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MOVIES

PLAY IT AGAIN, HARVEY

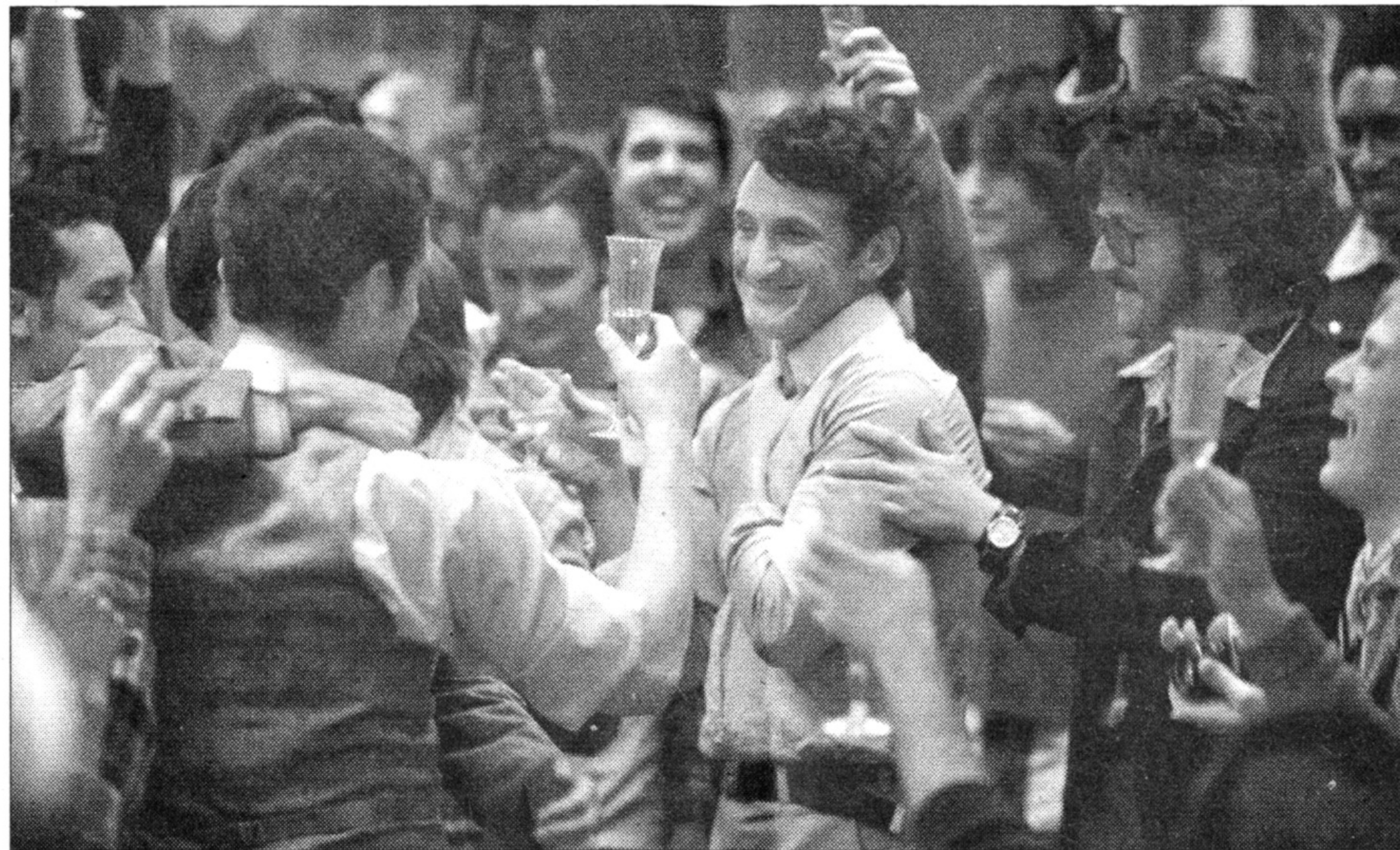
Milk re-creates a magical era of liberation in San Francisco. *Australia* makes an entire continent look foolish.

By Kelly Vance

Sean Penn isn't quite the public speaker that Harvey Milk was, but that's about the only shortcoming in his knockout performance as *Milk*. He still manages to get a certain lascivious twinkle in his eye as he scatters double-entendres on the assembled multitudes. Penn and director Gus Van Sant opted to have the actor go deep into character as the legendarily charismatic San Francisco gay rights martyr — wavy hair, lop-sided grin, polyester suit, and all. The strategy succeeds, and so does the film.

Milk is a bracingly passionate look back at the man who helped define a specific era of the late 1970s in the Bay Area, when the aspirations and fears of gays, lesbians, and a rainbow coalition of working people were crystallized in the inclusive political message of a community organizer who ran a camera shop in SF's Castro district. The message was about hope combined with a sense of humor, and *Milk* captures it with maximum local flavor.

