

With three fall releases to raise his profile, sensitive-guy specialist Jake Gyllenhaal talks about his role in the groundbreaking queer Western *Brokeback Mountain*—and what the experience taught him about sex, romance, and love.

By Bruce Shenitz

## ISSIN' COWBOY

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et's get the big issue out of the way first: *Brokeback Mountain*, the new Western due out in early December, is not at all coy about the sexual relationship between the cowboys played by Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger. (And, yes, there's nudity, too.) The two stars carry enough smolder to make the story of a secret 20-year-long relationship convincing—which also makes it passionate and ultimately heartbreakingly. And here's the kicker: In a career best known for soulful portrayals of misunderstood, sensitive young men (*October Sky*, *Moonlight Mile*, *The Good Girl*), this is the role after which the 24-year-old Gyllenhaal can stand up and say, "Today, I am a man." It is, in fact, the most "masculine" portrayal he has undertaken on-screen.

Gyllenhaal is in New York at the end of a few weeks' rest between movies when we meet for an early lunch at an unpretentious West Village restaurant-café. When he walks in with

sunglasses covering his large, trademark expressive eyes, simply dressed in a plain white T-shirt and baggy green shorts, with a folded-up *New York Times* under his arm, he could be a young professional skipping work on a beautiful summer morning. But during the course of our conversation, it's hard to know whether to be disarmed by the fact that Gyllenhaal is so damn nice (that's meant in the most unironic way), bowled over by the huge amount of professional and life experience he's already accumulated, or heartened by his matter-of-fact references to gay topics. "I grew up in a generation, and I grew up in a city, and I grew up with a family where the idea of two men falling in love is not a foreign idea. My two godfathers are gay men—they're a couple."

Gyllenhaal is poised and relaxed throughout the conversation, occasionally pausing to rub his light beard as he closes his eyes, and picks his words carefully. He has a ready laugh, especially about some of the more absurd questions that are sometimes brought on by stardom. Like when I ask about reports that he and *Spider-Man*'s Kirsten Dunst are getting married. (Answer: no.) Or when I pose this journalistically vital inquiry: What kind of bathing suit did he wear as a teenage lifeguard in Martha's Vineyard? (Answer: not a Speedo.)

But moviegoers will be able to watch Gyllenhaal in various stages of sartorial and psychological undress in the coming months. In addition to *Brokeback*, which bows in December, two other films of his open this fall. In *Proof*, which is just hit-

ting theaters, he plays a math grad student opposite Gwyneth Paltrow's troubled math genius, and in the much-talked-about *Jarhead*, which premieres in November, he plays Gulf War marine Anthony Swofford, who wrote the memoir that forms the basis of the movie.

As for the cowboy movie, *Brokeback Mountain* is based on a *New Yorker* short story of the same name by Annie Proulx—best known as the author of *The Shipping News*—that was republished in her collection *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*. The story begins with the meeting of Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (Gyllenhaal), who come together while they work herding sheep one summer on Brokeback Mountain in Wyoming. These iconic cowboys (one whitehatted, one black-hatted) are classic strong, silent types, but when they give in to their growing attraction, it's clear that we're not in John Wayne country anymore. The movie follows the two men as they both marry and have children, yet meet from time to time over the years to continue the relationship.

Gyllenhaal first read the *Brokeback* script five or six years ago, when "everyone sort of referred to it as the 'gay cowboy movie'" and Gus Van Sant was interested in directing. It resurfaced a couple of years ago, this time with director Ang Lee (*The Wedding Banquet* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) attached to the project. Gyllenhaal thought that Lee would be "perfect" for the project because "he's fluent in the language of silence." When he read the script, he "loved" it and immediately knew that he wanted to be in the film. "I knew exactly what the movie was about as soon as I read the script: the inability that we have and, ultimately, the ability we have to love. And that when you love, and when you really, truly love, that you fight as hard as you can to hold on to it. And the struggle that people have to do that."

He's patient with the inevitable questions about the role—how did it feel to play gay, to kiss a boy—and understands the interest in these matters. But he counters with the hope that audiences don't get so caught up in the sexuality that it gets in the way of "the universality of the movie coming through." He adds, "You know, ultimately, you can have sex with many people. But you can only love very few."

