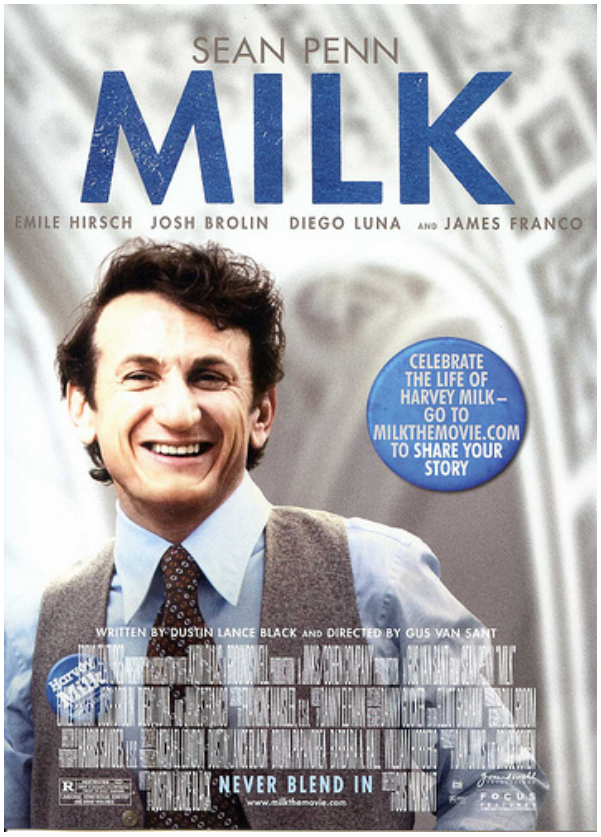
Sean Penn may be one of the most controversial actors in Hollywood today, but there is absolutely no denying the man's talent. It should therefore surprise no one that Penn once again gives a performance worthy of his Oscar nomination in Gus Van Zant's biographical film "Milk", chronicling eight years of the life of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man elected for public office as a San Francisco city Supervisor in 1977. In addition to Penn's fifth Best Actor Oscar nomination, "Milk" is up for Best Picture this Sunday, and Mitch reviews the film for our readers.



Sean Penn may be one of the most controversial actors in Hollywood today, but there is absolutely no denying the man's talent. He is one of those rare actors who never can be pegged with a "type" of role. He completely becomes the character in every film he is in, no matter if he is playing a jazz guitarist, a convicted killer awaiting execution, a grieving father who is also a mob boss, or even just a high school stoner always on the lookout for a good wave or a good buzz.

It should therefore surprise no one that Penn once again gives a performance worthy of his Oscar nomination in Gus Van Zant's biographical film "Milk", chronicling eight years of the life of Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man elected for public office as a San Francisco city Supervisor in 1977. One year later, he was gunned down along with Mayor George Moscone by a fellow

Supervisor, Dan White. Van Zant does not attempt to use the murder as suspense or a surprise, as he starts the film out with the actual footage of then Supervisor Dianne Feinstein announcing the murders to the press. In taking this approach, Van Zant puts the focus on Milk's life and career, not on his death. Indeed, one of the better things about the film is that it doesn't fall into the trap of so many biopics by being too maudlin and forebrooding. That Milk died was a shame, but what was much more important was what he did while he was alive.

That Harvey Milk became such a pioneer was a bit of surprise in itself. The movie picks up in 1970 with Harvey living a closeted life in New York, hours from his 40th birthday, picking up a young man in the subway, Scott Smith (brilliantly played by James Franco). This event that turned into a relationship was a wakeup call for Harvey, who was working as an insurance salesman, and he and Scott decided to leave New York, choosing to move to San Francisco due to the growing gay population that was centered there. They set up a camera shop in the area known as "The Castro", a once thriving Irish-Catholic neighborhood that had fallen on hard times, but was being revitalized by the surging gay community.

