

MOVIES

Focus Features hopes that audiences get 'Milk'

The studio that produced 'Brokeback Mountain' may find the story of Harvey Milk, the gay San Francisco city supervisor who was gunned down in 1978, to be an even tougher sell.

By Claudia Eller
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If you thought marketing a film about the forbidden love of two cowboys had some challenges, how about one about a gay political activist?

Focus Features, the specialty film division of Universal Pictures, is no stranger to selling movies that touch a nerve with the public. In 2005, it successfully steered "Brokeback Mountain," a drama about two Wyoming ranch hands who fell in love that pundits said would never find a wide audience, into a hit.



Remembering George Moscone

But this time Focus may be touching the third rail of movie marketing. On Wednesday, the studio is releasing "Milk," a \$20-million drama starring Sean Penn as Harvey Milk, the San Francisco city supervisor and gay activist who was gunned down in 1978 by a disgruntled former supervisor. Penn is already being touted as a potential Oscar nominee, and the film is being embraced by critics.

Unlike "Brokeback," which starred two young Hollywood heartthrobs against majestic scenery in a story about the spell of enduring love, "Milk" is about a leftist politician in anything-goes 1970s San Francisco. As such, Focus could find "Milk," with its unapologetic liberal political and cultural themes, a tougher sell to general audiences, especially in parts of the country more conservative than urban markets.

"It's a fight, but we're ready," said Focus Chief Executive James Schamus, who added that "'Brokeback' is a bit of the bane of our existence at the moment," given the high expectations it puts on "Milk" to perform accordingly.

Movies about political figures and events rarely set the box office ablaze. Although director Oliver Stone's 1991 film "JFK" did well, his 1995 "Nixon" flopped, as did his recent release "W.," about President Bush. Penn's previous turn as a larger-than-life politician in the 2006 drama "All the King's Men," in which he portrayed the fictional populist Southern governor Willie Stark, also bombed.

But Focus hopes to turn what Hollywood marketers would normally consider "Milk's" chief liability -- a political movie carrying a message -- into a virtue. The company is trying to capitalize on the current political mood in the country and its call for change, especially among younger people who were galvanized by the recent presidential election.

Indeed, Milk's successful effort against a California proposition 30 years ago that would have barred gay teachers in public schools closely parallels today's battle against the recently passed Proposition 8, which banned gay marriage in the state.

"The timing is not bad for this movie," said Peter Sealey, a former studio marketing executive who now teaches at Claremont Graduate University's school of management. He noted that the movie could benefit, especially in urban

markets, from its topicality.

"Prop. 8 has become a national phenomenon and a civil rights argument. . . . I think it will cross over," Sealey said about "Milk."

Whether "Milk" can achieve anywhere near the success of "Brokeback Mountain," which cost \$14 million to produce and generated \$178 million in worldwide ticket sales, is something even Focus executives caution against.

Schamus said it was unfair to compare the films because they were inherently different. "Everyone says, 'Oh, "Milk" is another gay movie so therefore it will be like "Brokeback," and I say, 'Wait a second, your logic's a little weird.' "

For starters, in "Brokeback" the word "gay" is never spoken, and the characters are conflicted about their homosexuality, which they keep secret. But Schamus said the opposite was the case with Harvey Milk and his milieu -- and Focus plans to exploit it.

"These dudes are gay with an exclamation mark -- and we've got to embrace that in the marketing," Schamus said.

The distributor is positioning "Milk" as a celebration of a crusader whose political activism inspired others to live their lives openly. The movie's poster carries the tagline "Never Blend In."

The trailer hits upon themes of courage and struggle in the face of bigotry against homosexuals, with Milk's own words, "You've got to give 'em hope." For the Internet, Focus created a "Milk Mosaic," a feature in which people can share their coming-out stories through words, videos, photos or drawings.

For decades, there were attempts to bring Harvey Milk's story to the big screen. At one time "Milk" director Gus Van Sant and others considered making a movie adapted from Randy Shilts' biography, "The Mayor of Castro Street," but the project never got off the ground.

Then last year, Dustin Lance Black, a writer on the HBO series "Big Love," wrote a "Milk" script and sent it to Van Sant.

Producers Dan Jinks and Bruce Cohen, who produced "American Beauty," signed on, along with Penn. Sidney Kimmel Entertainment, founded by a garment industry entrepreneur, agreed to finance the movie. Kimmel's company wanted a financial partner and called "Sideways" producer Michael London, who was flush with a newly established production fund of \$205 million.

But as the producers were scrambling to get script revisions done before the writers strike, Kimmel pulled out after the movie's proposed budget crept over \$20 million. London then approached Focus as a co-financier to take Kimmel's place.

Given the shakeout in the specialty film business rippling through Hollywood, the prospects for "Milk" coming together would seem dim. Nonetheless, a deal was made possible because "everybody cut their fees -- a lot," Jinks said.

Although "Milk's" cost is far below that of a typical studio film, its backers say it will need to appeal beyond the art house crowd to earn a profit. They were encouraged by the positive reaction from a mainstream audience when the movie was screened this summer near Las Vegas.

"This movie needs to reach a broad audience," London acknowledged.

When he and Van Sant first met, they discussed for "Milk's" intended audience. "He told me 'I'm not making the movie just to preach to the converted. It's important that it speaks to everybody.' "

Eller is a Times staff writer.

claudia.eller@latimes.com