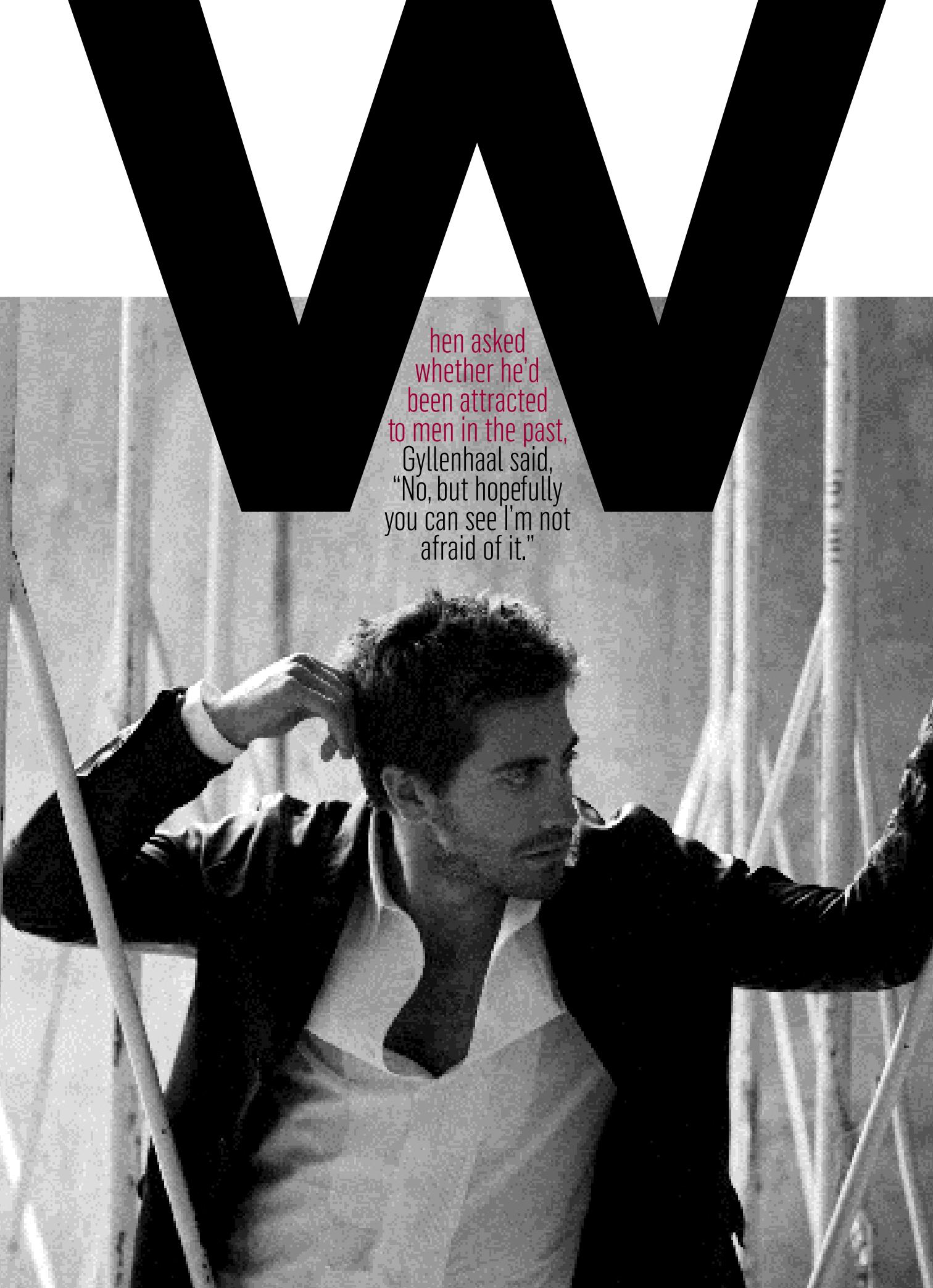
In fact, the movie provides an interesting opportunity to reimagine traditional love stories. "Doing straight romance is pretty difficult these days," says director Ang Lee. "To make great love