For most audiences, especially younger ones who somehow missed the history, the film's vivid evocation of the awakening of multiculturalism will be enough. It's told as a flashback from the day in 1978 when SF city supervisor Milk, along with liberal mayor George Moscone, was assassinated by reactionary former supervisor Dan White. From that base line, we're plunged headlong into the full '70s: the Stonewall riots, homosexual hippies furtively kissing in the subway, nascent gay liberation, and the transformation of the Castro from a square Irish-American neighborhood into the world's gay mecca. The latter was greatly helped along by transplanted New Yorker Milk and his friends, who are shown tirelessly building their con-



Sean Penn's performance in *Milk* is one of the best of his career.

stituency, first to oppose discrimination and then to tackle the really important issues — like cleaning up the city's dog shit.

Harvey Milk's genius was in relating to everybody, not just gays and lesbians, around basic, urban quality-of-life issues, but with an edge. Union officials, in particular, admired the way Milk and fellow activists engineered the successful Bay Area boycott of Coors beer, something they had not been able to do. For them, the issue was Coors' anti-unionism; for gay organizers, it was the Coors family's homophobia. Milk showed how the two groups could rally around commonalities. That free-form coalition building became his ticket to power. Van Sant wisely uses Rob Epstein's brilliant 1984 documentary, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, as a template.

Penn's performance is one of the smartest in his ambitious, risk-taking career. He captures the mercurial Milk — warm and cuddly one moment, coolly vindictive the next — as a creature of his times, a quick-thinking, fast-talking guy with a talent for disarming almost anyone. His inner circle is portrayed by a roster of Hollywood pinup boys: James Franco as lover Scott Smith; Diego Luna as the other, crazier lover, Jack Lira; and Emile Hirsch as Milk political aide Cleve Jones. Van Sant seeds the movie with other interesting casting choices, like art-

ist Jeff Koons as pol Art Agnos, Howard Rosenman as gay financial angel David Goodstein; and Victor Garber, a convincing Moscone look-alike. Aside from Penn's landmark title role, the major acting prize goes to Josh Brolin as Dan White, the odd man out. What a year it's been for Brolin, from George W. Bush to Dan White in the space of a few months.

Throughout, Van Sant pays loving attention to the cultural details of the time. After all, they're more or less the details of Van Sant's career, as well. From the white-brown male romance *Mala Noche* in 1985, through *Drugstore Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho*, to the schoolboy legends of *Elephant*, *Last Days*, and *Paranoid Park*, filmmaker Van Sant has charted a succinct but deliberately homoerotic course through a neglected subtext of the American experience. He admires troublemakers. Harvey Milk fits the mold perfectly, even though *Milk* uncharacteristically tackles (you'll excuse the expression) a

straight historical subject. Milk became a legend even before his untimely death — that's undoubtedly what appealed to Van Sant. He, Penn, Brolin, and company wallop Dustin Lance Black's carefully respectful screenplay about an inspirational civil rights leader into another realm entirely. And what a perfect image for Milk's last sight: the San Francisco Civic

Milk

Directed by Gus Van Sant. Opens Wednesday, November 26.

Australia

Directed by Baz Luhrmann. Opens Wednesday, November 26.

Opera House and a banner for *Tosca*. But the ongoing struggle stubbornly shines through — just as Milk and his followers battled Anita Bryant and her homophobes with their hateful Proposition 6, more or less the same thinking is behind the current Proposition 8. The more things change ...

While we're on the subject of the epic transformation of a wild, untamed land into a bastion of personal freedom and tolerance, let's direct our gaze to *Australia*, filmmaker Baz (Romeo + Juliet, Moulin Rouge) Luhrmann's klutzy, corny valentine to his homeland. It took Harvey Milk to trigger change in San Francisco. In the dusty, violent Northern Territory of Australia in the early days of World War II, it takes Nicole Kidman.

Kidman stars as Lady Sarah Ashley, snooty-but-honest English landlady of Faraway Downs, an outback cattle station in the process of being run into the ground by its conniving, murdering foreman, Neil Fletcher (David Wenham), who abuses the local aboriginals into the bargain. Lady Sarah arrives from Blighty to discover her husband, the landlord, has been mysteriously murdered, and the cattle operation about to be sold at a bargain price to King Carney, the nearby unscrupulous beef baron (Bryan Brown). All that stands in the way of that happening is plucky Lady Sarah, and all that stands in her way is the lack of a stud, specifically her handsome erstwhile hired hand, Drover (Hugh Jackman), a rough and rowdy type who delights in flexing his muscles in front of the campfire with his shirt off. In turn, the only thing preventing them from coupling are an arduous cattle drive across thousands of miles of desert, the ruthless skullduggery of Carney and Fletcher, the general racism of the white inhabitants of Oz, and the empire of Japan, readying an invasion at the port of Darwin. These things are easily brushed aside.

Lotsa CGI. In fact, too much — kangaroos, planes, panoramic vistas, etc. — we don't even trust the establishing shots. But the story of the half-caste "creamy" kid, Nullah (Brandon Waters), is almost worth the ticket price, especially alongside that of his spirit-channeling grandfather, King George, played by the great Australian actor David Gulpilil, who lent his talents to two far better tales of the Land Down Undah — *Walkabout* and *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Throw out the beefcake, the Stilton cheese, and the sub-*Dynasty* empire-building bushwah, and *Australia* might have boomeranged back to basics. As it is, it's permanently Murdoch-ed.

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