

film



Harvey Milk [Sean Penn] in his Castro Street store and campaign headquarters



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Castro Camera: “Bill, Barbara, Charlie [Art Director Beale] and the crew did the best kind of work – not showing off, but helping everyone live inside that world. Being in the camera store was a highlight of being on the set; it brought back some vivid memories of 1978 San Francisco.”

—Producer Michael London

“W”

Milk

Set Decorator
Barbara Cameron Munch SDSA
Production Designer Bill Groom
Focus

They were striving for as true-to-life a re-creation of the story as possible in the sets, the costumes, the performances and the dialogue. Since these people have very detailed, sometimes painful but also beautiful memories of what really happened, that helped us re-create so much more.

There was this whole other layer of meaning and truth and beauty in making MILK that you don't usually get on projects. It was extraordinary.”

— Director Gus Van Sant

film



Harvey's Apartment
 TOP & BOTTOM *Living Room*
 RIGHT *Dining Room*
 OPPOSITE *Kitchen*



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Set Decorator Barbara Munch SDSA offers her perspective on the unique experience of making the film MILK. SETDECOR asked her to respond to thoughts from others involved in this lovingly rendered bio-pic of Harvey Milk, one of the first openly gay elected officials in the nation

“People from Milk’s inner circle found themselves hanging out at ‘Castro Camera’ all over again. They would walk in, and they would get a look in their eyes; it was almost like they were time-traveling. This one shop played such an incredible part in the worldwide gay movement.”
 —Actor James Franco [Scott Smith]

Munch: There were some profound experiences. Danny Nicoletta is a professional photographer who worked in Harvey’s camera store as a kid and now is a character in the film. There’s a well known photograph of him sitting at the counter, and we re-created that photo for the film. All these years later, he sat there with the same little adding machine in our *camera store*...it was really very moving.

I went to that set very early one day, and he was sitting there by himself on this couch that I had found that looked similar to what Harvey had had in Castro Camera...it was an old Art Deco maroon velvet sofa...and he was very teary. I asked, “What’s the matter? Are you okay?” He said, “Well you know, just sitting here after all these years, I feel like I’m at home and I feel like I’ve gotten some closure to this whole situation.” Other people said the same thing.

Danny and I became quite close. He was in awe of what we were doing, and how quickly we were doing it, guerilla style. He said, “You’ll never be able to do it in that amount of time.” And I replied, “Just watch!”

He actually became one of the still photographers for the film.

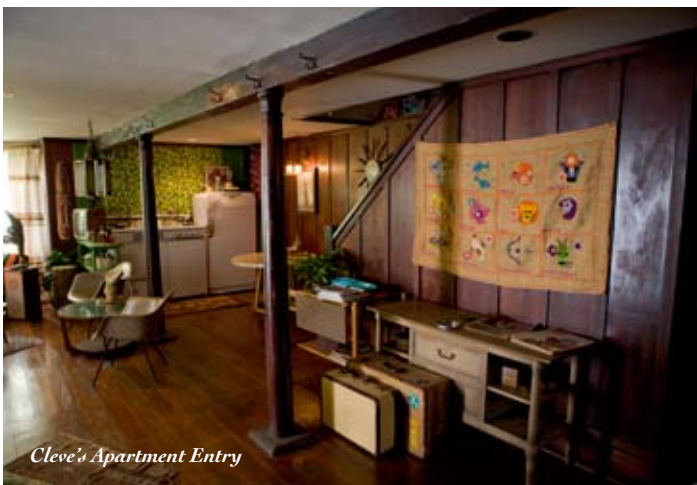
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“Harvey would call me up and say, ‘I need a banner for a march,’ and I would make one. It’s funny—here I was making them again in San Francisco for this movie! My friends who call me ‘the gay Betsy Ross’ say, ‘You never sewed that well in 1978.’”
 —Gilbert Baker, creator of the LGBT movement’s iconic Rainbow Flag ▶

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Cleve's Studio Apartment



Cleve's Apartment Entry

Munch: Gilbert Baker, who had actually made the first gay flag, was our drapery person. He made all the curtains and the pillows. Harvey apparently loved pillows, particularly the mid-70s Hippy variety...a little on the wild side...so we had them everywhere.

