



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# Desert Hearts

Although it has become a cult classic due to its explicit lesbian sex, *Desert Hearts* is a wonderfully well-made film with a host of appealing attributes. Steeped in moody, classic country and western music, it conveys romantic longing and confusion with bittersweet intensity. The casting is superb, starting with Helen Shaver as a primly proper New York professor and Patricia Charbonneau as a charismatic Reno cowgirl, but also extending to a riveting supporting cast, who do humorous, sharply observed vignettes across the spectrum of social class. Crisply edited subplots are effortlessly woven throughout. The gritty, monotonous sense of place is accentuated by Shaver's endearing disorientation in wide-open Nevada. The film has a beguilingly hypnotic atmosphere, like Shakespeare's magical green world, where things change shape and identities are transformed. As we contemplate the aching degrees and varieties of love, we must laugh at the eternal muddle of human aspiration and absurdity. With neither cynicism nor sentimentality, *Desert Hearts* charmingly asserts the centrality of emotion, as well as its prankish surprises.

**Camille Paglia, *Sight & Sound*, October 2015**

## **Donna Deitch on 'Desert Hearts'**

It all started in 1979 when somebody gave me Jane Rule's novel *Desert of the Heart* at a party. I instantly liked the central idea: a love affair between two women set in the context of all the gambling and risk-taking going on in Reno. It was a book where you were rooting for them to be together, not waiting for one or another of them to kill themselves. It's a film with a whole range of complicated relationships between women characters. These days you hardly ever see a film with four strong interesting women, each of whom has her own private personal agenda, all with their own ideas. And at the same time, there is a good deal of humour.

I was also drawn to the period, to the 50s, and the place: the music, the gambling, that whole cowgirl/cowboy kind of atmosphere. Some people have asked why I didn't do it as a contemporary story, but there wouldn't have been any point – for a start, no one goes to Reno to get a divorce anymore. More importantly, it would have been futile with this book: the story takes place in a particular time and a particular place. The only real reason for changing would have been economic, because it is much more expensive to shoot period-piece pictures.

My early films were funded by agencies like the National Endowment for the Arts, the American Film Institute and the Jerome Foundation. For *Desert*

*Hearts*, I needed a lot more money. My inspiration was the way Broadway shows are put together, with investors buying units or shares. And that is what I did: I sold shares in *Desert Hearts* at a thousand dollars a go.

All sorts of people bought the shares. Some were motivated purely financially – they thought it was a good and timely investment. Others were politically interested: they wanted to see a positive film about a relationship between two women. Some were motivated emotionally by the same issue. And for some, of course, it was a combination of all these things. After two-and-a-half years, I had raised \$850,000, enough to make the film. It worked: *Desert Hearts* isn't making as much money as *Room with a View*, but it's still one of the highest-grossing independent features right now. When we opened in New York, we came within tickets of breaking the house record for the cinema – and that was previously held by *Rocky III*.

**Interview by Jane Root, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1986**

### **A contemporary review**

At one point in Donna Deitch's film – her first feature after a number of documentaries – Vivian, trying to come to terms with the feelings aroused in her by Cay, asks whether the latter is trying to shock her by stating the sexual satisfaction she obtains from women. Cay replies that she is simply telling the truth. *Desert Hearts* is clearly intended to work on a similar principle, playing down any idea that its subject matter is at all 'controversial' or provocative, and concentrating instead on the emotional interrelationships between its characters. In this sense, lesbianism is not treated as a social issue.

The pressures on Vivian are either outside the film (her stifling New York academic background) or specifically familial (the threat her relationship with Cay poses to Frances' home on the range), but most importantly they are internal, a matter of repression. This sense of emotional upheaval occurring in a sort of limbo (Frances describes the Nevada desert as 'God's backyard') is heightened, paradoxically, by the film's historical setting.

This is at once precise – with the characters' every move accompanied by a choice selection of high-grade country and western and rock 'n' roll – but also quite casual. The soundtrack is not matched by an equal attention to costuming and production design, presumably a matter of budgetary constraints, nor in terms of other characters' attitudes to the Cay/Vivian pairing. Frances and Darrell may in their different ways be threatened by the two women's relationship, but there is no sense of the outrage that would be expected 'in period'. Quite characteristic is the male bemusement inherent in one remark offered to Cay: 'How you get all that traffic with no equipment beats me'. This may of course have as much to do with geography as history, with Reno marking exactly the point where heterosexual couplings are declared null and void, and where options are reopened.

