



JANUS FILMS *presents*

Desert Hearts

a film by Donna Deitch



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BEST ACTRESS — HELEN SHAVER
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NOMINEE
BEST FEMALE LEAD — PATRICIA CHARBONNEAU
FILM INDEPENDENT SPIRIT
AWARDS

Donna Deitch's swooning and sensual first film, *Desert Hearts*, was groundbreaking upon its 1986 release: a love story about two women, produced and directed by a woman. In the 1959-set film, an adaptation of a beloved novel by Jane Rule, straitlaced East Coast professor Vivian Bell (Helen Shaver) arrives in Reno to file for divorce, but winds up catching the eye of someone new, the younger free spirit Cay (Patricia Charbonneau), touching off a slow seduction that unfolds against the breathtaking desert landscape. With smoldering chemistry between its two leads, an evocative jukebox soundtrack, and vivid cinematography by Robert Elswit, *Desert Hearts* beautifully exudes a sense of tender yearning and emotional candor.

ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Desert Hearts has been digitally restored by the Criterion Collection, Janus Films, and the UCLA Film & Television Archive in conjunction with Outfest and the Sundance Institute.

Funding was provided by the Criterion Collection, Janus Films, the Outfest UCLA Legacy Project, and the Sundance Institute.

United States | 1986 | 96 minutes | Color | 1.85:1 aspect ratio | Screening format: DCP

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THE LEGACY OF *DESERT HEARTS*

By Farihah Zaman

At the mere mention of *Desert Hearts*, admirers of the film are liable to clutch their chests and instantly light up, eager for a moment of connection over Donna Deitch's groundbreaking yet underseen 1986 romance. This is rather appropriate for a movie that itself so deftly portrays the need for connection, the search for "someone that counts," in the words of one of its leading ladies, Cay (Patricia Charbonneau), a reckless twentysomething sculptor with only the vaguest of ambitions and no idea where to direct them. The other lead, the professor Vivian (Helen Shaver), is a somewhat older and more guarded woman who is perhaps more self-assured than Cay but also less self-aware, successful in work but ignorant of her own desires. This deceptively simple good-girl-meets-bad-girl story might have made it all too easy for the film to fall into the trap of lowest-common-denominator melodrama or, worse, sensationalist same-sex-relationship stereotyping. Instead, Deitch's astonishingly beautiful first and only narrative feature is a study in nuance, one that courses with raw emotions beneath its measured surface.

Desert Hearts is a seminal work of American independent cinema, and its particular significance to the queer, and especially lesbian, film canon cannot be overstated. And it is a measure of just how pathbreaking the film was that, more than thirty years after its release, movies that depict queerness as a meaningful but not all-consuming aspect of characters' lives continue to feel revolutionary. Deitch's film is an indisputable forerunner of recent critically lauded depictions of same-sex love like *Carol* and *Moonlight*—films that also defiantly use the cinematic

language of epic drama despite the perceived "otherness" of their protagonists. Furthermore, there is the fact that Deitch was a lesbian woman given the all-too-rare opportunity to tell the story of women who share her desires. In a moment of extreme minority marginalization in public sentiment and concrete legislation alike, representation in front of *and* behind the camera is obviously crucial to stemming a dangerous backslide toward reductive, if not outright bigoted, perceptions of queer relationships. In this case, Deitch's identity is likely one of the reasons for her film's enduring complexity, its particular combination of the achingly romantic and the ferociously subversive.

In fact, *Desert Hearts* has a general spirit of rebellion, beyond its depiction of queerness, that perfectly suits its reimagining of the western genre. Deitch has said that the film's central theme is risk, the emotional vulnerability required to give in to a romantic relationship, with the casino Cay works in acting as a clear metaphor. But the film is also about women looking for fulfillment—each in her own way—with romantic love presented as only part of that potential fulfillment. Although Cay and Vivian's relationship seems inevitable, the film never suggests that in each other's arms they have reached the end of their respective journeys, as is often the case for female characters of all sexual orientations. Vivian still feels compelled to leave Reno once her quickie divorce is finalized, and while it seems as though Cay will join her (at least for one more train stop . . . and then, who can say?), this decision appears to be as much about her finding the strength to leave her small-town support

system—again, learning to gamble in order to open herself up to life’s many possibilities—as it is about following the woman who has given her the courage to do so.

There is also a refreshingly open approach to identity and relationships throughout the film, not just in its handling of lesbian love. For one thing, the word “lesbian” is never uttered, leading the viewer to the conclusion—which today seems rather contemporary—that Vivian’s attraction to Cay does not automatically define her as gay. While Cay appears to be exclusively interested in other women, she also doesn’t feel the need to label herself. Of a brief affair with a male colleague who still holds a torch for her, she says, “I allowed myself to get attracted to his attraction to me”—a frank yet elegant way of expressing that matters of sexual identity and the rules of attraction are rarely cut-and-dried.

