoral politics exciting, funny and sexy. Milk shaves off his beard, cuts his hair and wears a suit to appear more socially acceptable, but he never attempts to conceal his sexual preferences and never drops the gay banter. He fights election after election until becoming the first homosexual to win significant electoral office in the United States, combating anti-gay legislation as well as implementing positive protection for persecuted minorities.

The movie, however, passes over the promiscuity that was a characteristic of the liberated, pre-Aids phase of gay liberation and suggests that during the eight years covered by the movie Milk had only two regular partners. The first is the kindly, easy-going Scott, the other the attractive, coquettish, hard-drinking Latino Jack Lira (Diego Luna), who cannot understand Harvey's social dedication and kills himself as a form of revenge.

The film also does less than justice to a number of other figures in the struggle. The character of White (played with a sad moroseness by Josh Brolin, who most recently impersonated George W Bush in Oliver Stone's W) remains something of a mystery, the public face of all those who sent death threats to Milk. A resentful, disgruntled loser, a devout Irish-American Catholic, he felt sidelined by a changing America, despite having been elected a supervisor alongside Harvey. He belongs to the dark side of the American Dream, turning to violence to express and revenge himself and then committing that ultimate act of self-hatred, suicide.

As we contemplate him, we recall that a couple of years ago, in *All the King's Men*, Sean Penn played the Huey Long figure, assassinated by a deranged opponent, and that Gus Van Sant's last film to win wide acclaim was *Elephant*, his attempt to explain the 1999 massacre at Columbine High School.

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