This air of openness towards its two central characters is certainly the film's main strength, helped by excellent performances from Helen Shaver and, particularly, Patricia Charbonneau. At the same time, however, it cannot disguise a surprising degree of stereotyping. It seems regrettably predictable that Vivian's repression should be associated with 'dry', respectable academia (she responds to Frances' enquiry about children by explaining that she and her husband were a 'professional couple'), while Cay, the freer spirit, is linked with art and horses. This shortcoming is all the more apparent given the nicely quirky quality of surrounding characters such as Walter, Silver, and the latter's fiancé Joe. One wishes, for example, for more moments akin to Joe's musing, while watching Cay and Silver share a bath, on the possibility of being reincarnated as 'a gorgeous woman'. Frances' character, on the other hand, sometimes seems an overly convenient locus for certain anxieties – familial, social, emotional – which need a more melodramatic edge than the film provides.

When, for instance, Cay tells Frances she is moving out, Frances claims that Vivian has broken Cay's heart more than she, Frances, could have done. But this suggests an emotional resonance which is actually undermined or left adrift by the film's understated tone. Similarly, at certain points, song lyrics are used somewhat heavy-handedly to underline rather than counterpoint the subject, suggesting an uncertainty about Deitch's response to the narrative demands of a feature. Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, and particularly given its low budget, *Desert Hearts* is a notable achievement. Certain scenes are handled in exemplary fashion (especially the motel lovemaking, with its neatly observed mix of humour, doubt and desire), and overall the film is a clear-sighted, cool riposte to the confused special (male) pleadings of efforts such as *Personal Best* and *Lianna*.

**Steve Jenkins, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1986**

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## DESERT HEARTS

*Director:* Donna Deitch  
*©/Production Company:* Desert Heart Productions  
*Producer:* Donna Deitch  
*Co-producer:* Cami Taylor  
*Associate Producer:* Carol Jefferies  
*Production Associate:* Coni Lancaster  
*Post-production Accountants:* Ronnie Morris, Robert Vessler  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Geralyn Miller  
*Location Manager:* Michael 'Doc' Dill  
*Location Co-ordinator:* Shirley Dale  
*Production Consultant:* Marsha Koff  
*Production Assistants:* Karen Geiger, Jeffrey Jacobsen, Patricia McGuire, Elizabeth Pinkul, Vance Wait  
*Producer's Representative:* Jeff Dowd  
*1st Assistant Director:* George Perkins  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Whitney Hunter  
*Assistant to the Director:* Claudia Stevens  
*Script Supervisor:* Benita Brazier  
*Casting:* Tim Flack  
*Associate Casting:* Jeff Oshen  
*Extras Casting/Reno:* Sally Lear  
*Screenplay:* Natalie Cooper  
*Based on the novel Desert of the Heart by:* Jane Rule  
*Director of Photography:* Robert Elswit  
*1st Assistant Camera:* Marty Layton  
*2nd Assistant Camera:* Mitch Marcus  
*Key Grip:* Steve Smith  
*Grip:* Kirk Peterson  
*Best Boy Grip:* Curtis Bradford  
*Gaffer:* John Zumpano  
*Electricians:* Ron Fisher, Peter Etchets  
*Best Boy Electrician:* Steve Crawford  
*Stills:* Jane O'Neal, David Lear  
*Editor:* Robert Estrin  
*Assistant Editor:* Sandra Adair  
*Apprentice Editor:* Linda Fitzwater  
*Production Designer:* Jeannine C. Oppewall  
*Art Director:* David Brisbin  
*Art Department Assistant:* Eric Higgins  
*Set Decorator:* Rosemary Brandenburg  
*Assistant Set Decorator:* Thierry Verrier  
*Leadperson:* Susan Emswiller  
*Set Dressers:* Kim Di Lonardo, Bill Welch  
*Cay's Pottery:* Leslie Thompson  
*Prop Master:* Trisha Gallaher  
*Assistant Prop Master:* Lisa De Alva  
*Costume Designer:* Linda Bass  
*Location Costumer:* Marjorie Glead  
*Assistant Costumers:* Marina Spadafora, Reanon Rusk  
*Make-up:* Richard Arrington