Desert Hearts, then, pulses with a sense of possibility, a sense that the boundaries that traditionally define relationships have been gently pushed away, a feeling further reinforced by the wide-open expanses—the mountains, lakes, and desert—of the film’s natural backdrop. After all, Deitch has discovered here the people and stories that have often been relegated to the background themselves. With women driving the narrative, having ownership over their lives, and appearing in nearly every scene, the Wild West, typically one giant sandpit of a boys’ club, has been reclaimed for them.

Here, the patron saint of broken hearts is Patsy Cline, not Hank Williams. Here, the lone figure seen forging a path on the dusty trail is a woman trying to find herself, not a cowboy in search of a wife. Here, there is room for all manner of defiant, inexplicable, unclassifiable loves, led on into the desert of promise by the pioneer Donna Deitch.

DONNA DEITCH

Following her first feature film, the landmark lesbian love story *Desert Hearts*—which was a hit at a number of film festivals, including Sundance and Telluride—Donna Deitch went on to direct the Emmy-nominated, Oprah Winfrey-produced ABC miniseries *The Women of Brewster Place* (1989), marking the beginning of a twenty-five-year career in television. She has since directed five network pilots as well as numerous cable and network films, including HBO’s *Prison Stories: Women on the Inside* (1991), ABC’s *Sexual Advances* (1992), and Showtime’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic* (1999), with Kirsten Dunst and Brittany Murphy, for which Deitch received an Emmy for outstanding directing.

Deitch has also directed many hours of series television, including episodes of *NYPD Blue*, *ER*, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, *Heroes*, *Private Practice*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Judging Amy*, *A Gifted Man*, and *Greenleaf*, among other shows. Her 1998 documentary *Angel on My Shoulder*, which chronicled the death of her best friend, actress Gwen Welles, won the Chicago International Film Festival’s Gold Hugo award. Deitch has also shot footage around the world for Equality Now and Donor Direct Action to document their work against sex trafficking and female genital mutilation, and for gender equality.

She is currently working on a number of feature film projects, including *Desert Hearts: The Sequel*; *The Catcher*, based on the Peter Wyden book *Stella: One Woman’s True Tale of Evil, Betrayal, and Survival in Hitler’s Germany*; and an adaptation of Terri Jentz’s award-winning true-crime memoir *Strange Piece of Paradise*.



Desert Hearts: AN INTERVIEW WITH DONNA DEITCH

By Patricia Aufderheide

Desert Hearts is a love story set in Reno in the late fifties. One person is shy, controlled, even rigid—an academic waiting to get a divorce. The other is spontaneous, unentangled, unambitious. What they have in common is a tremendous fear of risk, love, and commitment.

What's unusual about Desert Hearts is that the lovers are both women: Helen Shaver as the literature professor Vivian Bell and Patricia Charbonneau as Cay Rivvers. Even more unusually, the film is not a "lesbian love story." It's a love story whose protagonists happen to be lesbians, and the film neither slights nor excuses that fact, nor does it let the characters' sexual preference define their personalities. Instead, the story builds on the conflict between the American romance with freedom and self-realization and the real-life process of making relationships that work and grow. The film also features strong female characters in supporting roles, each richly individual without being quixotic. In characters such as Cay's adoptive mother, Frances (Audra Lindley), the theme of the search for self-fulfillment within the limits on women's roles in the fifties is deepened.

Filmmaker Donna Deitch based her work on Jane Rule's novel Desert of the Heart after someone gave it to her at a party and she read it "about seven times in a row," precisely

because it put lesbians front and center in a story with universal themes. "There hadn't been a film about a love relationship between women that hadn't ended in suicide, like The Children's Hour, or in a bisexual triangle," she says. "And I felt that the time was right for a love story handled in a frank and real way."

Deitch is a veteran of commercial filmmaking; after graduating from film school at UCLA, she made documentaries, including her thesis film, Woman to Woman, about the seventies women's movement, and the short film The Great Wall of Los Angeles, about a mural project. She worked in the Los Angeles film industry as an editor and in special effects.

Deitch's way of making Desert Hearts was, in some ways, unique to her project. In other ways, the process reveals the options of and limitations on independent filmmakers expressing long-hidden or forbidden themes on the screen. In the following interview, Deitch talks about how and why she made the film she did.

