

Task Force commentary: A Queerer than Queer Oscar Night

By Sue Hyde, Director of Creating Change, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

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The Academy Awards rank as one of my favorite spectacles of excess and celebration. As a registered homo, I love the outfits on the red carpet, the procession of celebrity and the feeling of anticipation that comes over me as I review the films and the performances of Hollywood's past year.

I always look for the gender-bending and rebellious sartorial spins. This time, I reveled the very butch top flair of Tilda Swinton. Men? Mickey Rourke looked very gay in his white suit, no tie and sunglasses. I'm still waiting for a leading man in a gown or a leading woman in a tux, but I wasn't disappointed in the way that queer nation stood front and center at the event.

Beyond fashion, this year's Oscar presentations hit new thresholds of significance for me and for every queer in America. Bookended by an emotional message of support and love to LGBT youth and a firm and unwavering commitment to equality for all, Dustin Lance Black and Sean Penn won my heart forever. Okay, I've always loved Sean Penn, for his brilliant acting as well as his obstinate refusal to kowtow to the industry studio establishment and his stubborn independence in choices of roles and films. Hollywood's bad boy more than once refused to attend the Academy Awards, not because he was overlooked or ignored, but because he didn't see the spectacle of excess as necessary to his own development in his loved craft. I'm so glad that Sean Penn didn't skip the Oscars this time out.

Dustin, I loved your message of hope and uplift for our young people. Just like Harvey Milk, who spoke directly to a young person in Altoona on the night he won a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Dustin Lance Black took his moment in the bright light of fame and honor to reach far beyond the footlights and to embrace the kids in Altoona, Peoria and Hattiesburg.

With grace and generosity and love pouring from every aspect of his person, Black spoke the most simple blessing: "... he'd want me to say to all of the gay and lesbian kids out there tonight who have been told that they are less than by their churches, by the government or by their families, that you are beautiful, wonderful creatures of value and that no matter what anyone tells you, God does love you and that very soon, I promise you, you will have equal rights federally, across this great nation of ours."

As he spoke, I remembered how isolated I felt as a young dyke in a backwater rural town in Illinois and I could feel the kiss on my young cheek delivered with great care by another young person who lived through his own crucible of self-doubt, fear and shame and emerged wholly dignified.

Mr. Penn, speaking of dignified, wrapped up the night with a full-throated affirmation of equality for all and a call to action. At. The. Oscars. Penn noted the toxic presence of the Phelps clan, hoisting messages of virulent hostility and animus. Thank you, Fred, for delivering another

profound teaching moment to our brothers and sisters. Penn went on: "... I think that it is a good time for those who voted for the ban against gay marriage to sit and reflect, and anticipate their great shame, and the shame in their grandchildren's eyes if they continue that way of support. We've got to have equal rights for everyone."

As if Sean Penn's embrace of my family and my community wasn't enough, he wrapped Mickey Rourke in a verbal bear hug. What a man, what a dude, what a brother is Sean Penn.

So, yeah. I watched. I wept. I cheered. It was better than Cats.

Dustin Lance Black, Bruce Cohen, Dan Jinks and Gus Van Sant, the creative team behind Milk, a feature film about the life of Harvey Milk, were honored with the 2008 National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Leadership Award.

Learn more about the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, visit www.theTaskForce.org.