Hostility from numerous businesses towards gays started Harvey down the path of activism. Using his Castro Camera store as a base of operations, he soon attracted a strong circle of friends who would meet there to work on their plans for acceptance. Milk was a natural, having the charisma and tireless energy needed to schmooze, plead, or cajole others into building a strong coalition. He even managed to garner support from the Teamsters Union when they were pushing for a boycott of Coors Beer. Harvey was able to bring the gay community strongly into the fight, which ended up being successful. In return, the Union instituted policies that allowed for the hiring of gay drivers.

With that taste of success, Harvey decided to venture into politics. But these efforts were not immediately successful. Harvey was still "a

middle-aged hippie", wearing his hair in a long ponytail with a scraggly beard, while wearing grungy jeans and sandals. And despite his natural political skills, he had a stubborn streak, which alienated him from some in the gay community, including David Goldstein, publisher of the influential magazine "The Advocate". He would always come close to winning, but would end up just falling short.

However, after three losses, his luck changed as the election rules were modified. Previously, all of the supervisors were chosen at-large, but in 1977, the people were allowed to select supervisors from their neighborhoods, which made Harvey a lock to win due to his standing in The Castro.

As often happens with these biographical films, the movie does seem to take a very long time to get anywhere; and then once it does, it takes off at a near breakneck pace. Milk's election doesn't happen until almost two-thirds through the movie, and then it quickly goes into his most important fight; the campaign to defeat Senator John Brigg's Proposition 6. Fueled by Anita Bryant's high profile attacks on gays as deviant sinners, Brigg's proposal would have made it illegal for any homosexual to have a job as a teacher, as well as calling for the firing of any teacher who supported gay rights. Van Zant wisely does not use an actress to play the role of Bryant, instead utilizing vintage footage of her news conferences and television appearances. This is so much more effective, as the audience cannot look at Bryant and see an actress portraying a character, which could lead one into feeling that the performance was just designed to distort the actual person. Instead, we hear Bryant's actual words of bigotry spewing out, disgusting coated in dismissive "we don't hate the sinners, just the sin" rationalizations as she blithely passes her judgments of how they are all going to Hell.

Penn gives one of the best performances of his career as he shows us someone who did heroic things, but was not a standard Hero. Milk had plenty of faults to go along with his multitude of positives. His obsession with politics would eventually cost him his relationship with Scott Smith, and he would then bounce to a series of bad choices with partners, most vividly exhibited with Jack Lira, played by Diego Luna. It was frustrating to watch such an intelligent man being played for a fool by a seriously damaged person, as you never truly understand what it was that he saw in him. But in looking through our own lives, I'm sure most of us can find examples of similar behavior from people we all know personally, be they gay or straight.

The supporting actors are all top-notch as well. James Brolin shines in an understated role as Dan White. You see the man's frustrations build as he sees Milk's star rise while his seems to be flat-lining. It is always too easy to show these people as just mindless haters, but Brolin does not fall into that trap. Unfortunately though, I feel that Van Zant, as an openly gay man, allowed his own prejudices to influence how White was portrayed, as he chose to suggest that White was actually a repressed homosexual masquerading as a married family man. I feel that this is a plot device that is getting close to becoming a cliché due to its overuse, and it does not benefit the film.

This does not in any way detract from Brolin's performance, however, and he is well deserving of the Oscar nomination he received for Best Supporting Actor. Also providing strong performances were James Franco and Emile Hirsh as Cleve Jones, a young drifter who Harvey befriends, and then molds into his perfect protégé.

In all, the film had many of the problems seen with this type of linear

telling of someone's life, but the high points more than made up for it being a bit long-winded. Milk is a sobering look back at a time that was really not that long ago, capturing the look and feel of the late 70s with amazing clarity. I'm not entirely certain that it deserves it nomination for Best Picture, but it is definitely in my Top 10 list for 2008.

My Rating - Brian Sipe (3 ½ Footballs)