*Assistant Make-up:* Susie De Santo  
*2nd Assistant Make-up:* Virginia Jacobson  
*Hairstyles:* Don Morano  
*Title Design:* Louise Kollenbaum  
*Titles/Opticals:* Pacific Title  
*Music Supervisors:* Terri Fricon, Gay Jones  
*Music Supervision:* Fricon Entertainment  
*Music Consultant:* Robert Estrin  
*Production Sound Mixer:* Austin McKinney  
*Boom Man:* Jack M. Nietzsche  
*Sound Mixers:* John Brasher, Roberta Doheny  
*Sound Effects:* J's Fine Art & Provision Company  
Roberta Doheny, Beth Bergeron, Alia Kahn, Lars Nelson  
*Loop Group:* Leigh French  
*Stand-ins:* Shirley Barnhart, Russell Cusick, Terry Perez, Cameron Shilly, Patricia Yeckley

## Cast

Helen Shaver (*Vivian Bell*)  
Patricia Charbonneau (*Cay Rivvers*)  
Audra Lindley (*Frances Parker*)  
Andra Akers (*Silver Dale*)  
Dean Butler (*Darrell*)  
Gwen Welles (*Gwen*)  
James Staley (*Art Warner*)  
Kati Labourdette (*Lucille*)  
Alex McArthur (*Walter Parker*)  
Tyler Tyhurst (*Buck*)  
Denise Crosby (*Pat*)  
Antony Ponzini (*Joe Lorenzo*)  
Brenda Beck (*Joyce*)  
Sam Minsky (*best man*)  
Patricia Frazier (*change girl*)  
Sheila Balter (*roadside waitress*)  
Tom Martin (*red cap*)  
Joan Mankin (*casino waitress*)  
Frank Murtha (*minister*)  
Dave Roberts (*Lon*)  
Bob Blankman (*croupier*)  
Ron Fisher (*drunk gambler*)  
Gene Skaug (*announcer*)  
Donna Deitch (*Hungarian gambler*)

USA 1985©  
91 mins

The screening on Wed 16 Feb will be introduced  
by BFI Head Librarian Emma Smart

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## BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

**Desert Hearts** Fri 11 Feb 20:40; Wed 16 Feb 18:20 (+ intro by BFI Head Librarian Emma Smart)  
**My Beautiful Laundrette** Sat 12 Feb 18:20; Tue 15 Feb 20:45; Sat 19 Feb 20:45  
**The Handmaiden (Ah-ga-ssi)** Sat 12 Feb 20:10; Sun 27 Feb 17:50  
**Victim** Sun 13 Feb 13:00; Mon 21 Feb 18:00  
**Happy Together (Chun gwong cha sit)** Sun 13 Feb 15:20  
**A Fantastic Woman (Una mujer fantástica)**  
Sun 13 Feb 18:40; Tue 22 Feb 20:50  
**Maurice** Mon 14 Feb 18:00  
**Beautiful Thing** Mon 14 Feb 20:30  
**All About My Mother (Todo sobre mi madre)** Wed 16 Feb 21:00

**Young Soul Rebels** Thu 17 Feb 20:45  
**Mädchen in Uniform** Fri 18 Feb 20:30; Sat 26 Feb 16:00  
**Rent** Sun 20 Feb 18:10  
**Brokeback Mountain** Mon 21 Feb 20:25  
**Rope** Tue 22 Feb 14:30  
**My Own Private Idaho** Wed 23 Feb 18:00 (+ intro by BFI Race Equality Lead Rico Johnson-Sinclair)  
**Moonlight** Thu 24 Feb 14:30; Mon 28 Feb 20:45  
**To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar** Fri 25 Feb 20:45  
**Go Fish** Sat 26 Feb 18:20  
**The Watermelon Woman** Sat 26 Feb 20:30

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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