

FROM HOPE TO ETERNITY: A REVIEW OF *MILK* - A FILM BY GUS VAN SANT

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Decades before Barack Obama talked about “the audacity of hope,” or Bill Clinton proclaimed he never forgot about “a town called hope,” Harvey Milk declared, “You have to give them hope, hope for a better world, hope for a better tomorrow, hope for a better place to come to if the pressures at home are too great,” (Shilts, 1982, 363). In so doing, he served as a protagonist in one of the great political dramas of U.S. social and political history. One of the first gay politicians to be elected to public office, Milk’s work straddled the line between political campaign and social movement. To balance these competing impulses, Milk shared the stage with a generation of organizers, tapping into their wanderlust for a better world. As those who felt the yearning for a new kind of political culture during the recent presidential campaign can testify, such politics can be profoundly enticing, especially when social actors can find a place for their own participation in such a story.

Certainly Sean Penn, who played the title role in Gus Van Sant’s compelling biopic, was able to do so. While Penn is more physically attractive than Milk, few who have followed Penn’s career doubted he could generate the pathos to reproduce Milk’s story. What surprised me was his capacity for social eros. With the real Cleve Jones standing right behind him, joy and justice pulse through Penn’s rendition of Milk’s “This is What America Is” speech. Faced with the first incarnations of the ascendant and intolerant Christian Right, which would dominate the Reagan years, Milk

defiantly reminded his opponents that the “pursuit of happiness” is a core part of U.S. social and political life.

On the statue of liberty it says: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free...” In the Declaration of Independence, it is written: “All men are created equal and they are endowed with certain inalienable rights...”

For Mr. Briggs and Mrs. Bryant and Mr. Starr, and all the bigots out there, that’s what American is. No matter how hard you try you cannot erase those words from the Declaration of Independence. No matter how hard you try, you cannot chip those words off the statue of liberty (Shilts, 1982, 371).

The film captures the giddiness of the crowd in hearing these words. Part of the vitality of the speech, of course, was that Milk was not only offering a transformational narrative, he was asking those who heard his words to participate in a culture changing narrative. This was the story of a country and a movement which many wanted to be a part of. As he repeated over and over again, the story was not about Harvey Milk: it was about a movement of many, many leaders. As a movement actor rather than a mere politico, Milk was able to reconcile his previous two losses in runs for public office before his successful 1977 run. For Milk, social change work was about more than scoring a goal or winning an election, it was about shifting social and cultural mores. This was Milk’s strategy

to beat back the 1978 California ballot Proposition 6—which would ban gays from teaching in public schools—better known as the Briggs Initiative. Rather than cower, apologize for queer sexuality, or suggest queers were just like “hets,” Milk challenged those who blamed gays for violence against children to look at themselves, their churches, and larger patterns of socially accepted structural violence. Rather than buck to the advice of policy professionals to tone down the rhetoric and back away from the controversial issue of gays and children, Milk directly challenged the phobias propelling this stigma, linking this hatred within a long line of U.S. assaults on otherness, from the Salem Witch Trials to the McCarthy hearings. And of course, Proposition 6 failed.

Contrast the recent unsuccessful campaign against prop 8 to repeal gay marriage with the successful campaign against the Briggs Initiative and a number of points become clear. The first was that queers could be successful by defiantly challenging forms of bigotry. This could be far more successful than arguing from the vantage point of the status quo. The second lesson was that, unlike the campaign against Prop 8, the campaign against Prop 6 was based on a bottom up model, which called for mass participation of the grassroots early and often, rather than adherence to established political leadership (also see Hollibaugh, 1979/2000; Jones, 2000; Shilts, 1982, Shepard, 1997). The point of considering such history is that it often tells us as much about the present as it does about the past.

The film captures Milk recruiting young organizers, such as lesbian Anne Kronenberg, who coordinated the 1977 campaign, and Cleve Jones, who at the time was a 23 year old street vagabond. Jones and Kronenberg would become two of the most effective street organizers in the campaign. In watching the film, one is able to observe a strengths-based approach to accessing the rich potential of those around him. Social workers and community organizers who hope to tap the assets of those around them could do well to learn from such an example. Building on these lessons, Jones, like many in the campaign,

would go on to take a leading role in organizing, documenting, engaging in direct action, building organizations, and providing services for those coping with the AIDS carnage which would start to strangle the city only months after Milk’s assassination. To do so, Jones literally built a tapestry of memories of those who were lost. In 1987, he helped create one of the largest pieces of folk art in the world with the “Names Quilt” (see Jones, 2000, Shepard 1997). Part of what helps the film is Van Sant’s obvious affiliation for those around Milk. Cleve Jones, who consulted on the movie, first told me about Van Sant’s project in an interview I conducted with him in 1995.

Gus Van Sant is certainly not the first drawn to the grand narrative of Milk’s life and the era it helped represent. Randy Shilt’s 1982 work is the best extant biography of Milk’s life and times. From 1993 – 1995, I conducted oral history/life review interviews with people with HIV/AIDS in San Francisco. Years before effective treatment options were available to those with the virus, I was struck by how many of those I interviewed looked back at the Milk era as perhaps the most important event of their lives. Their connection to this story helped them hold onto meaning, no matter how tenuous. Many interviewees did not even make it to the summer of 1996, when effective HIV treatment became a reality. This—the AIDS onslaught—is the ascending shadow of the Milk era. Back in 1995, Cleve Jones recalled sitting on a Ferris wheel with Ann Kronenberg in 1980, only months after Harvey was lost and the riots which followed. The two looked back in awe at what they had been through and wondered what else could happen to him. It would not be long before they would find out. Within a few months, in 1981, they both started reading about a mysterious cancer afflicting homosexuals in San Francisco, L.A., and New York.

If I have one criticism, it is that the film fails to grasp the anger or the riots which followed the manslaughter charge against Dan White, who shot Milk and Mayor Moscone in cold blood at San Francisco City Hall. While 30,000 supporters held a candlelight vigil for Milk and Moscone after their assassinations,

supporters were disgusted to hear the news that their murderer would only face a short jail sentence. Many expressed their anger with rage: burning police cars and setting fire to city hall in an evening known as the White Night Riots. In 1995, I had the pleasure of interviewing Hank Wilson, one those who participated in the riots. Wilson actually helped light the matches and also coordinated throwing them into the police cars. A long time gay liberationist, Hank Wilson was one of the most thoughtful activists anyone could ever meet. In the years after the riots, Wilson would take a lead in organizing against the AIDS onslaught. While others from this cohort ran for office and got involved with politics, Wilson would spend much of the next 15 years educating and providing housing and harm reduction services for social outsiders afflicted with the disease; all the while supporting the work of ACT UP. Outside of activism, Wilson managed the Ambassador Hotel, an SRO hotel in San Francisco's Tenderloin. His life very much involved the interplay between radical service provision and social movement. He died just weeks before *Milk* was released nationally (Highleyman, 2008).

In many ways, the enduring legacy of the Milk era is the means with which those involved tapped into the voices and passions of countless friends, lovers, neighbors, and quiet heroes, who helped transform a small neighborhood and its quirky politics, and turn it into a culture changing story full of rich, quirky, compelling heroes. I have long believed the lesson of San Francisco's Gay Liberation years was that gay rights became human rights, a story for everyone who saw a hero and friend in one of the pieces in Cleve Jones' quilt. *Milk* helped capture much of this culture changing ethos.

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