



Photo by Kimberly French

THE GREAT DIVIDE: Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Ennis (Heath Ledger) struggle with their deep feelings for each other in "Brokeback Mountain."

Out on the range

Heath Ledger & Jake Gyllenhaal go for 'Broke'

BY JOEL DOSSI
Contributing Writer

I guess I can describe my performance as kinda sexy," says "Brokeback Mountain" star Jake Gyllenhaal at the Toronto Film Festival last fall.

"[Director] Ang Lee is a man of very few words," the actor explains. "He would say

things to me like 'do that better' or 'that was OK' and it's sexy.' I got, 'very gay,' too.

"I remember specifically when I asked him about [one] shot, he said that it was 'VERY gay.'"

That's the dilemma the media faces in describing "Brokeback Mountain," often pigeonholing it as "a gay cowboy movie," which disturbs those involved.

"It's a different type of movie," says Gyllenhaal, "that goes beyond the confines of sexuality and moves towards the more difficult topic of love."

Ang Lee described "Brokeback Mountain," based on Annie Proulx's story published in *The New Yorker* in 1997, as "a great American love story." It just happens that the film's leading characters are gay, cowboys, and in love with each other.

"It was one of the most beautiful stories I had ever read," says Heath Ledger, who plays Gyllenhaal's love interest. "It's a story of love which hasn't been told, and I've read a lot of books and have seen a lot of movies 'about love.' But they all seemed so stale."

Ledger admits, however, "It was a very lonely movie for me to make, because my character is very lonely."

"Brokeback Mountain" focuses on two ranch hands, Ennis (played by Ledger) and Jack (portrayed by Gyllenhaal). They're hired to tend sheep for the summer on an isolated Wyoming

mountain, where their relationship turns from camaraderie to a deeper intimacy. But when they part at summer's end, both must resume living the life society in 1963 expects — whether they want to or not. Jack moves to Texas, and Ennis continues to eke out a living in Wyoming. They both marry and raise families.

Throughout the next 20 years, the two men struggle to keep their secret bond alive, facing eternal questions of fidelity, commitment and trust.

"It's actually a pretty straightforward story line," says Gyllenhaal, adding that the most interesting thing about the film is how the characters must navigate living apart from each other. "You see [Ennis and Jack] relate with each other, and then you see us interact with the women in our lives. That's the jugular. You see all the character's struggles, which add the fourth dimension to the movie."

When asked the secret of portraying their character's deep commitment to one another, Gyllenhaal jokes by saying one word: "exfoliate."

Ledger, on the serious side, admits that their relationship is the same as any two people in love. "As actors we just had to investigate our intentions and objectives," says Ledger, "And believe the love story."

Gyllenhaal contends that their relationship could never be completely portrayed on screen, though. It's the expectations and desires the

audience brings to the film that completes the relationship. "As soon as you've intimately consummated Ennis and Jack's relationship, everything is imbued with whatever the viewer wants it to be imbued with," he says.

The difference in a relationship between a "soul mate" and "best friend" is only the sexual element, Gyllenhaal points out. "Once you see the two characters 'do it,' portraying the friendship they have, the things they share, and the fun they have together is kind of easy.

"Heath and I have that chemistry as friends, so we just sort of dove into the love scenes, and then dove out as fast as we could," Gyllenhaal says.

Downplaying the idea that "Brokeback Mountain" is a statement for gay rights, Ledger insists "We didn't get into the movie with an idea of affecting political change or making statements. If [the movie] has positive effects, that's wonderful. But it wasn't our intention."

Gyllenhaal says that gay rights is one of the most important issues facing America today. "This film does tackle that issue and sheds light on the idea of real love." But he warns that the issue can become politicized, and lose the loving aspects in the process.

"When two people love each other, they simply love each other. And they should hold on to that love as strongly as they can, whether they're heterosexual or homosexual, or whatever their preference might be."