

# TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

THURSDAY, MAY 4, 2023

7 P.M. • HUMANITIES

QUADRANGLE

ALICE CINEMA

# DESERT HEARTS

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM  
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



"I wanted to make a love story between two women that was authentic. The *inauthentic* ones ended in a bisexual triangle or a suicide. It was foremost for me that this be *authentic*, and authenticity in this case means love."

—Donna Deitch

Set in Reno in the '50s, director Donna Deitch's "astonishingly polished and nuanced first film" (Paul Attanasio) portrays the romance between a Columbia professor awaiting her divorce and the free-spirited younger woman she first encounters in what B. Ruby Rich calls "the most memorable meet-cute scene I've ever witnessed." *The Guardian* has cited *DESERT HEARTS* as one of the ten most romantic films of all time, while *The Lesbian Film Guide* states, "It is no exaggeration to say that in 1985 *DESERT HEARTS* was the film many lesbians had waited for all their lives. For the first time in cinema history here was a movie which was an unashamedly romantic lesbian love story, aimed primarily at a lesbian audience."

Screenwriter Natalie Cooper loosely adapted *DESERT HEARTS* from Jane Rule's 1964 novel *Desert of the Heart*, one of the few hardcover books about lesbians in an era of pulp fiction. Rule's novel drew upon her own life as a university lecturer (at the University of British Columbia) and her visits to family in Reno. It took Rule three years to get *Desert of the Heart* published, with one publisher asking, "If this book isn't pornographic, what's the point of printing it?" After it came out, Rule reported, "I got a huge amount of fan mail which I didn't expect... People were writing things like, 'You are the only person in the world who could possibly understand who I am, how I feel, if I'm not able to talk to someone I'm going to kill myself! It just felt to me overwhelming and depressing that there was so much fear and so much self-hatred and so much loneliness.'"

Deitch's adaptation—which she describes as a twist on *THE MISFITS*—took a full six years to create, with most of that time spent fundraising. An NEA grant covered a small part of the film's \$1.5 million budget, but most of the funding came from individual donations at fundraising parties aimed at the feminist and gay communities. Deitch claimed, "In San Francisco I sold it as politics. In New York as art. In LA I convinced them that it would be a box office hit." She ultimately sold her house to cover music licensing—for songs from Patsy Cline, Buddy Holly, Ella Fitzgerald, Ferlin Husky, Kitty Wells, and more—which was a full 20% of the film's budget.

The film stars Helen Shaver (*THE OSTERMAN WEEKEND*, *THE COLOR OF MONEY*) as Vivian Bell and Patricia Charbonneau in her Independent Spirit-nominated debut as Cay Rivvers. It also features Audra Lindley (Mrs. Roper in the hit *THREE'S COMPANY*) as Cay's unofficial stepmother and Vivian's host at the divorcée dude ranch. *DESERT HEARTS* was shot in 31 days in 1984, an experience called "magic" by Charbonneau and "pure joy" by Shaver. It premiered at Locarno in August, 1985, with Shaver winning Best Actress, and played at festivals including Telluride, Toronto, and Sundance (where it won the Special Jury Prize) before wide release in March, 1986.

Praised as "a passionate, beautifully controlled drama" (Geoff Brown) with "elegant, traditional story-telling" (Gene Siskel), it was beloved by indie audiences, with actress Jane Lynch saying she'd seen it over 50 times. Part of the film's appeal was surely its setting. As B. Ruby Rich observed, "Expansive space of the kind that Deitch captures is usually a male preserve in the movies: the place where men can get away from the civilizing force of the women back East... In westerns, it's the place where women are not welcome, where they are a nuisance, or perhaps in danger and in need of rescuing. *DESERT HEARTS* hijacks that tradition for the girls."

After *DESERT HEARTS*, Deitch directed only two films, the 1994 thriller *CRIMINAL PASSION* and *ANGEL ON MY SHOULDER*, a 1997 documentary about the death of actress Gwen Welles, who played Cay's friend Gwen in *DESERT HEARTS*. Deitch has worked primarily as a television director, but in 2016 she announced that she was fundraising for a *DESERT HEARTS* sequel.

DIRECTED BY **DONNA DEITCH**

SCREENPLAY BY **NATALIE COOPER**

BASED ON A NOVEL BY **JANE RULE**

CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **ROBERT ELSWIT**

PRODUCED BY **THE SAMUEL GOLDWYN COMPANY**  
(1985), 91 MINS.

STARRING **HELEN SHAVER, PATRICIA CHARBONNEAU,**  
**AUDRA LINDLEY, AND GWEN WELLES**

N<sup>o</sup> 26  
SEASON 7

**DID YOU KNOW:** DIRECTOR DONNA DEITCH HAS A CAMEO IN *DESERT HEARTS* AS THE HUNGARIAN GAMBLER WHO SPINS THREE BARS ON A SLOT MACHINE AND ADVISES VIVIAN, "IF YOU DON'T PLAY, YOU CAN'T WIN."

**NEXT UP:** JOIN US FOR A MATINEE SCREENING OF STEVEN SPIELBERG'S *A.I.: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE*, CO-PRESENTED WITH FILMS AT THE WHITNEY. HALEY JOEL OSMENT STARS AS A ROBOT BOY, PROGRAMMED TO LOVE, WHO SEEKS HIS HUMAN MOTHER'S ACCEPTANCE. **SUNDAY, MAY 14 AT 2 P.M.**