

# artscreen



**HE CAME FROM WOODMERE TO CHANGE THE WORLD** A triumphant Harvey Milk leads marchers in the 1978 Gay Freedom Day Parade in San Francisco. *Below*, Sean Penn as Milk in the same scene

## The Mayor of Castro Street rides again

Sean Penn plays Harvey Milk in a new film about the murdered San Francisco politician. Here the people whose lives Milk changed talk to *Tim Teeman* about the film, and the man who inspired it



Cleve Jones got an e-mail recently from a Mormon father of six who had been to see the movie *Milk*. The man had voted “yes” on Proposition 8, a move to ban gay marriage in California. Gus Van Sant’s movie had changed his mind. The man told Jones — a longtime activist and adviser on the movie — that he was sorry and that he would do whatever he could to make up for supporting the discriminatory legislation.

Were he still alive, Harvey Milk would have been at the forefront of fighting it too. He was the first openly gay elected public official in California, winning a seat on the Board of Supervisors in San Francisco (after three failed attempts to gain political office) in 1977. He was the self-declared “Mayor of Castro Street”, the city’s gay hub, with a signature rallying cry: “You’ve got to give them hope.” *Milk* is an astonishing, even landmark film, not for its sexual content but for its politics, plunging the viewer

into the eddying waters of Seventies gay liberation. Sean Penn absolutely inhabits Milk’s charismatic personality.

Like so many gay men, Milk came to San Francisco in the early Seventies. He opened a camera store in the Castro with his lover Scott Smith, mobilising the gay community against police hostility and the bigotry of shopkeepers. He was a hippy, then cut off his ponytail and started playing politics. In office, he lobbied the Mayor, George Moscone, to sign a gay rights ordinance. He fought the anti-gay campaigns of Anita Bryant and (successfully) Senator John Briggs’s attempt to ban gay teachers from working in California.

Milk was assassinated, along with Moscone, by Dan White, a fellow city supervisor, in 1978. White received a seven-year sentence for manslaughter, which led to rioting. Today, there’s a bust of Milk in City Hall, a memorial plaza in the Castro, a display of his life in San Francisco’s Public Library. There are even schools named after him. But behind the crusading image, his friends here remember his wit, passion, flirtatiousness and love of custard pies. ▶

**Anne Kronenberg**

Milk's campaign co-ordinator for his successful bid to become a city supervisor. Alison Pill plays her in the film.



The film really captures the truth of the time. They re-created Castro Camera in the old shop and it was exactly how it used to look, it was like going back 30 years and seeing our "office". The whole experience was cathartic. Losing Harvey the way we did, it's hard to remember the good times when things end in such a tragedy.

I met Harvey when I was 22 in 1977. I was a lesbian, the only woman surrounded by a team of gay men who were very suspicious of me. A friend of mine suggested to Harvey that he employ me. I was very political but working at a wholesale seafood company, typing invoices and making coffee. I hated it. I didn't know Harvey but he was a hero of mine. He was out and open, vocal and passionate. I couldn't believe it when he called me. He said: "You'll be my campaign co-ordinator, not manager, because no one manages me. I'll teach you everything you need to know and I have nothing to pay you." I said: "Great, I'll quit my job."

We were family. We had such a blast. We worked 14 or 16 hours a day, then party. Drinking, drugs — we did it all. It was wild, fun times. One of his lines was: "Wanna buy me a drink?" He loved to play practical jokes, like throw custard pies in people's faces on their birthday.

The campaign was intense. We walked every precinct three times. He was a smiler, electric. You could not meet him without feeling drawn to him. He had this energy about him. He was not a saint. He had a bad temper. When we met he said: "I'll yell, you'll have to yell back at me. If you don't yell back you're not going to make it." He'd leave little notes on my desk or call me at night, two-minute conversations that really said, "Anne I love you" without actually saying that. When he was elected, he pulled me up onstage and said: "This is my new administrative assistant,

I have her to thank for my campaign." I remember thinking, "Oh my God, I'm going to City Hall."

Josh Brolin is amazing as Dan White. Dan was not a monster, he was tormented. Josh shows that he was crazy rather than bad. Harvey thought White was in the closet; that he was so afraid of being outed he went on the offensive himself. When Harvey told me he had made tapes to be played in the event of his death I told him I thought it was morbid. He was 48 when he died. I was 22 and at an age where you don't have that sense of how fragile life can be.

On our bulletin board Harvey always put up a letter from a bigot which we called the "letter of the week". "Let them see," Harvey would say. He knew there were homophobic people out there who would want to take his life. But he never lived his life in fear. Scott Smith (who had Aids and died of pneumonia in 1996) was Harvey's love, I'm sure. Scott suffered a lot with all the politics. Harvey was not necessarily the most sensitive person in the world and Scott felt he was No 2. Every day Scott would bitch about Harvey and Harvey would bitch about Scott. Then he went out with Jack [Lira] and Jack was a raving alcoholic. Harvey liked to rescue people. Jack committed suicide at the apartment and Harvey found him. It was devastating but he carried on working.