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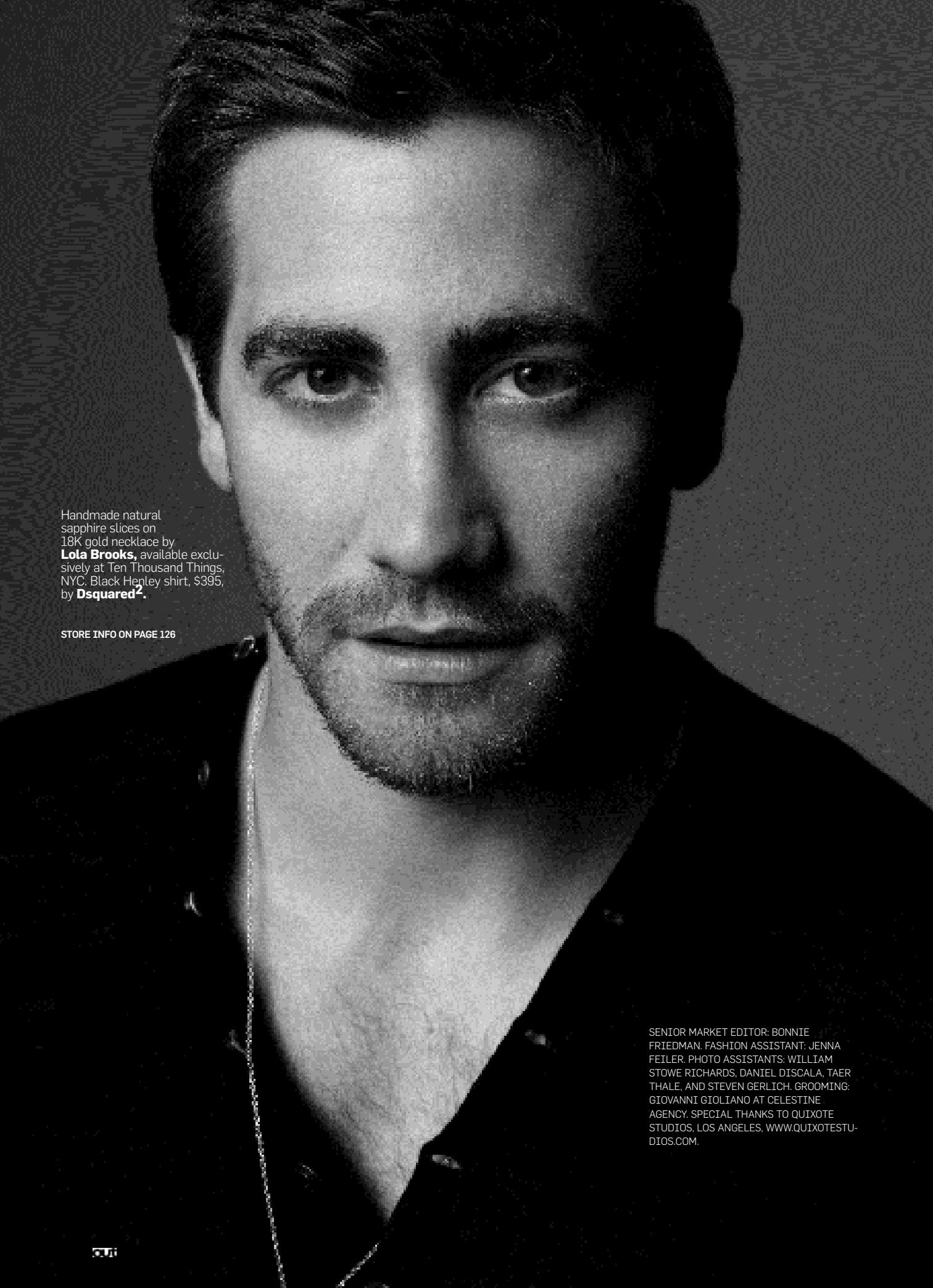




hen asked whether he'd been attracted to men in the past, Gyllenhaal said, "No, but hopefully you can see I'm not afraid of it."



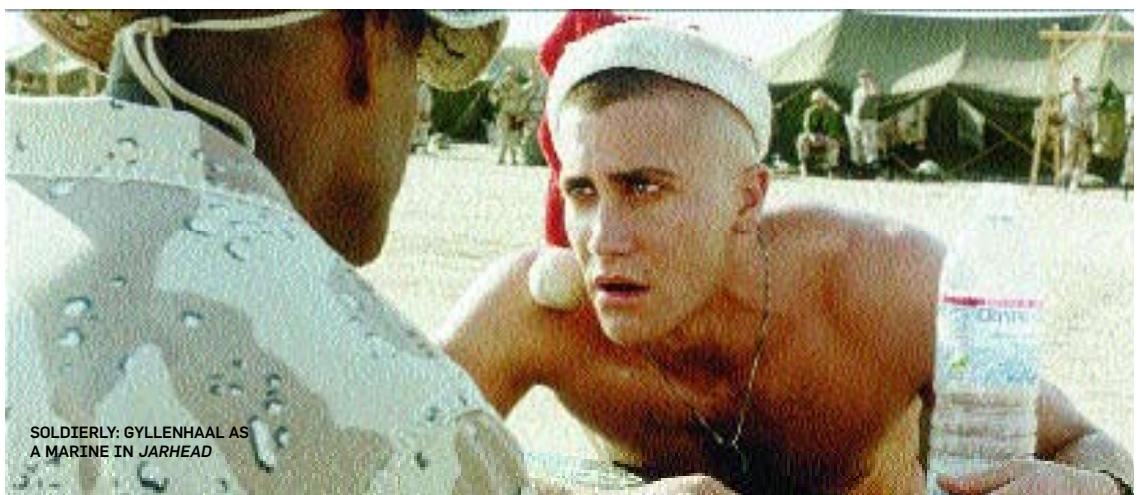
Handmade natural sapphire slices on 18K gold necklace by **Lola Brooks**, available exclusively at Ten Thousand Things. White tuxedo shirt, \$250, black leather jacket, \$1,340, and navy faded trousers, \$420, by **Neil Barrett**.



