



Black, Dustin Lance (b. 1974)

by Claude J. Summers

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Academy Award-winning screenwriter Dustin Lance Black has quickly established himself as both an accomplished filmmaker and a committed activist. His Oscar-winning screenplay for Gus Van Sant's biographical film, *Milk* (2008), based on the life of martyred gay politician Harvey Milk, not only deftly captures the spirit of the gay rights movement in 1970s San Francisco but also offers an affecting portrait of a remarkable, highly idiosyncratic, individual.

Black was born in San Antonio, Texas in 1974 into a Mormon household. His father had been a missionary when he met Black's mother and converted her. Black spent his early years in San Antonio, where his father abandoned his family, leaving Black's mother to raise their two sons on her own.

Black remembers these as difficult and painful years. "We were welfare kids," he told interviewer Ari Karpel. "My father vanished, literally just took off one day."

Black's mother remarried twice, the second time when he was in his teens, when she relocated the family to California's Central Valley, where his new stepfather was in the army.

The combination of a conservative religious background and a rigid military atmosphere made Black's adolescent years troubled, particularly because he realized quite early that he was gay. He has described his childhood as secretive and fearful. At one point, he considered suicide, so incompatible did he find his sexuality and his family's religious beliefs. As he explained to Karpel, "I became intensely shy, I had thoughts of suicide. I was a pretty dark kid, because I had an acute awareness of my sexuality, and was absolutely convinced that I was wrong."

In an autobiographical essay, Black has described his childhood dilemma: "So I had two choices: to hide--to go on a Mormon mission, to get married and have a small Mormon family (8 to 12 kids)--or to do what I had thought about many a time while daydreaming in Texas history class: take my own life. Thankfully, there weren't enough pills (fun or otherwise) inside my Mormon mother's medicine cabinet, so I pretended and I hid and I cried myself to sleep more Sabbath nights than I care to remember."

Like many other troubled gay adolescents, Black found solace in art and literature, and especially in theater. During high school he began working at The Western Stage in Salinas-Monterey, California, attempting to learn all the theatrical crafts, from acting to lighting. His passion for theater led him to enter UCLA's School of Theater, Film and Television, from which he graduated with honors in 1996. While at UCLA, he worked at Hollywood's Hudson Main Stage Theater and also came out publicly.

After college, Black found work in film production, first as an art director, and later as director of commercials and music videos. In 1999, he wrote and directed a short gay coming-of-age film, *Something Close to Heaven*, but his real debut as a maker of feature films came with *The Journey of Jared Price* (2000), a gay romance that he both wrote and directed.



Dustin Lance Black attending the Academy Awards ceremony in 2009. Photograph by Greg Hernandez.

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The extremely low-budget film, shot over a period of five days, tells the story of a small-town Georgia boy who arrives in Hollywood to pursue his dreams and discover himself. The filmmaker has since disowned *The Journey of Jared Price*, but despite its low production values it nevertheless attracted the notice of critics and marked Black as a talent to be watched.

Black's early practice of immersing himself in all aspects of theater and mastering as many of the theatrical crafts as possible has served him well as a filmmaker. He has not only directed and produced many of his projects, but he has also served as editor and cinematographer on a few, as well as appearing as himself or as a character in some.

In 2001, Black released a documentary that he both directed and appeared in, *On the Bus*. The film documents the journey of six young gay men to the annual Burning Man Festival in the Nevada desert. Along the way, the six young men bond with each other and discuss their lives and plans for the future.

In 2002, Black produced and directed another documentary, *My Life with Count Dracula*, a biography of Dr. Donald A. Reed, the creator and founder of the Count Dracula Society, and the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Horror Films. Throughout his life, Reed struggled to gain appreciation for science fiction and horror films by celebrating the work of filmmakers typically ignored by mainstream film societies. The film, which features appearances by directors Bryan Singer and Randal Kleiser, presents Reed in the last years of his life.

In 2006, Black joined the staff of HBO's series about a polygamous Mormon family, *Big Love*. From 2006 to 2009, he wrote 15 episodes of the show and co-produced six episodes in 2009. The only Mormon-raised writer on the show, Black drew on his childhood experiences to add authenticity to the story of a man with three wives and many children.

