

Sean Penn's Oscar-Possible Harvey Milk Puts Face to Gay Rights in 'Milk'

Submitted by [HollywoodChicago.com](http://www.hollywoodchicago.com) [1] on November 27, 2008 - 11:03am

- [Adam Fendelman](#) [2]
- [Alison Pill](#) [3]
- [Barack Obama](#) [4]
- [Diego Luna](#) [5]
- [Dustin Lance Black](#) [6]
- [Emile Hirsch](#) [7]
- [Gus Van Sant](#) [8]
- [Harvey Milk](#) [9]
- [James Franco](#) [10]
- [Josh Brolin](#) [11]
- [Milk](#) [12]
- [Movie Review](#) [13]
- [Mystic River](#) [14]
- [No Country for Old Men](#) [15]
- [Philadelphia](#) [16]
- [Sean Penn](#) [17]
- [Tom Hanks](#) [18]



Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Just as Tom Hanks put a face to AIDS in 1993's "Philadelphia," Sean Penn has now put a face to gay rights as Harvey Milk in the new Gus Van Sant true-story film "Milk".

While Penn's Harvey Milk had the physical demeanor of a petite and gentle man, the fire inside the real-life activist for gay rights – and more broadly civil rights – was both his blessing and sometimes his poison. Milk found balancing personal relationships challenging amid his relentless quest to be the first gay politician in California.



Sean Penn stars as real-life gay rights icon Harvey Milk in director Gus Van Sant's "Milk".

Photo credit: Phil Bray

The film's story takes place in the 1970s when those who were out of the closet were much less accepted than they are today. Milk found

himself fighting not only the adversity to his political dream because it hadn't been done before but also a powerful politician in his state as well as an omnipresent national force against gay rights.

But even more than gay rights, Milk's life was devoted to the same tenants of newly elected U.S. president Barack Obama: change and hope.

Because of the political corollaries to Obama's message for change today as well as the brouhaha in California now over gay marriage (and the potential to repeal the thousands who snuck in during the short period of time when the law allowed them), the timing for the release of the film today couldn't be more prescient.



Alison Pill (left) and Emile Hirsch (right) star as real-life gay rights activists Anne Kronenberg and Cleve Jones (respectively) in director Gus Van Sant's "Milk".

Photo credit: Phil Bray

While we've seen Penn deliver Oscar-worthy roles before (he won for "Mystic River") and he does again for Gus Van Sant ("Good Will Hunting," "Finding Forrester," "[Paranoid Park](#) [19]"), what assists in the power of his transformative character performance is the complement of a sea of other notable actors playing against type. We're treated to an entirely new way to look at Emile Hirsch – whose character range is now light years away from 2007's "Into the Wild" – and Diego Luna.

While in "Milk" he wore no dancing shoes from 2004's "Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights," Luna's gay character as Milk's real-life lover is both something we've never seen before from him but also something that's most certainly not a stretch to see from him.

Josh Brolin – who for this critic took three times of screening 2007's "No Country for Old Men" and then a brilliantly authentic performance in 2008's "W." as George W. Bush to be sold on him – was the one questionable link in this stalwart cast who could most loudly make you go "hmmm...".



Diego Luna portrays Harvey Milk's real-life lover Jack Lira in director Gus Van Sant's "Milk".

Photo credit: Phil Bray

Brolin's inner conflict and heterosexual ways (despite an unusual homosexual inference from Milk) could leave you with the same mixed feelings about his performance that he clearly had in delivering his own character. While "Milk" currently stands out among director Gus Van Sant's best film thus far, in his direction you certainly felt his ambition for honesty and authenticity.

RELATED READING



[Early "Milk" extras casting call.](#) [20]



[Behind-the-scenes "Milk" filming.](#) [21]



[More film reviews from critic Adam Fendelman.](#) [2]

But you also felt his sensitivity and even sometimes his restraint. His filmmaking felt like he'd show you just enough to do the story justice but not enough to go over the line and make you uncomfortable.

While a sign of interesting filmmaking is the willingness to make you uncomfortable, legendary filmmaking will do so with a purpose and a reason while leaving a meaningful and lasting impression. This isn't a story to take lightly or a concept to be told delicately.

It's a holocaust on inequality that's demanding to be heard and absolved to break down even today's barriers that still hold the gay man and woman back.

Make sure you stay for the credits. In a film that cast countless primary, supporting and background gay characters, you'll be treated to the one and only credit of the entirely unknown actor Brian Yates Sharber as the "Gay Man".

"Milk" stars Sean Penn as Harvey Milk along with Emile Hirsch, Josh Brolin, Diego Luna, James Franco and Alison Pill. "Milk," which is directed by Gus Van Sant and written by Dustin Lance Black, opened in Chicago on Nov. 26, 2008.

By [ADAM FENDELMAN](#) [23]
Editor-in-Chief
HollywoodChicago.com
adam@hollywoodchicago.com [22]



[22]

© 2008 Adam Fendelman, HollywoodChicago.com

Source URL (retrieved on *Apr 25 2024 - 8:18am*):

<http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/5747/sean-penns-oscar-possible-harvey-milk-puts-face-to-gay-rights-in-milk>

Links:

- [1] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/users/hollywoodchicagocom>
- [2] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/adam-fendelman>
- [3] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/alison-pill>
- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/barack-obama>
- [5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/diego-luna>
- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/dustin-lance-black>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/emile-hirsch>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/gus-van-sant>
- [9] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/harvey-milk>
- [10] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/james-franco>
- [11] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/josh-brolin>
- [12] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/milk>
- [13] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/labels/review.html>
- [14] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/mystic-river>
- [15] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/movie-review/no-country-for-old-men>
- [16] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/philadelphia>
- [17] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/sean-penn>
- [18] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/tom-hanks>
- [19] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/1765/skater-boy-culture-takes-center-stage-in-cult-director-van-sants-paranoid-park>
- [20] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/forums/1527/extras-needed-for-gus-van-sants-milk-on-march-9-2008-in-san-francisco>
- [21] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/forums/1627/behind-the-scenes-filming-for-milk>
- [22] <mailto:adam@hollywoodchicago.com>
- [23] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/about#adam>