



Big Screen Classics

Cruising

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Directed by: William Friedkin

©/Presented by:

Lorimar Film- und Fernsehproduktion GmbH

Made in Association with:

CIP-Europäische Treuhand

For: United Artists

Producer: Jerry Weintraub

Associate Producer: Burt Harris

Production Executive: Mark Johnson

Auditor: Lucille Weiner

Location Manager: Carmine Foresta

1st Assistant Director: Alan Hopkins

Script Supervisor: Sidney Gecker

Casting Director: Louis DiGiaino

Written for the Screen by: William Friedkin

Based upon the novel by: Gerald Walker

Director of Photography: James Contner

Colour Timer: Larry Rovetti

Camera Operator: Enrique Bravo

Gaffer: Gene Engels

Key Grip: William Miller

Stills Photography: Josh Weiner

Film Editor: Bud Smith

Production Designer: Bruce Weintraub

Art Director: Edward Pisoni

Set Decorator: Robert Drumheller

Property Masters: Barry Bedig, James Raitt

Costume Designer: Robert deMora

Make-up Artist: Alan Weisinger

Special Make-up Effects: Robert Norin

Hair Stylist: Robert Grimaldi

Music by: Jack Nitzsche

Music Performed by: The Cripples, Willy Deville,

Germs-G.I., John Hiatt, Mutiny, Rough Trade,

Madelyn von Ritz, Egberto Gismonti

Sound Recording: Robert (Buzz) Knudson,

Robert Glass, Christopher Jenkins

Sound Mixer: Kim Ornitz

Supervising Sound Editor: Charles L. Campbell

Dialogue Editor: Norman Schwartz

ADR Mixers: Athan Gigiakos, The Sound Shop

Technical Advisers: Randy Jurgensen,

Sonny Grosso

Cast:

Al Pacino (*Steve Burns"/John Forbes*)

Paul Sorvino (*Captain Dave Edelson*)

Karen Allen (*Nancy Gates*)

Richard Cox (*Stuart Richards*)

Don Scardino (*Ted Bailey*)

Joe Spinell (*Patrolman DiSimone*)

Jay Acovone (*Skip Lee*)

Randy Jurgensen (*Detective Lefranksy*)

Barton Heyman (*Doctor Rifkin*)

Gene Davis (*DaVinci*)

Arnaldo Santana (*Loren Lukas*)

Larry Atlas (*Eric Rossman*)

Allan Miller (*Chief of Detectives*)

Sonny Grosso (*Detective Blasio*)

Edward O'Neil (*Detective Schreiber*)

Michael Aronin (*Detective Davis*)

James Remar (*Gregory Milanaise*)

William Russ (*Paul Gaines*)

Mike Starr (*Patrolman Desher*)

Steve Inwood (*Martino*)

Keith Prentice (*Joey*)

Leland Starnes (*Jack Richards*)

Robert Pope (*DaVinci's friend*)

Leo Burmester (*Water Sport*)

Bruce Levine (*dancer*)

Charles Dunlap (*Three Card Monte*)

Powers Boothe (*hankie salesman*)

James Sutorius (*voice of Jack*)

As a serial killer hunts down gay men in New York's leather scene, Al Pacino's naïve cop is sent undercover into an alien world of hyper-sexual debauchery. As he immerses himself in the anonymity of the cruising scene, fantasy and reality begin to blur. Boycotted by the queer community on release, but reevaluated for its authentic portrait of a lost subculture, William Friedkin's grime-smeared, dive-bar drama remains vivid and provocative.

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Right from the start, *Cruising* was a hated film. William Friedkin took a 1970 pulp fiction serial-killer thriller by Gerald Walker set in New York's gay scene, transferred it into the city's S&M leather bars and cast Al Pacino as Steve, a cop who works undercover to unmask the murderer. Friedkin has talked about working with the S&M community, but at the time many gay men were horrified, believing their lives were being sensationalised, and they disrupted filming in a number of innovative ways. The film opened to negative reviews and underperformed at the box office.

