



Donna Deitch at the OutFest 2008 film festival. Still from a YouTube video.

## Deitch, Donna (b. 1945)

by Linda Rapp

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Pioneering filmmaker Donna Deitch is best known for *Desert Hearts* (1986), a classic of lesbian cinema. Produced a decade before the advent of the New Queer Cinema, *Desert Hearts* is one of the first films to present positively a sexual relationship between women.

A native of California, born June 8, 1945 in San Francisco, Deitch enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley in the 1960s with the intention of becoming a painter. She soon became interested in photography, however, working first with a still camera but then discovering that her true vocation lay in making motion pictures.

Deitch continued her education with graduate studies in film production at the University of California at Los Angeles. She concentrated on making documentaries, mostly on the lives of women. Because of the quality of her work, the American Film Institute awarded her a grant of \$2,600 in 1972 so that she could complete one of her projects.

Along with muralist Judith F. Baca and painter Christina Schlesinger, Deitch founded the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in 1976. SPARC "espouses public art as an organizing tool for addressing contemporary issues, fostering cross-cultural understanding, and promoting civic dialogue." Among the artworks that the group has created is a gigantic mural about which Deitch made a documentary, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1978).

In 1979, after reading Jane Rule's novel *Desert of the Heart* (1965), Deitch wrote to the author, seeking to buy the film rights to the story. Rule had received previous proposals from movie studios but had turned them down, wary of how the Hollywood establishment might distort her tale of lesbian love. After meeting with Deitch and seeing her films, Rule decided that she was the right person to make the movie.

Securing funding for the project was a challenge for Deitch, who made about a thousand phone calls to potential investors. She also held fund-raising backer parties in ten cities around the country, with celebrities such as Lily Tomlin, Stockard Channing, and Gloria Steinem co-sponsoring the events.

After winning kudos at the Telluride, Toronto, and Sundance Film Festivals, *Desert Hearts* was assured a wider audience when it was picked up for distribution by Samuel Goldwyn Studios in 1986. Although it had a major distributor, however, because of its subject matter the film played mainly in art houses.

Deitch stated in 1997 that "*Desert Hearts* was definitely ahead of its time in the sense that had I made that movie now, I think that it would have crossed over or attracted even a much wider audience, and in every way been more 'mainstream.'"

What set the film apart was its positive depiction of lesbian love. Unlike most previous depictions of lesbians in love in popular literature and film in which the protagonists committed suicide, went mad, or experienced a miraculous conversion to heterosexuality, *Desert Hearts* was an affirming statement of the

power and naturalness of lesbian love.

*Desert Hearts* tells the story of Vivian Bell (played by Helen Shaver), a professor of English literature who has come to Reno, Nevada to divorce her husband, and Cay Rivvers (played by Patricia Charbonneau), an artist, ten years her junior, whom she encounters at a "divorce ranch" hostelry and with whom she falls in love.

Influential film critic Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* gave *Desert Hearts* an extremely negative review, writing--curiously enough--that the landmark film "has no voice or style of its own" and concluding that "it's as flat as a recorded message from the telephone company."

Other critics, however, recognized the importance of the film and the talent of its maker. Rob Salem of the *Toronto Star* stated that "Deitch is blessed with uncanny instincts when it comes to pulling the most impact from any given scene. Visually, *Desert Hearts* often approaches breathtaking." He also observed that the film's principal love scene is "one of the most erotic, seductively photographed sexual encounters, homosexual or otherwise, you are likely to find at the movies."

Lesbian viewers took *Desert Hearts* to their hearts, and it quickly became a staple of glbtq film festivals. Deitch has observed that "the most repeated comment" that she received from women who had seen the film was that it had moved them to come out.

*Desert Hearts* was released on DVD in 2001, making the affirmative story accessible to a new generation of viewers. A sequel to *Desert Hearts* has also been reported as in the works.

Despite the success of *Desert Hearts*, Deitch was not pursued by Hollywood studios. She turned from the big screen to television.

Deitch's next major project was the television mini-series *The Women of Brewster Place* (1989, based on the novel of the same name by Gloria Naylor, 1982), the story of seven black women, among them a lesbian couple. Oprah Winfrey, both a producer and a star of the show, hired Deitch as the director, but the choice was controversial: several female African-American directors insisted that a black woman should have had the job.

