



Need Equality? Get 'Milk': Gay Activists Anchor Anti-Prop 8 Message in New Film

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November 25, 2008

Need equality? Get Milk.

That might be one way of summing up how some gays and lesbians regard the new Gus Van Sant film, a biopic named after openly gay San Francisco City Supervisor Harvey Milk, an openly gay politician who was gunned down thirty years ago.

The film revolves in part around a fight to fend off the so-called Briggs Initiative, which would have outlawed gay teachers in the public schools, along with any and all sympathetic or positive expression for gays and lesbians.

How times change... or not: like Proposition 8, the ballot initiative that voters approved earlier this month, the Briggs initiative targeted gays for exclusion from a realm in which heterosexuals are welcome.

In the case of the Briggs Initiative, which went down in defeat three decades ago, the arena was employment equality; in the case of Proposition 8, which was bolstered with an estimated \$40 million in contributions from anti-gay groups and individuals, such as the Mormon faith, which contributed half the money that flooded in to the Yes on 8 campaign, the issue was marriage equality.

In an unprecedented development, the success of Proposition 8 at the ballot box amended the California constitution and revoked an existing right.

Minorities of all sorts are now reportedly uneasy with what that might mean in election cycles to come. Meanwhile, the timing for the Harvey Milk movie--titled simply Milk--seems eerily appropriate.

A Nov. 25 article in the San Francisco Chronicle recalled a snippet from a famed speech delivered by Milk in 1978, the year of his murder.

"Invisible, we remain in limbo--a myth, a person with no parents, no brothers, no sisters, no friends who are straight, no important positions in employment," the openly gay leader proclaimed.

For the masses who took to the streets in spontaneous and, with very rare exceptions, peaceful demonstrations against Proposition 8, those words have taken on meaning that thirty years of progress had blunted--until Nov. 4, the day a fundamental, existing right was stripped from gay and lesbian families through popular vote.

The Chronicle article quoted the president of the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

(GLAAD).

Said Neil Giuliano of the new movie, which stars Sean Penn in the title role, "It's more than a biopic of a gay politician--it's the biopic of a movement coming of age."

Added Giuliano, "The vast majority of Americans under, say, 35 barely know this story."

Giuliano was the mayor of Tempe, Arizona, when he revealed the truth about his sexuality, the article mentioned; Arizona voters, after having rejected in 2006 an anti-gay constitutional amendment that many feared would adversely affect unmarried heterosexual couples, approved a more narrowly worded version of the amendment that targeted only gay families this past Election Day.

Added Giuliani, "I think, especially for young people, they will learn social justice is worth fighting for, even if they don't always win."

The film comes from the same studio that produced 2005's grassroots hit *Brokeback Mountain*. That film did unexpectedly well across the nation, despite predictions that only urban audiences would want to see a film about two Wyoming ranch hands secretly in love with one another, even if the cowboys in question were played by Jack Gyllenhaal and the late Heath Ledger.

But for gay activists looking for a new avenue to express their anguish and alarm over the precedent set by the passage of Proposition 8, *Milk* means more than a chance to see a gay drama get the A-list treatment at the Cineplex.

The San Francisco Chronicle quoted Rea Carey, the director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, who posed the question, "What changes any one of our lives?"

Said Carey, "It can be a media image.

"I certainly hope Milk does that."

Wyoming newspaper the Casper Star Tribune carried a Los Angeles Times story on Nov. 24 in which doubts were raised about the ability of *Milk* to draw the same sort of audience response as *Brokeback Mountain* did three years ago.

Brokeback Mountain, the article noted, was produced for \$14 million, and earned \$178 million world-wide. *Milk* cost the studio \$20 million--bargain basement, by big film standards, a budget made possible by the commitment of the talent who came together and demanded less than their usual fees to help get the movie made--but its appeal may be more limited, especially in those same states where naysayers predicted audiences would snub the movie about gay ranch hands.

Or maybe not: with anti-Proposition 8 rallies having already taken place in 300 American cities, the Zeitgeist may well carry a cultural charge that could make a movie about gay civil rights into a hit, given the real-life debate that rages in the wake of the amendment's high-cost marketing and its subsequent success at the ballot box.

The Los Angeles Times article quoted an instructor at the school of management at Claremont Graduate University.

Sad Peter Sealey, whose previous career was as a marketing executive for a Hollywood studio, "The timing is not bad for this movie."

Added Sealey, "Prop. 8 has become a national phenomenon and a civil rights argument."

That could bode well for *Milk*. Said Sealey, "I think it will cross over" from gay audiences and into

the mainstream.