Cineaste: *How did you get the resources to make Desert Hearts?*

Donna Deitch: The film cost \$1.5 million, and it took five years to make. I bought the property in 1979, and I shot the film in five

weeks—that was the enjoyable part—in 1984. It took me two and a half years to raise the money. More women than men invested, many of them lesbians. It meant networking. I would go to a city and have fundraising parties. There were straight male investors, too, who contributed more money than the women. Then I sold my house, and finally I got an advance from the Goldwyn company, which is distributing it.

Did the film work out as you planned?

Yes—it didn't go overbudget. The actors were all paid scale. We used a nonunion crew, though.

What has been the reaction to the film?

Well, there's a very positive reaction because people feel the story was told well. We came within tickets of breaking the box-office record—held by *Rocky III*—in New York, so I think it has had a positive reception generally. What lesbian investors have said to me is, "I invested in this project because I believed in it. Now I know I'll get my money back, but I don't care anymore because the film's so good." The straight male stockbroker who put in the single largest amount was really impressed, and he's ready to invest in my next project—which is on hold right now because my time has been taken up with publicity for the film.

How did you attempt to transcend stereotyped categories?

I wanted originally to make a movie about an intimate relationship between two women. I thought it had never been done well before. The book really helped. It presents the relationship as a universal story. I thought of it as a transformation of the relationship between Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable in *The Misfits*.

I didn't want to ghettoize the story in any way. I paid attention to the central metaphor, which is about risk and gambling—it's located in Reno, of course—





and how that risk is a necessary part of relationships of any kind.

How much work did you do on the script?

I wrote a script originally to raise the funds. It worked well for that purpose, but when I got close to filming, I knew it wasn't anywhere near good enough. So I went searching for scriptwriters. I thought a woman should write it. I had a list of 130 scriptwriters, but for all the scriptwriters there are, it's hard to find a good one. The script was crucial for me, because it was important that the characters not be symbolic, that they come off as real people. Finally Natalie Cooper rewrote it, and what you have is her screenplay. She did a terrific job. All the dialogue in the film is her dialogue.

My favorite scene in the movie is when Cay and her sometime girlfriend are in the car, and Vivian's getting into the car. The girlfriend says to Frances that she hasn't

seen her in a while, and Frances says, "I'm handlin' it." I thought, When have you seen a moment in a film when there are four women on-screen, each attractive and interesting in her own right, each with her private agenda, and what's going on is clear without a lot of expository dialogue?

It would have been easy for Desert Hearts to have become a "lesbian film," an issue film.

I didn't want to deal with issues as issues—job discrimination or single motherhood, for example. So I focused on the internal conflict of the women, the love story. Of course, their conflicts are influenced by the external world.

Did you think the film would be this successful?

I'm pleased that it's being seen so widely, but I never intended to give it to a major, even if one would have taken it, to distribute. I looked for a small company, because I think if you have fewer films

you're more invested in each one's success. Goldwyn is a specialized distributor.

Independents should note that every specialized distributor is looking for product. Not every film fits what they need, of course, but if a film comes close, a lot of distributors will bid for it. You have to be thinking about the distribution, the audience, from the beginning of the film.

I don't understand filmmakers who don't do this. I suppose it's partly the legacy of the nineteenth-century romance of the artist, producing it for themselves. But film's not like that. That's not to say you don't follow your dream. Nobody gets successful at something of quality by going into a project because they want to make a killing.

This interview first appeared in vol. 15, no. 1 (1986) of Cineaste. It has been reprinted with permission.

TRIVIA

The film is based on the 1964 novel *Desert of the Heart* by Jane Rule. The manuscript was rejected by over twenty publishers before being accepted by Macmillan. By publishing the same-sex love story, Rule risked losing her job as a lecturer at the University of British Columbia.

Between 1931 and 1970, more than 325,000 marriages met their end in Reno, Nevada. Divorce seekers were only required to establish a six-week residency before they were able to file for divorce (regardless of where the marriage occurred).

Donna Deitch sold her house to cover the cost of the licenses for the songs that appear on the film's star-studded soundtrack.

Desert Hearts is one of cinematographer Robert Elswit's first features. He would go on to shoot films for Paul Thomas Anderson, Tony Gilroy, and George Clooney. He won an Academy Award for his work on *There Will Be Blood*.

Oprah Winfrey saw *Desert Hearts* and hired Deitch to direct the 1989 ABC miniseries *The Women of Brewster Place*.

Desert Hearts was the first time actress Helen Shaver was directed by a woman, and the experience inspired her to become a director herself. She was nominated for an Emmy for her work on the Showtime movie *Summer's End* (1999), and she has directed episodes of such series as *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and *Orphan Black*. She is currently in preproduction on the feature-length film *Frankie's Baby*.

During the shoot, Shaver met and fell in love with Steve Smith, the key grip, whom she later married.

Patricia Charbonneau found out she was pregnant two days before shooting started.