

Donna Deitch: The Soul of "Desert Hearts"

Interview by Steve Warren

"I want to stay independent — in my mind anyway." That's *Desert Hearts* producer-director Donna Deitch's response to the question of whether her future films will be made for major studios. "Right now," she says, "I'm concerned with getting this film launched as successfully as possible." She knows her future independence is largely dependent on getting people to fork over their five dollars or so at the nation's box offices.

Most people will tell you there are easier ways to break into feature films than with a romance set in Reno in 1959 between an upfront lesbian and a college professor shedding a husband.

"I love punishment," Deitch explains, a joking response to Joyce Chopra's "I'm not up for punishments" in the *Time* article that hailed them as part of Hollywood's new crop of women directors. Turning more serious, she adds that the "grueling experience" of making the film would not have been worth going through for a story that didn't interest her. Besides, with a subject perceived as less "limited" she wouldn't have had a specific target group of investors to work on.

Even with a target audience, Deitch learned during her two and a half years of fundraising to make regional variations in her pitch: "In Los Angeles I sold it as a film that would make money, in New York I sold it as art, in San Francisco I sold it as politics."

The struggle to bring Jane Rule's novel *Desert of the Heart* to the screen began in the late 70s when someone gave Deitch a copy at a party. "I read the book seven times in a row," she says, "and then wrote [the author] a letter" requesting an option on the film rights.

Rule, who lives a secluded life on an island off the coast of Vancouver, British Columbia, had already rejected a number of offers for fear of how her material might be distorted. "I told her it would be timely," Deitch says of her letter, "and that the American commercial cinema had yet to show a romance between two women that didn't end in suicide or a bisexual triangle."

It happened that Rule was making a rare visit to Southern California, where the San Francisco-born Deitch has been based since her UCLA graduate studies. The women met, Deitch showed Rule the documentaries she had made, and "We hit it off."

That was the easy part.

"I wrote the first three drafts of the screenplay myself," Deitch says, "because I didn't want to spend the money on a writer at that point. I raised the money based on my drafts."

Unlike 99 percent of writers, Rule encouraged Deitch to change her novel. The filmmaker, who doesn't claim to be a writer, says she "approached it as a cinematographer would," remaining slavishly faithful to the book while trying to interpret it in visual terms. "It was very hard for me to leave the book behind."

With money at last in hand Deitch hired Natalie Cooper "because she's the best writer I know" to write a real screenplay. She rewrote from the ground up, even changing the title and the names of the main characters — from Evelyn and Ann to Vivian and Cay.

"All the dialogue is Natalie's," says the pleased filmmaker, "except for the bourbon scene between Vivian and Frances, which Andra Lindley and I wrote... It provided a tremendous challenge for the actors. In most movies people are just talking about walking across the street to get a Coke... The actors have to provide subtext to give the lines meaning. Natalie writes dialogue complete with subtext and the actors have to find the best way to get it across."

Cay Rivvers (Patricia Charbonneau) lives in a cabin on the ranch owned by her adoptive mother, Frances Parker (Andra Lindley). Cay makes no secret of her lesbianism and has little trouble being accepted, even if some people talk behind her back.



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Her boss at the gambling casino where she makes change wants to marry her: "I could look the other way if I had to."

Deitch doesn't find his attitude improbable, even in Reno in 1959. "He's hopelessly in love with this young woman." Yes, Reno was a redneck town — "It still is, but it's very permissive. A lot of things happened in the 50s with the influx of people from all over the country getting divorces... Politically they were and are still conservative, but sexually it's a permissive town."

The Reno boom was ending in 1959. "The (gambling) action was moving to Las Vegas," Deitch points out, and other states were liberalizing their divorce laws. Business was slow at Frances Parker's ranch, but Vivian Bell (Helen Shaver) found her way there, planning to stay the required six weeks to establish residency and get a final decree.

Shaken by the collapse of her perfectly ordered world symbolized by a boring 12-year marriage, Vivian keeps to herself at first but gradually accepts the supportive friendship of Frances and Walter, Frances' illegitimate son by Cay's father, the lover who "reached in and put a string of lights around my heart." Walter (Alex McArthur) seems to be

coming on to Vivian at first, but later is seen as her buddy.

