

Zach (Trevor Wright). A cute, depressed, gifted artist a year out of high school working as a short-order cook, Zach is weighed down almost to immobility by family baggage, forced to forego an art career to play surrogate father for his dysfunctional family as well as for his slacker sister Jeanne's (Tina Holmes) fatherless kid, Cody.

The only time Zach feels free is when he's exercising his artistry by tagging walls throughout his port town of San Pedro, south of Los Angeles. That is, until Shawn (Brad Rowe)—the gay older brother of Zach's best friend, Gabe—reappears after a long absence. Shawn is hunky and, best of all for Zach, who's just broken up with his girlfriend and is struggling with his sexual identity, an out gay man. They reconnect, to the horror of Jeanne and the mocking surprise of the surf crowd they all run with.

Writer/director Jonah Markovitch's background is mostly as an art director, so *Shelter* looks quite polished, with beautifully shot scenes of the blighted industrial landscape of San Pedro and the gorgeous ocean waves just beyond it. But the film is well-directed, too, full of dramatic tension (will the boys' romance work?) and fine performances by the principals, especially Wright. There's also an effective class angle (Shawn is rich) that's not overplayed. Eagle-eyed viewers might recall Holmes as the fucked-over fag hag in the gay coming-of-age drama *Edge of Seventeen* and Rowe as the dream stud in *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*, scruffier and in some ways sexier here, almost 10 years later. Both give sharp, credible performances.

Some viewers might complain about the lack of serious kissing (no tongue, kids!) between the boys in their sex scenes. Both are beautiful; why shouldn't they get down and dirty, especially in an indie? There's barely even a butt shot here. This is an occupational hazard when straight men play gay; they simply can't be as free and enthusiastic about such things as actual, practicing homosexuals. Then, too, this film was made for Here, so perhaps the network was hedging its bets, hoping to appeal to a wider crowd with more delicate sensibilities than the gay viewers *Shelter* was clearly made for. **B+**

—GM

The Singing Revolution

This wonderful, inspiring documentary, narrated by Linda Hunt, combines interviews and exceptional archival footage to tell the story of Estonia's use of song and nonviolence to precipitate the downfall of the Soviet Union. In 1869, Estonia's awakening nationalism led to its first singing festival, Laulupidu. For the next 122 years, people would gather in public to sing forbidden patriotic songs and rally for their independence. A most unusual history lesson! Opens April 4 at Hollywood Theatre. **A**

—YPB

Snow Angels

David Gordon Green (*George Washington*, *Undertow*) wrote and directed this exceptional—albeit depressing—adaptation of a Stewart O'Nan novel that juxtaposes a teenage boy's coming of age with a domestic violence storyline punctuated with a series of harrowing tragedies. Kate Beckinsdale delivers one of her best performances as the ex-wife of a highly unstable man (Sam Rockwell,

also memorable) who's not ready to let go of his marriage. The entire cast is terrific, and Green brilliantly captures both the beautiful and the hopeless aspects of the winter landscapes. Featuring my muse Amy Sedaris in a rare dramatic turn. **A-**

—SB

Stop-Loss

Nine years after her impressive debut feature film, *Boys Don't Cry*, queer writer/director Kimberly Peirce returns with this searing yet humane indictment of the war in Iraq. Ryan Phillippe is astonishingly good as a soldier who goes AWOL when he returns to his home in Texas and the military extends his tour of duty on the day he's set to retire. Abbie Cornish, Joseph Gordon-Levitt and former male model Channing Tatum deliver raw and memorable performances. Apart from a few ill-advised forays into cinéma vérité, Peirce proves that her long hiatus from filmmaking hasn't diminished her uncanny eye for detail or her compassion for misfits and struggling working-class Americans. **A-**

—SB

Taxi to the Dark Side

In February this disturbing documentary scored an Oscar upset over the higher-profile films *Sicko* and *No End in Sight*, and it's easy to see why: Alex Gibney presents an airtight case against the U.S. government for engaging in unforgivable acts of torture in the Mideast, then fooling the public into thinking that justice was served by incarcerating a handful of soldiers who were just following orders. Be warned: These images and accounts are both haunting and infuriating. **A**

—Jim Radosta

The Times of Harvey Milk

A present-day viewing of Robert Epstein's Oscar-winning 1984 documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* is an affecting yet disorienting experience. The film confirms that the milieu it documents—San Francisco during the post-Stonewall years of the 1970s as it evolved into a gay mecca, with City Supervisor Harvey Milk consistently at the center—was one of rapid evolution of queer liberation into a movement to be taken seriously. But it also reveals how fragile the momentum of our movement was and still is.

As described by colleagues interviewed for the film (and as shown in its bountiful, well-curated archive footage), Milk was a figure with just the right charm-to-aggression ratio to attain his unlikely level of political power and public endearment. Although he was ultimately martyred by the senseless assassination detailed in the film's final part, he could not have made the contribution he did by taking up the role of noble martyr (of which queendom had already had far too many). Instead, he used his cleverness, political savvy and ability to work a crowd—all tools necessary to make it in the world of politics—on behalf of a movement that was the underdog of the underdogs. Milk's inexhaustible passion and openness,



The Times of Harvey Milk documents a leader who attained an unlikely level of political power and public endearment at a time when homosexuality was feared, despised and politically exploitable.

as grandstanding and schmaltzy as it could be, is amazing when contrasted with what the film's interviews and archive footage also remind us of: Homosexuality was feared, despised and politically exploitable then to a degree that, while reminiscent of the recent political landscape, also puts it into some perspective.

Aesthetically and culturally, *The Times of Harvey Milk* is a fine example of documentary craft, offering a fascinating glimpse of the real "Mayor of Castro Street" shortly before Sean Penn gives us his rendition in Gus Van Sant's upcoming *Milk*. (One wonders whether Penn took advantage of the documentary's ample opportunities to study Milk's voice, body language and mannerisms when preparing for his role.) Historically and politically speaking, it's an effective tribute to pioneers like Milk, who stuck his neck out when homosexuality was considered incontestably unspeakable. As uphill as the struggle might still feel and as widespread as ignorance might still seem, it's encouraging to see an acknowledgment that there were those who worked unimaginably hard and took real risks—even to the point of paying with their lives—to bring queer issues into the public arena in the first place.

Screens 8 p.m. April 14 at Mississippi Studios. Admission is free. **B+**

—Christopher McQuain

21

For such smarties, the MIT students who go to Vegas to break the bank in *21* don't act it. For starters, their secret hand signals telegraph their intentions for miles, and their adolescent swagger is guaranteed to call attention to themselves. But that's the fault of director Robert Luketic (*Legally Blonde*) and not the team of attractive young actors, which includes Jim Sturgess (*Across the Universe*) and Kate Bosworth (*Superman Returns*). Their fault is that they can't live up to the standards set by veterans Kevin Spacey and Laurence Fishburne. **C**

—FS

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