Handmade natural sapphire slices on 18K gold necklace by **Lola Brooks**, available exclusively at Ten Thousand Things, NYC. Black Henley shirt, \$395, by **Dsquared2**.

STORE INFO ON PAGE 126

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SOLDIERLY: GYLLENHAAL AS A MARINE IN *JARHEAD*

stories, you need barriers, and those have been stripped away." It's the very difficulty of the relationship between the cowboys that makes it so dramatic. "Everything they feel, they have to keep private," Lee says. "It's precious, and something special that they cannot articulate."

Gyllenhaal was born in Los Angeles and spent most of his growing-up years there, but he's spent a good amount of time in both New York and in Martha's Vineyard, where his family has a house. The members of the close-knit family all work in movies. Jake's real-life sister, Maggie, played his movie sister in the 2001 cult classic *Donnie Darko* and is known for her fine performances in offbeat movies such as *Secretary* and *Happy Endings*. Their father is director Stephen Gyllenhaal (*Losing Isaiah*, *Waterland*, and extensive TV work) and mom is screenwriter Naomi Foner Gyllenhaal (*Running on Empty*, *Losing Isaiah*, and the upcoming *Bee Season*).

Jake's desire to be an actor, he says, "was just sort of an organic thing that grew out of being in a family that makes films." He acted in a couple of movies when he was very young (he appeared as Billy Crystal's son in *City Slickers* when he was 10), but his parents discouraged him from doing too much work too soon. Jake says that since he started out "a little too early, I see why they didn't want me to do it." Having to navigate through an adult world of work doesn't allow a child to be a child, "and that's what they wanted me to be as long as I could. So that I could be real adult when the time came." His journey toward real adulthood included two years as an undergraduate at Columbia University. He had some "incredible experiences" there, including studying Tibetan philosophy and civilization with professor Robert Thurman (Uma's dad), but he decided to leave before finishing his degree. Instead of studying for exams and writing papers, he made *Donnie Darko*, *Bubble Boy*, *Lovely & Amazing*, and *Moonlight Mile*. (His biggest box-office hit is the doomsday thriller *The Day After Tomorrow*.) If his family had any reservations about his leaving school early, he says, they ultimately realized that if you consider his work experiences an on-the-job acting major, "What better teachers could you have than [*Moonlight's*] Dustin Hoffman and Susan Sarandon?"

In the past Gyllenhaal has talked openly not only about how close he is with his family but also about the fact that there was a lot of family conflict when he was growing up. "There was a lot of stuff going on in that house," he says, laughing, when I bring that

up. "We're big personalities...and I love it. I really do love it. I'm trying to really revel in it. And I think when I do, it brings me a lot of happiness." On the upside, watching those struggles taught him something. "I've watched my parents find love, find their love for each other, and not always know it was there. And that was a hard thing for everyone when there's fighting."

His mother's 1988, film *Running on Empty*, provides one of his personal touchstones. "There's a similar theme in a lot of the films that my mother writes. Simply put: In order to really love somebody, you have to let them go," he says. Though the movie is framed by the story of a family living under false identities because the parents are being pursued by the FBI for violent antiwar activities from the 1970s, "there's this struggle to balance a family with all that." The film also underlines the family's interest in politics: The American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California presented all four Gyllenhaals with its Torch of Liberty Award in 2003. "It was more for my mother than for the entire family," he says. Jake himself has appeared in an ACLU advertisement, and his Web site features such causes as voter registration and antiwar activities.