The San Francisco Chronicle quoted from more cautious sources. Said David Thomson, a film historian, "I don't think movies are made, generally, to change political or social behavior."

Added Thomson, "Gradually, sometimes movies do have an effect... but my instinct is to be very cautious."

Thomson drew a parallel between homophobia and racism, saying, "You can point to certain films that, in a very Hollywood-y way--The Defiant Ones, In the Heat of the Night--take very deliberate, strong attitudes toward racism, but I don't know whether they had very much effect except preaching to the converted."

The Chronicle article addressed a question that has surfaced on gay and lesbian blogs, and other outlets, as to whether Milk might have made a difference in the Election Day outcome, reaching those California voters that the TV ads from the No on 8 campaign--spots that have been criticized as tepid and ineffectual--failed to convince.

Director Gus Van Sant answered the question of why Milk was not released prior to Election Day. As it turns out, it was a marketing choice.

Said Van Sant, who spoke with Filmmaker magazine in an interview, "The end decision was not to have the film speaking directly to the election, because if it was seen to be just about the election, that might take away its chance of having a life after the election."

Another question is how the movie might be affected by a boycott against Cinemark, a moviehouse chain that has booked the film but drawn the ire of gay patrons because its CEO made a donation of just under \$10,000 to the campaign to pass Proposition 8.

Last week Cinemark issued a release that read, in part, "Any individual act or contribution is just that, individual acts of personal expression, and do not reflect company positions or policy."

If Milk is to have any effect at all in the post-Proposition 8 world, some expect that it will be gradual, in that way that increasing visibility (and slowly more positive portrayals) of gay and lesbian characters in films and in television have been gradual.

The Chronicle quoted David Binder, a pollster based in San Francisco, as saying, "I think that pop culture and media has played a much larger role than people give it credit for" when it comes to demystifying gays and lesbians and making them part of the accepted mainstream.

"Before [positive depictions starting in the 1970s], when gays were invisible, there was this fear that gays were sordid or overly sexual, a threat to children--all these terrible stereotypes," Binder continued.

"It was initially through TV and the big screen that those stereotypes were combated."

The marketing strategy for Proposition 8 that is credited with carrying the ballot initiative to victory relied on a claim that school children as young as kindergarten would be required to learn about gay marriage unless marriage parity for gay and lesbian families were made illegal once again.

Opponents of the measure said that this claim was inaccurate and amounted to fear-mongering; after the ballot-box success of the amendment, the pro-Proposition 8 side credited that message with swaying voters and stripping marriage rights from gay and lesbian families.

Times, and anti-gay messages, may not have changed so much after all. But as media sources note, the film has what sounds like a ready-made message for a community reeling after a blow

to their family rights: Penn, in the role of Milk, demands of a crowd, "If this thing passes, fight the hell back!"

Some in the GLBT community are not waiting to see whether Milk brings more sympathizers to GLBT inequality; they are moving ahead with their own messages, and Milk is a handy, high-profile movie to which to link their messages.

As reported in a Nov. 25 article in the International Herald-Tribune the movie-whether the Focus Features marketing department likes it or not--has already been embraced by anti-Proposition 8 protesters, who cannot ignore the resonances between the movie's 1978 battle to defeat an anti-gay initiative and this year's successful voter-approved anti-gay measures, not only in California but in Florida and Arkansas as well.

Patrick Milliner was an example cited by the International Herald-Tribune. Milliner, the article said, looked to the premiere of Milk to kick off his protest, which he calls "Shame on 8."

Advance screenings of Milk have already drawn anti-Proposition 8 crowds in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Anti-Proposition 8 organization jointheimpact.com is encouraging its members to see Milk as a "gay-friendly" theater, the article said, citing jointheimpact.com co-founder Amy Balliett, who was quoted as writing in an email, "Our goal is to make this movie one of the top three-grossing movies of the weekend."

But the attention paid to the movie for its timing worries some. The article quoted Cleve Jones, who had known Harvey Milk. A character based on Jones appears in the film, played by Emile Hirsch; Jones also was a consultant to the film, the article said.

When it comes to attempts at identifying Milk with Proposition 8, Jones expresses doubt, saying, "I don't know that it would be appropriate."

The article said that Jones worried about an unseemly exploitation of the life, and untimely death, of Harvey Milk.

But another of Milk's acquaintances, Daniel Nicoletta, did not seem to think that drawing parallels between anti-gay initiatives of three decades ago with ballot initiatives targeting gay families today would dishonor the memory of Harvey Milk.

The article quoted Nicoletta as saying that the anti-Proposition 8 movement "need[s] that excitement" that the film is sure to generate.