Gilbert just loved being our draper. He'd say, "Okay, I'll have these in a couple of weeks." And I'd say, "No. I need them in 3 days." And he was great about it. He fell right into it and got very involved, and really enjoyed himself. I saw him at the premiere—he was dressed head to toe in sequins.

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"We were working already from thousands of photographs and hours of film and video, but everybody from back then helped us interpret those materials. There were a lot of 'aha!' moments along the way when someone stepped in and put the pieces together. People who have been in the Castro for a very long time just started coming forward with not only photographs, but objects from Harvey's camera store."
—Production Designer Bill Groom

Munch: Yes, his friends would come up and say, "Harvey gave



Castro Camera's backroom Print Shop

me this. He found it on the beach in Santa Monica and he had it in the camera store.” There were several little artifacts like that, and Harvey’s nephew Stuart had a couple of items that we also put in the film.

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“Even the insides of drawers would be dressed so that the actors would be surrounded by welcoming atmosphere and things they could make use of – especially since Gus Van Sant’s style can be improvisational, like jazz.”
—Production Designer Bill Groom

Munch: That’s something I always do. Having worked with Sean Penn before, knowing what a method actor he is, I always give him as much as I possibly can—because he’s very busy on the set and he’s looking for things to do something with. It’s important for him that the drawers be filled and that he can go into cabinets and find something and use it as if he were in his own environment.

The camera store in particular. Everything had to be exact for the year and what was selling at that point. Although, the camera store was not so much a store but more a campaign

headquarters, so we also always had inks around, paper and printer supplies, silk-screens. We did, in fact, set up the print room in the back. We rented a vintage printing press and had the owner come with it. The press weighed a ton! But we moved it into the location building and the gentleman got it working for us...and you actually see it working in the film.

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“There was not only an excellent script to be guided by here. There was also a good amount of archival material. I fell in love with Harvey, with this person, this spirit of this human being, which transcended my own agenda as an actor.”
—Actor Sean Penn [Harvey Milk]

Munch: Yes, our own agendas grew. It used to bother me in the beginning that we were doing what producer Bruce Cohen referred to as “the biggest re-shoot you’ve ever done.” But even though we were trying to re-create, it did take on its own visual style—with all the people involved, it became its own element.

There was very little reference material for *Harvey’s Apartment*...just a few little photographs. He had been a financial analyst in New York and did have some money; ▶

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eventually he had some antiques brought to San Francisco. So we put a few nice pieces of furniture in his apartment later on...you do see the apartment several times in the film. It's very quietly lit, because most of the scenes are at night. It's very moody...and very lovely. Harris Savides, the director of photography, is just amazing. He's done 3 or 4 films with Gus before and they have an incredible working relationship.

We had to have the apartment done a month in advance for Sean, because he wanted to live there for a week before we started filming. We told him that everything wasn't exactly what we were going to use, because the filming of the apartment came later in the schedule. But we brought it to that period and placed what we could, so he would feel comfortable with it. I don't know how much time he spent there, but he had the run of the place for about a week or two and we stayed away.

Since this was filmed on location in San Francisco, the apartment we used was up two flights of stairs. No elevators, narrow hallways. We also re-created the City Hall offices in the old Federal Building downtown. We had to be on our toes with logistics. We had a small window of time everywhere we were, steep hills and a tightly congested city to negotiate trucks through. We had a 3-page list of 90+ sets. All the little vignettes mattered, too, because everything had to be period correct.

It wasn't a huge budget film, but everyone gave it everything they had. There wasn't anything to not like about it. Everyone became emotionally involved.

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“I felt honored to be a part of this movie....Individuality must be celebrated, and people must be reminded of that. There is still a struggle for so many young people today. Hopefully, MILK will awaken the need for people to do something against intolerance and bigotry.”

—Actor Victor Garber [San Francisco Mayor George Moscone]

Munch: That speaks for all of us. ■