Interestingly, though, he doesn't talk about *Brokeback Mountain* in overtly political terms but more about what the movie says about love and his reactions as an actor. As the movie was going into production last year, the media often reported on how the two leads felt about playing gay men—the well-rehearsed media press ritual on such occasions. Both were quoted about having some fears about it, but Gyllenhaal points out that as an actor, "I do a lot things that are terrifying." Some of those assignments involve not unfamiliar love but eerie violence. In *Zodiac*, which is filming as we go to press, Gyllenhaal plays a writer who helps unravel the mystery of the eponymous serial killer who terrorized California in the 1960s and '70s. "Being in a world where you're dealing with a true story about a serial killer terrified me. *That's* scary."

He's also been asked about another comment he made around the time the movie was getting under way: "Every man goes through a period of thinking they're attracted to another guy." When I ask him what prompted the remark, he asks, "What exactly is the quote?" and we both laugh. I repeat it for him and point out that implied follow-up questions are "Were you ever sexually attracted to another man? And if so, what did you do about it?" While there wasn't a certain someone in his past, he

CONTINUED ON PAGE 124

adds, "Hopefully, you can see I'm not afraid of it."

Nobody else involved with the movie seemed very afraid of making a movie about a same-sex love affair—not even one which takes on one of the last holdouts of American macho, the cowboy Western. Director Ang Lee hesitates to describe it as a "Western," a "created genre" that was mostly a form "some Irish guy invented in the Hollywood studio." Still, how is it that the creative team of Lee and producer James Schamus—neither of whom is gay—were behind two of the finest recent gay movies: *The Wedding Banquet* and now *Brokeback?* Schamus, who also teaches film at Columbia University, says, "I think both of us have a real interest in the liminal zones in a supposedly free society," then offers to give "very queer readings" of some of their other films, such as *Ride With the Devil* and *Sense and Sensibility*.

Lee's response is more direct: "A good love story is universal whether it's gay or straight." I became a bit worried when so many people involved in *Brokeback Mountain* talked about the movie's "universality"—which has sometimes been a smoke screen for blinding down gay content—or any kind of cultural difference. I needn't have worried. "Of course it's a gay love story," says Lee. "A good love story touches the heart. Being different makes it interesting; being universal makes it interesting."

While no one knows how audiences will react to kissing cowboys, Schamus says, "We are seizing on the [movie] codes and conventions of people in love and in lust—and we're going to keep the camera rolling for 20 seconds more than you probably thought we'd keep it rolling. If you have a problem with it, I don't care!" The filmmakers and actors clearly want to convince filmgoers that a love story about two men will speak to a "general" audience. The fact that they believe this so strongly is a powerful statement at a moment when gay people are still often told by the larger culture that our lives remain outside the zone of what it means to be human. So long as the gay sexuality remains vital and is not made to disappear (remember the were-they-or-weren't-they-girlfriends of *Fried Green Tomatoes*?), a story doesn't have to sacrifice its special flavor in search of mass audience appeal.

Gyllenhaal obviously feels strongly about just how universal the movie's intent is: "I watch movies all the time that are considered to be about love, or a love story, or whatever, and a story between a man and a woman that's become so cliché. We all buy into it—I'll speak for myself, I buy into it. And I try to make my own love I find in my life after those movies." This brings him, oddly enough, to his sister's movie *Secretary*, which portrays a heterosexual S/M relationship. "Whatever love is, whatever people think of it, if it's true, that's all that matters," he says.

Which may help explain why the scenes between the men carry such an honest intensity. Gyllenhaal acknowledges that there was a kind of "awkwardness and uncomfortable ness" to some of those scenes, adding, "As an actor I think we need to embrace the times we feel uncomfortable, and oftentimes [those] are the best performances we give." *Uncomfortable* isn't the word. Both Gyllenhaal and Ledger got bruised up in several of the love scenes, including one in which they meet up for the first time in several years and alternately slam each other into walls as they kiss. "It's just as violent as it is loving. And the two become one and the same," he says.

The physical demands of a role always shape an actor's performance, and *Brokeback* is no exception. "The cowboy boots, even the cowboy hat, they're not things I normally wear in my everyday life," Jake says. "And being on a horse for hours on end in a day—definitely, you kind of saunter in a different way." And while there isn't much sauntering when he plays a math student in *Proof*, be prepared for some visual surprises when *Jarhead* comes out next month. In addition to getting his head shaved for his role as a young marine, Jake and other cast members spent about 10 days in "boot camp," which simulated the physical and emotional pressures of training, down to an in-your-face drill instructor. But it's surprising when Gyllenhaal mentions in passing, "There are moments in *Jarhead* where I wear even less than I do in *Brokeback*—and that is to an end too. And that's something I've learned to give a lot of respect to. You should do whatever you can as an actor if it pushes the story along and the story is something you believe in." ●