Despite the criticism, the Emmy-nominated series resonated with black women. Deitch recalled that when she was on a trip to New York, her African-American cab driver told her that "every black woman in America had seen" *Brewster Place* and, upon learning that Deitch was the director, "pulled the cab over and wouldn't stop talking about it. She loved it, and she didn't want to let me out of the cab."

Deitch continued her work in directing for television with an episode of the 1991 HBO trilogy *Prison Stories: Women on the Inside*. Her segment was ironically entitled "Esperanza"--the name of the principal character but also the Spanish word for "hope."

Deitch has directed episodes of numerous other television series, including *Second Noah* (1995-1996), *Murder One* (1995-1997), *NYPD Blue* (1997, 2000-2001, 2003), *Crossing Jordan* (2001-2003, 2006-2007), *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (2002), *Judging Amy* (2003), *South of Nowhere* (2005), *L.A. Dragnet* (2006), and *Bones* (2006). She earned a nomination for Outstanding Directorial Achievement from the Directors Guild of America for her work on a 1997 episode of *NYPD Blue*.

Deitch also directed *The Devil's Arithmetic* (1999), a special for the Showtime channel, based on Jane Yolen's 1988 novel for young people in which a teen-aged girl is transported from a seder in America at the end of the twentieth century to a concentration camp in Nazi Germany.

Deitch sought to "make this [film] from a young person's point of view" but also to educate.

"It amazes me how many young people don't know anything about the Holocaust," she said. "The basic message of the movie is the message I get from survivors: 'Remember.' And we tried to get that message across from the beginning with performers and stories young people could identify with."

The powerful movie takes teens from the familiar world of the shopping mall and trendy tattoo parlors to concentration camps where inmates were involuntarily marked with tattoos. Deitch received a Daytime Emmy for Outstanding Directing in a Children's Special for her work.

Deitch was excited to direct a film version of the stage play *Common Ground* for the Showtime channel in 2000. "I was knocked out by it," she said of the script. "I saw *Common Ground* as a gay *Our Town*," referring to Thornton Wilder's 1938 play set in a small New Hampshire community.

The three-part *Common Ground* takes place in the fictional town of Homer, Connecticut and traces the experiences of gay and lesbian residents over a half century. Paula Vogel wrote the first segment, "A Friend of Dorothy," set in the 1950s and dealing with a lesbian discharged from the Navy after visiting an "alternative" bar. Terrence McNally contributed the second part, "Mr. Roberts," about a 1970s gay high school student--a scholar, an athlete, and a musician--who is bullied and beaten by schoolmates when they learn of his sexual orientation and who turns to his French teacher, who is empathetic toward his student but too intimidated by the social climate to come out of the closet himself. Harvey Fierstein completed the picture with "Amos & Andy," set in the 2000s and featuring a gay wedding.

Deitch returned to feature film with *Angel on My Shoulder* (1998), the story of the death from cancer of her friend actress Gwen Welles, who had a role in *Desert Hearts* and who was best known for her performance in Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975).

Diagnosed with cancer in 1992, Welles refused conventional treatment. Trusting Deitch, she allowed her to film her decline and to record her thoughts as her life was ending. What she valued most was the gift of honest friendship. In the final scene before her death, Welles, who was straight, celebrated such a relationship by singing Lerner and Loewe's "I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face" with Deitch.

Deitch is currently working on bringing the book *Strange Piece of Paradise* (2006) by her partner, Terri Jentz, to the screen. It tells the true story of a savage attack upon Jentz and her college roommate Shayna Weiss while they were on a biking and camping trip in Oregon in 1977. The assailant first ran his pick-up truck over the two young women as they slept in a tent and then bludgeoned them with an axe. As suddenly as it had begun, the attack ended, with the man driving away and leaving his victims for dead.

Although gravely hurt from numerous injuries, Jentz managed to go for help. Both she and Weiss eventually recovered, but only after many months of extensive medical treatment.

Upon returning to the scene of the crime some fifteen years later, Jentz learned that residents of the small nearby town of Redmond had almost immediately suspected a cowboy, then seventeen, who remained in the community, piling up a long criminal record for assaults, including domestic violence. No charges were ever filed against him for the attack, however, and the three-year statute of limitations on attempted murder that was the law in Oregon at the time has long since expired.

Jentz stated that she hoped that readers would not just focus on the story of the horrifically brutal crime but also think about "getting below the surface of why it happened."

"We need to teach men that it's unmanly to beat women," she stated. "We have to shift the paradigm."

Deitch and Jentz, life partners since the early 1990s, reside in Los Angeles.

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