The Golden Globe-nominated series was created by professional and romantic partners, Marc V. Olsen and Will Scheffer, who have mentored Black. "They walked me through the ins and outs of the TV world," he says, adding "They were very much like parents to me."

Among other older gay men who have mentored Black is director and producer Paris Barclay, who took him under his wing after reading one of the younger man's scripts in the late 1990s. "Paris was one of the first people to encourage me to write," Black says.

In 2003, Black and Barclay developed a story about Pedro Zamora, best known as the first openly gay, HIV-positive cast member of *The Real World*, which aired in 1994 and was set in San Francisco. Black's screenplay delves deeply into the life of Zamora, including his relationships with his close-knit Cuban family and his African-American partner Sean Sasser. It was finally brought to the screen as a 90-minute MTV movie in 2009 produced by Barclay and directed by Nick Oceano.

Black has explained that he immediately seized the opportunity to write a screenplay about Zamora because "he was one of the first out gay role models ever to grace mainstream TV. I was still in the closet then, but I never missed an episode."

He continued, "In 1994, there were few HIV/AIDS treatment options, and little hope. Those who tested positive generally hid and eventually vanished. But when Pedro was diagnosed as a teenager, he willfully opened himself up to scathing, bigoted attacks in order to share his story. . . . To many of us, he was one of the few examples of a gay person living openly and with pride."

Another gay role model who inspired Black was Harvey Milk, whose story he had been interested in telling

for many years before he actually wrote the screenplay that made him famous. Indeed, as a teenager he heard a recording of a speech by Milk, which, he says, made a profound impression on him, convincing him that he was loved. "From the grave, over a decade after his assassination, Harvey gave me life . . . he gave me hope."

At UCLA, Black saw Rob Epstein and Richard Schmeichen's Academy Award-winning documentary, *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984), and thought then that the story would make an excellent feature film. As he told the *Bay Area Reporter*, "when I first saw a copy of the documentary, I remember just breaking down into tears. I thought, 'I just want to do something with this, why hasn't someone done something with this?'"

Among the obstacles Black faced in marketing his screenplay, which he wrote without a contract, was that plans for a Milk biopic had been underway for years, but the projects had always stalled for various reasons. Black first approached Craig Zadan and Neil Meron, the prolific producers who had long held the rights to Randy Shilts's biography of Milk, *The Mayor of Castro Street*. When they declined his offer to write a script based on the Shilts book, he decided to write one based on his own research.

Black began by interviewing Milk's surviving friends and colleagues, including especially Milk's assistant Cleve Jones, his campaign manager Anne Kronenberg, and former San Francisco Mayor Art Agnos.

He and Jones became good friends, and Jones put him in touch with others who had been active in the 1970s. As Jones, the founder of the Names Project, commented, "He didn't dismiss us as dinosaurs. That was a big part of getting everyone to open up. People shared stories with him that they had stopped talking about years ago."

Jones introduced Black to his friend director Gus Van Sant, who remembered the writer's reality movie, *On the Bus*. Impressed with Black's screenplay, Van Sant agreed to direct it and also persuaded Sean Penn to star in it.

Although film is a director's medium rather than a writer's, *Milk* is nevertheless very much Black's film. He collaborated with Van Sant on every aspect of the movie and received credit as executive producer as well as screenwriter.

The success of the film depends a great deal on the mesmerizing performance of Penn, who thoroughly inhabits the character of Milk, but it also owes much to the strength of Black's screenplay, which reflects his extensive research into Milk's life and into San Francisco politics during a time of momentous change. He places Milk within the context of the heady and tumultuous gay liberation years and he presents him as a heroic, but altogether human individual, with a messy personal life. The film is a biography of a courageous and visionary politician, not of a saint. Black's Milk is a man who grows to fill a role demanded by the extraordinary times in which he lived.

In the film, Milk's romantic relationships are intricately intertwined with his politics. As Black has explained, for glbtq people the personal is necessarily political. "Harvey was personally connected to why he was doing what he did. It wasn't just about rights or electoral politics, it was about the fact that he was in love with Scott Smith or Jack Lira--and he wanted that to be OK. He wanted to have the right to be himself."