When Harvey liked someone he courted them, but he could only pursue it for so long because politics were so important. But sex was important to him too. He'd report if he'd got lucky the night before. Harvey didn't drink but he would cruise bars and pick up young men. When he died he was seeing this very smart guy, Doug, who died of Aids in the late Eighties. He was such a nice man, and I thought, "This will be the one". The day Harvey was murdered I had flown to Seattle to see my family. My father told me when I landed. My mind couldn't grasp it. They didn't want me to go back. There were all kinds of crazy theories. Was the killer still out there? I got on the next flight and went straight to City Hall and saw what seemed like a sea of candles from the procession along Market Street that seemed to stretch forever.

I was so sad and angry. I just felt my life had been ripped from me. Harvey was a friend, mentor and father figure. I had a



JEAN DIERCKES CARLISLE

really tough time after Harvey died. I moved to Washington to get away from San Francisco and explore who I was. I ended up getting married to a man I have been with for 23 years. At one premiere of *Milk* a reporter asked my husband: "Did you know Anne was a lesbian?" My husband replied, "Well, that what was so appealing about her." My kids have been bought up to be open and accepting. Harvey was always about celebrating who you were.

He would have loved all this movie stuff. He'd be on the red carpet prancing and bowing and eating it up. My favourite memory is of starting every day with a coffee with him. He'd call me his "little dyke-ette" and talk about all the dramas in my love life. Was he fulfilled? That's a hard question. Harvey always wanted more. He was a visionary. The film helps to establish his legacy. I hope it helps the movement.

**Cleve Jones**

Met Milk as a young man and was his political aide. He went on to create the Aids Memorial Quilt. Emile Hirsch plays him in the film.



I arrived in San Francisco aged 17 and unemployed. I was a street kid and got by through hustling and begging. Most nights I didn't eat. I slept in doorways. My parents weren't bad people — we get on great — but when I came out they didn't respond so well. I panicked, and when you were gay, 17 and in Phoenix, Arizona, in the early Seventies... there weren't a whole lot of places to go so I came to San Francisco.

I was political long before I met Harvey. That was in early 1975 just as I was preparing to go travelling in Europe. Harvey liked to combine cruising and campaigning. I wouldn't like to say which was his priority, but I was quite hot for about six weeks in the mid-Seventies. When I came back from Europe in 1977 I didn't think he could win a seat as a supervisor. I was a radical.



MOVIESTORE

**REEL TO REAL**  
Clockwise from above: James Franco as Scott Smith and Sean Penn as his lover and business partner Harvey Milk in *Milk*; Dan Nicoletta, Milk and Dean Anthony Kelly — the son of the woman who took the photograph — clowning around at Castro Camera in 1975; Milk's killer, Dan White

**Milk's last words**

"I could be assassinated at any moment..." Listen to the Harvey Milk tapes and read the archive *Times* report of his killing, at [timesonline.co.uk/film](http://timesonline.co.uk/film)

He was a shopkeeper. He had been a Republican. He wasn't progressive enough for me. But he reached across boundaries.

Older gay men clothed, fed and sheltered a lot of the street kids. Harvey encouraged us to go back to college. I studied film. I remember showing my first film at the Castro Cinema and Harvey coming and saying: "Cleve, you have no talent." I was crushed. This was just before he ran for supervisor for that final time, and to soften the blow he said: "I'm going to get elected this time. Change your major to political science and come and work for me as an intern to get some college credits." I'm glad I did or today I could be a bitter, unsuccessful film-maker. The speech he gives me in the film about falling in love at some point in my life was true. He was very sweet and he loved young people: gay, straight, boys and girls. He had the knack of making you feel better about yourself. He was a mentor, too, he identified strength and potential. Meeting him was the single most important thing that happened in my life. The Aids Memorial quilt [which Jones conceived in 1985] would never have happened without Harvey.

I was in the Castro when I heard that the mayor had been shot. At City Hall I found Harvey's body in Dan White's office. I remember coming around the corner and seeing a pair of dress shoes poking out from around the door: they were Harvey's. A cop was turning his body over and I saw

what was left of his face. Oh God, it was horrible. I was in shock for several months.

It never crossed my mind that Dan would do something like that. He was very childish and was in way over his head at City Hall. The political system baffled him. Harvey always believed he would be killed. I'd joke with him, tell him: "Get over it. You are not that important. You're not Dr King, Malcolm X, you're not a big enough threat." I always thought it was the police or CIA he was referring to. If he had stayed alive, I think he would have become a mayor. I hope the film brings his legacy alive.

**Dan Nicoletta**

Photographer. Lucas Grabeel plays him in the film.



I met him in August 1974. I had taken some film in for processing. Both he and Scott were remarkably friendly. I didn't realise they were checking me out. We became friends and I worked as an assistant there. Every other sentence was sexual innuendo. The seat behind the counter ensured your eye was level with the customer's crotch.

