Art in action

Lansing native gets chance to mix business with activism in 'Milk'

by Eric Gallippo

As a student at Michigan State University, Lansing native Charley Beal remembers first hearing about Harvey Milk not because of the gay rights matters he was fighting for, but because of fecal matter. "I remembered his campaign against dog poop. That actually made the national news," said Beal during a phone interview, referring to the San Francisco supervisor's push to get pet owners to clean up after their pets. "It really impressed me, because he was this openly gay politician who was doing this incredibly savvy campaign."

Beal's intrigue was dimmed by grief a short time later, when Milk's life was cut short by former fellow supervisor Dan White, who had resigned shortly before the murder. (Supervisors are akin to City Council members elsewhere.) "A few months later, I clearly recall when he was shot and killed," Beal said. "As an openly gay man, it affected me a lot."

Nearly 30 years later, Beal, 52, was working with a team that included director Gus Van Sant and actor Sean Penn to recreate the scenes — savvy, sorrowful and otherwise — of Milk's six years of political involvement in San Francisco. Beal is the art director for the new biopic "Milk," which opens locally this weekend.

Beal (brother of former Lansing City Council President Ellen Beal), whose previous credits include art direction for "Invincible," "In & Out," "The First Wives Club," actively pursued the job after hearing about the film from friend Cleve Jones, a longtime gay rights activist who worked with Milk and is portrayed in the movie by Emile Hirsch. "I really wanted to be the person to art direct this movie on a deeply personal level, because of the story and what it involved and what it meant to me," Beal said. "It brought together two parts of my life, working as a gay activist and working as a filmmaker. They never really intersected before."

To create the film's authentic 1970s Castro District, Beal said he reviewed about 4,000 photographs, all site specific to Milk's apartment, camera shop/campaign office and other area storefronts. "We had to redress about 64 storefronts in the Castro," Beal said. "Doing that is like planning the invasion of Normandy, just the logistics of it. That is the art director's job and something I really enjoy — working out the problems and making the process go smoothly."

To meet Van Sant's vision of splicing dramatization with documentary footage, Beal said the goal was not to overdesign the sets, but just get them right. "There were a lot of funny moments," he said. "We recreated the camera shop in the same place it was back then. I don't know how to put it mildly — it was kind of a dump."

Despite urges to spruce up the place, Beal said they made it just as "awful as it really was."

Over the course of the film, the camera shop takes on its own life, as it moves from upstart to booming business to campaign office. In all, Beal counts 10 different phases. "It was very complicated, and the only person who had it in his head was me," Beal said. "That was something that was very detailed and complex and, I really, really enjoyed doing it."

To Beal's surprise, many people who worked with Milk in the '70s were still living in the area, and they helped by offering photographs and memories.

With the help of folks like Jones, Anne Kronenberg and Danny Nicoletta, Beal said they were able to reconstruct a map used in one poignant scene in the film, in which Jim Rivaldo convinces Milk after several failed campaigns that he could win if he ran again for supervisor thanks to new voting districts. Jones also provided the buldhorn Milk would use for public speeches and marches. "We frankly got a lot of lucky breaks," Beal said. "We always thought Harvey was smiling down on us."

Beal got his start designing sets at the Okemos Barn Theatre when he was 17. "The one I remember most was for a production of 'Winnie the Pooh,'" he said. "It was very successful."

He studied theatrical set design at MSU, after which he moved to New York, where he met stage and set designer Tony Walton, who put him to work. Although he lives in New York today, he still considers himself a "Michigan guy," and said he is doing his part to encourage directors and producers to shoot here in light of the new film incentives.

For now, he hopes a wide audience will see his latest work for the great story and tragically overlooked piece of history that it is. While some, in the wake of California's Proposition 8, have criticized the decision to release the film after the election, when it could have had an impact beforehand, Beal stands by the position he, Van Sant and others took.

"We didn't want the movie to become a political football," Beal said. "We wanted it to have a clean opening. I don't want just the supporters of gay rights to see this movie. If you tie a film to an election or some sort of political campaign, what you've immediately done is alienate anyone who opposes."

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