

FILM REVIEW

One of the first scenes in *Milk* is of a pick-up in a New York subway station. It's 1970, and an insurance executive in a suit and tie catches sight of a beautiful, scruffy younger man — the phrase "angel-headed hipster" comes to mind — and banter with him on the stairs. The mood of the moment, which ends up with the two men eating birthday cake in bed, is casual and sexy, and its flirtatious playfulness is somewhat disarming, given our expectation of a serious and important movie grounded in historical events. *Milk*, directed by Gus van Sant from a script by Dustin Lance Black, is certainly such a film, but it manages to evade many of the traps and compromises of the period biopic with a grace and tenacity worthy of its title character.

That would be Harvey Milk (played by Sean Penn), a neighborhood activist elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977 and murdered, along with the city's mayor, George Moscone (Victor Garber), by a former supervisor named Dan White (Josh Brolin) the next year. Notwithstanding the modesty of his office and the tragic foreshortening of his tenure, Milk, among the first openly gay elected officials in the country, had a profound impact on national politics, and his rich afterlife in American culture has affirmed his status as pioneer and martyr. His brief career has inspired an opera, a documentary film and now *Milk*, which is the best live-action mainstream American movie that I have seen this year.

Milk is accessible and instructive, an astute chronicle of big-city politics and the portrait of a warrior whose passion was equaled by his generosity and good humor. Penn, an actor of unmatched emotional intensity and physical discipline, outdoes himself here, playing a character different from any he has portrayed before.

In the years since the earnest and commercial *Finding Forrester* (2000), Van Sant has devoted himself to smaller-scale projects, some of them



PHOTO: AP

A freedom fighter in life becomes a potent symbol in death

BY A. O. SCOTT
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

(like the Palme d'Or-winning provocation *Elephant*) employing nonprofessional actors, and none of them much concerned with soliciting the approval of the mass audience. *Gerry*, *Elephant*, *Last Days* and *Paranoid Park* are linked by a spirit of formal exploration and also by a preoccupation with death.

Like *Elephant* (suggested by the Columbine High shootings) and *Last Days* (by the suicide of Kurt Cobain), *Milk* is the chronicle of a death foretold. Before that subway station encounter, we have already seen real-life news video of the aftermath of Milk's assassination, as well as grainy photographs of gay men being rounded up by the police. These images don't spoil the intimacy between Harvey the buttoned-up businessman and Scott Smith (James Franco), the hippie

who becomes his live-in lover and first campaign manager. Rather, the constant risk of harassment, humiliation and violence is the defining context of that intimacy.

And his refusal to accept this as a fact of life, his insistence on being who he is without secrecy or shame, is what turns Milk from a bohemian camera store owner (after his flight from New York) into a political leader.

"My name is Harvey Milk, and I want to recruit you." That was an opening line that the real Milk often used in his speeches to break the tension with straight audiences, but the film shows him deploying it with mostly gay crowds as well, with a slightly different inflection. He wants to recruit them into the politics of democracy, to persuade them that the stigma and discrimination they are used to enduring quietly and even guiltily can be addressed by voting, by demonstrating, by claiming the share of power that is every citizen's birthright and responsibility.

The strength of Black's script is that it grasps both the radicalism of Milk's political ambition and the pragmatism of his methods. *Milk* understands that modern politics thrive at the messy, sometimes glorious intersection of grubby interests and noble ideals.

For more than two lively, eventful hours, *Milk* conforms to many of the conventions of biographical filmmaking, if not always to the precise details of the hero's biography. Milk's inexhaustible political commitment takes its toll on his relationships, first with Scott and then with Jack Lira, an impulsive, unstable young man played by Diego Luna with an operatic verve that stops just short of camp.

Meanwhile, local San Francisco issues are overshadowed by a statewide anti-gay-rights referendum and the national crusade, led by the orange-juice spokesmodel Anita Bryant, to repeal municipal antidiscrimination laws. The culture war is unfolding, and Milk is in the middle of it. And so, 30 years later, in the wake of Proposition 8, is *Milk*.

Film Notes

MILK

DIRECTED BY: GUS VAN SANT

STARRING: SEAN PENN (HARVEY MILK), EMILE HIRSCH (CLEVE JONES), JOSH BROLIN (DAN WHITE), DIEGO LUNA (JACK LIRA), ALISON PILL (ANNE KRONENBERG), VICTOR GARBER (MAYOR GEORGE MOSCONE), DENIS O'HARE (JOHN BRIGGS), JOSEPH CROSS (DICK PABICH), STEPHEN SPINELLA (RICK STOKES), LUCAS GRABEEL (DANNY NICOLETTA), KELVIN YU (MICHAEL WONG), JAMES FRANCO (SCOTT SMITH)

RUNNING TIME: 128 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

Marriage: it's a word, not a sentence

Promising documentary maker Wuna Wu's latest film finds merit in the social institution of matrimony

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Woman: "I am getting married on Sept. 30."
Man: "Congratulations!"
Woman: "But I am short of a groom ... I pick you."
Man: "Me? No! ... The fortune-teller said I can't get married this year."



Ordinary people tell their stories of married life in *Let's Fall in Love*.
PHOTO COURTESY OF CLASSICA VISION

Just one of many colloquies between couples in *Let's Fall in Love* (尋情歷險記) that had the audience laughing out loud at the film's press screening.

After dealing with schizophrenia in *Echo* (快不快樂四人行, 2002) and the loss of a loved one in *Farewell 1999* (再會吧一九九, 2003), *Let's Fall* sees promising documentary filmmaker Wuna Wu (吳汶鈺) tackling marriage, a subject matter that seems, at first glance, mundane.

The project sprung from the director's sense of urgency. Being an intellectually and financially independent city gal who yearns for love but is unable to hold down a stable relationship, Wu found herself heartbroken after a breakup at the age of 30, and the seven wedding invitations she received didn't help much to alleviate the pain. Then she met Helen Chen (陳海倫), a happily married musician and head of a consulting company who dabbles in matchmaking as a hobby and has successfully hitched up 20 couples over the past five years.

Chen the matchmaker is the star of this documentary, dispensing advice — such as "love and romance come not before but after the marriage" — that contemporary relationship experts might deride as old wives tales. Through Wu's intimate lens and her heartfelt friendship with the couples featured in the film, the

big points or explore deep emotions. Marriage is viewed as something that needs work and a social institution that does have its merits — people share, learn from past mistakes and find true happiness.

Though the cinematography is rough and the narrative uneven, the documentary amounts to a heartwarming essay on matrimony and mixes a sense of humor with personal intimacy and empathy, which is underscored when the director puts herself in the firing line as she asks Chen to help her find a partner.

Wu is seeking investors to bankroll the film's release nationwide. After two months, 100 people have come forward, each investing NT\$10,000. This has enabled the film to be screened in Hsinchu City and Taipei City.

Wu's goal is to attract a total of 500 investors and roll out the film across the country.

Let's Fall in Love screens for one week at the Majestic Theater (真善美戲院) in Ximending starting today. For more information, call (02) 8712-6080 or e-mail theviewart[at]gmail.com.

Film Notes

LET'S FALL IN LOVE (尋情歷險記)

DIRECTED BY: WUNA WU (吳汶鈺)

STARRING: WUNA WU AS HERSELF; HELEN CHEN (陳海倫) AS HERSELF; IRENE CHEN (陳愛娟) AS HERSELF; JOHNSON SHIH (施柏百) AS HIMSELF

RUNNING TIME: 90 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN WITH CHINESE AND ENGLISH SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: SHOWING