Deftly directed by Van Sant, the film earned a number of Academy Award nominations, including ones for Best Picture, Best Director (Van Sant), Best Actor (Penn), Best Supporting Actor (Josh Brolin), and Best Original Screenplay (Black).

Indeed, Black's screenplay earned him a number of honors: a Film Independent Spirit award for best first

screenplay, an American Film Institute Award, and two awards from the Writers Guild of America, one for best original screenplay and the guild's Paul Selwin Civil Rights Award for "the member whose script best embodies the spirit of constitutional and civil rights and liberties."

But the honor that brought Black the most attention was the Academy Award that he received for best original screenplay. In accepting the coveted award, he gave one of the most memorable acceptance speeches in the history of the Academy Awards, using the occasion to spread the message of activism and acceptance that Harvey Milk himself embodied.

Speaking just months after California voters had approved Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriages and sparked deep anger and resentment among gay men and lesbians across the country, Black at once reassured young people and enunciated a powerful vision of equality.

After thanking his colleagues in making "this life-saving story," Black recalled that "When I was thirteen years old, my beautiful mother and my father moved us from a conservative Mormon home in San Antonio, Texas to California and I heard the story of Harvey Milk. And it gave me hope. It gave me the hope that I could live my life, it gave me the hope to one day live my life openly as who I am and that maybe one day I could even fall in love and get married."

After pausing to collect himself, he continued, "I want to thank my mom who has always loved me for who I am, even when there was pressure not to."

He concluded by articulating the great message of Harvey Milk himself: "But most of all, if Harvey had not been taken from us 30 years ago, I think he'd want me to say to all of the gay and lesbian kids out there tonight who have been told that they are less than by their churches or by the government or by their families that you are beautiful, wonderful creatures of value and that no matter what anyone tells you, God does love you and that very soon, I promise you, you will have equal rights, federally, across this great nation of ours. Thank you, thank you, and thank you God for giving us Harvey Milk."

Black's eloquent message of hope was heard not only by the millions of people watching the Academy Awards, but reached millions more through its dissemination via newscasts, youtube videos, and blogs. It instantly gave him credibility as a gay activist and spokesperson for the glbtq community.

Black has used this credibility well, taking many opportunities to speak out on gay issues and appear on high profile talk shows such as *Oprah* and NPR's *Fresh Air*, as well as at high schools and other venues to win support for gay rights. He and Cleve Jones have jointly advocated for a change in strategy by the glbtq political movement, advising a turn away from the current state-by-state approach to winning same-sex marriage to a strategy that focuses more broadly on a whole panoply of rights on the federal level.

Black had campaigned to have the California legislature recognize May 22 as "Harvey Milk Day" in the Golden State. Such a commemoration of Milk's birthday would honor the slain leader's contribution to gay rights. The bill establishing "Harvey Milk Day" had passed the legislature in 2008, but was vetoed by Governor Schwarzenegger. On October 12, 2009, however, he announced that he had signed it.

The Governor's signing the Harvey Milk Day bill into law came the day after the National Equality March in Washington, D. C., at which Black spoke. The National Equality March was the culmination of a grassroots movement, led by veteran activists David Mixner and Cleve Jones, to refocus the gay rights movement from an incremental, local approach to a broader, national strategy.

Black was devastated by the passage of Proposition 8 in California. He has criticized those in charge of the campaign against the initiative for failing to learn the lessons of Milk's campaigns in the 1970s, particularly the decision by the No on Proposition 8 campaign not to feature gay people in their commercials. "I

thought, you know what, I want the gay and lesbian people leading this movement to either step aside or read their history books."

Black joined the board of The American Foundation for Equal Rights, the group that sponsored the federal challenge to Proposition 8. The American Foundation for Equal Rights supports the lawsuit filed by Republican former Solicitor General Theodore B. Olson and Democratic activist David Boies that argues that Proposition 8 violates the federal constitutional guarantees of equal protection and due process.

The suit sponsored by AFER has led to the declaration that Proposition 8 is unconstitutional, first at the District Court level by Judge Vaughn Walker after an historic trial, and then, later, by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. It currently awaits United States Supreme Court review.