"There were a couple of (transitional) scenes missing there," Deitch admits. They would have called for an extra day's shooting at the ranch location, which was costing \$1,000 a day and requiring two and a half hours' travel each day from and to the film's Reno base.

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Cay's closest friend is a co-worker at the casino, Silver (Andra Akers), who marries a man in the course of the story. The closeness of the women suggests that they might have been lovers at one time. "If they were," Deitch says, "it was just an extension of their friendship, as happens sometimes... If it did happen they only went to bed once. It wasn't the basis of their relationship."

The warmth between Cay and Silver, including a scene where they share a bathtub, was part of Deitch's calculated plan to draw non-gay audiences into the story: "I wanted to show instances of physical proximity between women before the love scene (between Vivian and Cay) to

take away from the shock of it... It's true in real life that women, even straight women, touch each other much more than men do."

While Vivian is considering Cay's offer to go beyond friendship, she gets a piece of unsolicited advice from a woman with a Hungarian accent at the slot machines: "You don't play, you can't win." Woody Allen, one of Deitch's favorite directors (along with Ingmar Bergman and Martin Scorsese), might have highlighted this line with a flashing "Message" light. Deitch, who doesn't have a Hungarian accent in real life, played the one-line role herself, changing her voice to dilute the obviousness of the words: "It was supposed to come from another place."

By the time Vivian decides to go for it, or whatever they said in 1959, Deitch hopes the audience will be behind her. "I want people to root for this romance," she says, "the same way they rooted for the romance in *An Officer and a Gentleman*. If anybody rooted for that," she adds dryly.

Realizing that she may be coming on a bit strong with her hard-sell approach, Deitch stops to explain "why I have that 'Buy-a-ticket' message: I feel that the film is a communication tool and [gay] people can use it that way, to communicate about a relationship between two women. They can bring their parents or uncles or sisters or people from their workplace to see it and communicate about a lesbian relationship."

"I think straight people will see this picture as a universal love story. I did want to tell a story about two women who fall in love with each other, but I didn't want to ghettoize it," to tell it in a way that would exclude anyone from appreciating it.

You'll have to see *Desert Hearts* to find out how it ends. We'll only say that it's not "suicide or a bisexual triangle." In real life it's been a happy ending so far for all concerned. Helen Shaver has made two more films, *Lost* and *The Men's Room*, and is shooting *The Color of Money* for Martin Scorsese. Patricia Charbonneau, whose only previous film role (*Without a Trace*) had ended on the cutting room floor, is signed to do a picture for William Friedkin.

As for Donna Deitch, she's been devoting all her energy to promoting *Desert Hearts* and hasn't chosen her next project. "I've had a number of scripts sent my way," she says, "but nothing I've wanted to do... People talk a lot about 'offers,' but it's a murky area. It's not quite tangible. Most of the projects that get talked about never happen. It's a question of 'If we can get this person to direct' and 'If we can raise the money'..."

If *Desert Hearts* is successful, it will give Deitch more clout in the industry. "I'm not interested in establishing clout," she protests, modifying, "I'm interested, but I'm not motivated by it."

Kim Garfield's cover story in the *Advocate* did a thorough job of reporting on *Desert Hearts* and the people who made it, with one glaring exception. While the lead actresses were identified as heterosexual, there was no mention of the producer-director's sexual preference.

"They were too polite to ask," Deitch says with a disarming smile to soften the implication that your reporter is being impolite in trying to get the facts for you.

She explains that she doesn't want to shift the focus from her film to herself and says that with the exception of one reporter in Toronto, no one outside of San Francisco has raised the question. In San Francisco, everybody asks.

If she could relive the six years she spent bringing *Desert Hearts* to the screen, Deitch says she would change only two things: "I wouldn't spend two and a half years raising money, and I would want to have more money so I could afford to pay people more and have more shooting time."

But while she'd make those adjustments, Deitch replies to a question based on an early line of Frances Parker's, "I'm not sure that 'we'd all put in for a new past if we could!'"