



JOSH BROLIN

For Josh Brolin, 2008 was the year of finding the soul in despised political figures. First, there was his accurate but nuanced portrayal of America's 43rd President in Oliver Stone's controversy-baiting *W*—a role few might have expected the 40-year-old actor to take following his breakout performance in the Oscar-winning *No Country for Old Men*, least of all Brolin himself. When Stone offered the part, Brolin recalls, "My response was, 'Why would I want to do that?' I'm having a nice moment in my career, and I don't want to sabotage it *quite* yet."

But he was seduced by the way Stanley Weiser's script explored how a personality like George W. Bush could actually become president. Though the pressure of playing "a role that's so massively in the world psyche" made him break out in hives while preparing, his thorough research helped him steer clear of caricature and instead present Bush as a wounded but fiercely stubborn human being whose overabundance of daddy issues wound up influencing national policy.

Then, in Gus Van Sant's *Milk*, Brolin brought similar depth to another maligned public figure as Dan White, the San Francisco city supervisor who assassinated gay rights icon Harvey Milk and mayor George Moscone in 1978. Aided by Dustin Lance Black's thoughtful script, as well as archival footage and conversations with firefighters, cops, and activists who knew White, Brolin was able to portray the disgraced pol (who committed suicide in 1985) not as a bigot or a sociopath but as a deeply conservative, traditional man baffled by the way history had passed him by. "For me, the most important thing was being able to ask the question, How did these decent people become this?" Brolin says. "Both stories are sad in the same way. They both were given amazing opportunities, and they both failed miserably." **Jesse Ashlock**

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