In 2011, after the Ninth Circuit refused to release videos of the Proposition 8 trial, known as *Perry v. Brown*, Black wrote the play *8*, which portrays the actual events in the trial and the testimony that led to the declaration that Proposition 8 is unconstitutional.

In September 2011, soon before his play's premiere in a one-night reading on Broadway, Black told the Associated Press that the trial "was the first time I've ever seen our case argued by the most capable lawyers in the world, in a court of law where the other side had to raise their right hand and swear to tell the truth. . . . It killed me to think that this would only live inside this courtroom for the dozens to see and not the country to see, and I think it killed all of us in the room. We immediately started trying to figure out, 'How do we get this truth out there?'"

Black crafted the play from the transcripts of the trial, supplemented by his firsthand observations of the trial and interviews with the plaintiffs and their families.

The play is framed by the trial's closing arguments in June 2010, and features the best arguments and testimony from both sides during the trial. Scenes include flashbacks to some of the more jaw-dropping moments from the trial, such as the admission by the Proposition 8 supporters' witness, David Blankenhorn, that "we would be more American on the day we permitted same-sex marriage than we were on the day before."

8 first opened at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre in New York City on September 19, 2011, and later broadcast to a worldwide audience on YouTube from the Ebell of Los Angeles Theatre on March 3, 2012. Both staged readings of the play featured all-star casts.

In the performance livestreamed on March 3, Brad Pitt stars as United States District Chief Judge Vaughn R. Walker, who found Proposition 8 unconstitutional after presiding over the historic twelve-day public trial.

Pitt was joined by George Clooney and Martin Sheen as Plaintiffs' lead co-counsel David Boies and Theodore B. Olson, the renowned attorneys who notably faced-off in *Bush v. Gore*, the case in which the Supreme Court in effect appointed George W. Bush President of the United States, before teaming up to fight for marriage equality.

Other cast members include Christine Lahti and Jamie Lee Curtis as plaintiffs Kris Perry and Sandy Stier, a lesbian couple who have been together for eleven years and are the parents of four boys, two of which figure in the play. Matthew Morrison and Matt Bomer play plaintiffs Paul Katami and Jeff Zarrillo, a gay couple who have been together over ten years.

Kevin Bacon portrays Charles J. Cooper, the lead attorney for the anti-marriage proponents of Proposition 8. Jane Lynch stars as Maggie Gallagher, co-founder and former chairman of the anti-gay National Organization for Marriage. John C. Reilly plays David Blankenhorn, founder and president of the Institute for American Values, who testified ineffectually for the proponents of Proposition 8, but when subjected to

a withering cross-examination by David Boies, actually provided support for the benefits of same-sex marriage.

The American Foundation for Equal Rights and Broadway Impact have released and licensed the play for readings nationwide on college campuses and in community theaters free of charge.

Black also wrote the screenplay for Clint Eastwood's *J. Edgar*, a drama based on the life of J. Edgar Hoover, released in November 2011. The film, which received mixed reviews, is notable for Black's depiction of the relationship between Hoover and his deputy Clyde Tolson as life partners and his exploration of the difficulties of a prominent person living in the closet.

Black, who is single, has been so busy as an activist that, he jokingly told Karpel, it has damaged his love life. When he goes out on the town in West Hollywood, he spends so much time talking to "cool lesbians" who want to discuss marriage equality that he winds up going home alone. "That's why I don't get laid," he quipped.

Despite his work on behalf of glbtq rights, Black has a number of film projects in the works.

In 2010, Black directed a film based on his own script (and on his own youthful experience) entitled *What's Wrong With Virginia?*, described as a mother-son coming of age story starring Jennifer Connolly, Ed Harris, and Harrison Gilbertson.

When the film debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival, it was not greeted happily by critics. Although Connolly's performance was praised, the film itself was deemed a failure, more like bad camp than cutting-edge satire.

In response, Black re-edited the film, retitled it simply *Virginia*, and re-released it in 2012. The new version received more mixed reviews, though many continued to find the film's occasionally comic treatment of schizophrenia unsettling.

He will also collaborate with Gus Van Sant again, this time on a film based on Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-aid Acid Test*.

Black recently led the list of *The Advocate's* "Forty under 40": forty accomplished individuals who owe their success at least in part to what happened at the Stonewall Inn 40 years ago.

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