It's still a shocking film, whose influence can be seen in trashy erotic thrillers (*Basic Instinct*, 1992) as well as in provocative works by queer filmmakers such as Alain Guiraudie (*Stranger by the Lake*, 2013) and Yann Gonzalez (*Knife+Heart*, 2018). James Franco even made a mediocre vanity project, *Interior. Leather Bar.* (2013), in which he imagined the legendary lost 40 minutes of sexually explicit footage that Friedkin cut from the film – Friedkin's anecdote about how the first cut of *Cruising* was received by the head of the ratings board is a commentary highlight [from the Blu-ray release]. The first murder is particularly harrowing, reminiscent of the first on-screen killing in Hitchcock's *Frenzy* (1972).

Cruising channels a palpable terror of men. Almost all of the male characters are at best unlikeable, at worst detestable, particularly those who work in law enforcement. The very few male characters depicted sympathetically end up being violently killed. Serial-killer films with exclusively male victims are still very rare. Putting men at the mercy of other men who want to fuck them and kill them put a rare spin on the tropes of slasher films from the previous two decades, in which female characters generally fell prey to vicious sex killers. There is only one woman of note in *Cruising*; Steve's girlfriend, an underwritten role for Karen Allen, exists solely to serve as a question mark over his sexuality.

Despite the prevalent gloom and horrific violence, some of the scenes in *Cruising* topple into full-blown camp. Sequences of Pacino huffing an amyl nitrate-soaked handkerchief and boogieing frantically on the dancefloor, howling 'Yes! Yes!' as he pumps iron and, in a surreal moment, being punched in the middle of a police interview by a cop wearing only a cowboy hat and a jockstrap, are ridiculous, if unsettling. The film is at its best when it flirts with black comedy – the set piece where Pacino enters a club under cover, in full leather attire, only to discover it's 'cop night', as horny fake detectives writhe around him, is a smart, droll take on identity and performance.

Friedkin is characteristically frank about working with Pacino, claiming he did not know his lines and favouring the original choice for the role, Richard Gere. Friedkin is right to suggest that Pacino's rather awkward performance works

Richard Jamieson (*spotter*)
James Ray Weeks (*seller*)
David Winnie Hayes (*bouncer*)
Carmine Stipo (*bartender*)
James Hayden (*cockpit coke man*)
Todd Winters (*tugboat mate*)
USA 1980
102 mins
Digital

The screening on Wed 9 Sep will include an introduction by Stephane Harivelo, Mr Leather London 2024

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for a character who is completely out of his element. It was a risky choice for a popular actor to play such an ambiguous and heavily sexualised character. A scene where Pacino, trussed up naked on a bed in an attempt to trap the killer, scolds police officers for breaking in too early before the sexual encounter has progressed, is unusually blatant in suggesting the character's confused sexuality.

The film may not be coy about showing gay sex but it is far from celebratory. Sex ends in grisly death – subliminal shots of gay porn are even intercut in the murder sequences. Lessons in the meanings behind the handkerchief code, doled out by a sex shop salesman (an early role for Powers Boothe), send Steve fleeing for the exit. Violent scenes of whipping and fisting are seen in the bars. *Cruising* revels in city sleaze, enhanced by James Contner's cinematography (done full justice in this 4K restoration) and Jack Nitzsche's chilling score. The depiction of a deadly force killing the gay community seems particularly disquieting today, as the film was released the year before the first Aids-related deaths began to make headlines. While seeing film depictions of gay men as violent and villainous was nothing new, they were rarely as sinister, and never as eroticised, as in *Cruising*.

As frenzied as the action gets, it has sensitive representations not just of gay self-loathing (a theme Friedkin had previously explored in 1970's *The Boys in the Band*) but, more interestingly, the reasons behind it. While the killer(s) may be the enemy within the community, the police department's brutality towards queer men (the film opens with the sexual abuse of two LGBTQ+ clubbers) and the icy homophobia of a suspect's father make clear the hatred gay men faced, even in a city as nominally liberal as New York. *Cruising* may not be a great film, but it's always a fascinating one and remains deeply unsettling. Although the resolution was derided by contemporary critics as unsatisfactory, even lazy, the ending image of a black stare to camera is chillingly effective.

Alex Davidson, *Sight and Sound*, October 2019