There was a real sense of ferment in the Castro, of history unfolding. Harvey and I talked about the arts, which he loved. He loved being photographed and I took pictures of him for his campaign, though I remember the best one was rejected, because it was felt he couldn't be seen with his tie flapping in the wind. Harvey felt passionately that you should love whom you choose and took great umbrage that being gay should put your own safety at risk. He would tell me about the threatening letters and say I could choose to come to work or not. He would joke, "This one will kill me", "That one's a dangerous one".

I remember being in City Hall and Dan White walking by and Harvey saying: "That's a dangerous guy". There isn't a day that goes by that I don't imagine what his advice might be. I still haven't properly mourned him. Watching a bit of the film left me devastated for three days.

**Tom Ammiano**

Gay San Francisco politician. Member of the California State Assembly, and until last year a city supervisor in San Francisco. He plays himself in the film.

I first saw Harvey Milk one night in the early Seventies. At that time, the police got a kick out of intimidating the queens coming out of the bars. There was a black men's bar and that was a double whammy for the police. They'd shake the patrons down. Someone had a joint in their pocket! Oh, the horrors! There was Harvey on the corner, asking the police why they were there. I thought, "I like this guy".

He became a force on Castro. He compiled a list of shops that were homophobic. I remember one liquor store guy who would not serve you, but after that list came out he couldn't do enough. He'd take your bag to the car! I was a teacher, and approached Harvey about the issue. I remember him coming to one meeting, expressing his strong support and taking home a handsome young man. Harvey had a strong libido. I was a radical gay liber-

**First night**

La Bayadère: luminous showcase for the corps de ballet — page 16



“Dan White was not a monster, he was tormented. Harvey thought White was in the closet, afraid of being outed”

ationist. I asked him once why he was running for office. "Nothing happens there," I said. He said there was a place for both activism and conventional politics. I sniffed I never would become a politician... Being district supervisor paid s\*\*\*. He couldn't afford the rent and had to close the shop. I saw him leaning against a car and called out that I was sorry. "What can you do?" he said and shrugged. A few days later he was dead. When I heard, I had a sickening realisation, like a lot of gay people. Back then you felt you could be out but you could get harmed. The candlelight march converged at 18th Street and Castro, and what was surprising wasn't how long it was but how wide. Every type of person was there. There are a lot of out people in politics now, but Harvey is still an inspiration. He was a maverick, but he also built alliances. Sean Penn captures his sweetness. When people called the Castro a gay ghetto he would always say it was a neighbourhood.

**Ernie and Martha Asten**

Owners of Cliff's Variety store, 479 Castro Street

Martha: I first saw Harvey campaigning on the street when he ran for supervisor in the mid-Seventies. He was down on 18th Street standing on a park bench wearing a ponytail, a politician I could believe in

because he didn't sound like a politician. He was talking about civil rights, how he was there for people. It just talked to me.

Ernie: He had a wicked sense of humour that doesn't come across in the movie. If you close your eyes you could just about hear him, but he was taller than Sean Penn.

Martha: There was a genuine warmth about Harvey. Sean didn't have that for me, but he captures what Harvey was all about: how he got people motivated.

Ernie: And the chair... he had a barber's chair in the camera shop where you would sit and talk to him.

Martha: I remember Jack coming in. Jack was crazy. You'd think, "What does Harvey see in him?" He must have been a good lay, that's all I can think. He would come to the store and charge something to Harvey's account and sign the bill "Mrs Harvey Milk".

Ernie: Harvey was a human being. We all have foibles. Jack filled some need.

Martha: Harvey needed love. I remember getting up the morning that he was killed and thinking that now the dust had settled after the election, we should have Harvey over for dinner. I heard he had died on the car radio and nearly crashed.

Ernie: I ran up to Castro Camera. Scott said: "Harvey's been killed". I helped him to close the shop. He was beside himself.

Martha: We closed early that night. A lot of people bought candles for the march. Ernie and I were invited to go on the boat to scatter Harvey's ashes.

Ernie: The shoe-box they were in was wrapped up in Doonesbury cartoons, one of his favourite comic strips. That was very Harvey: he used humour to undercut seriousness. He didn't have much truck with formality. You can see his legacy outside. People come from all over the world to the Castro to be out. In the Seventies there was a slight air of perpetual adolescence and ongoing party to the atmosphere. Harvey gave that some direction and purpose.

**Nick Romero**

Owner, Given, 575 Castro Street

This shop is on the site of the original Castro Camera, and was transformed back into it for the movie. They had to cover the mural I commissioned from John Baden, which shows a bullet heading towards a print of Harvey's head. It's provocative and very striking and includes his famous quote: "If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door." It's the contrast of something ugly leading to something beautiful.

I feel Harvey's spirit — doors sometimes open and close — but it's never scary. As an out gay businessman in his thirties I owe it to Harvey's legacy to do something. I wouldn't have any of the advantages I enjoy now if I was living in the early Seventies. I owe it to the movement.

**Milk is released on January 23. The Castro features in the Travel section of this Saturday's Times**

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