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film

Totally '80s

Pop these early queer flicks into your DVD player
for a trip back in time

Cruising

In the early 1980s Hollywood made a short-lived effort to make gays and lesbians the central subject of mainstream films. Harry Hamlin and Michael Ontkean got it on in Arthur Hiller's *Making Love*, while Mariel Hemingway played a bisexual track star in Robert Towne's *Personal Best*. Both films are a bit hokey, but at least they present queer characters that are interesting and multifaceted.

And then there was *Cruising*. Director William Friedkin (*The Exorcist*) wrote and directed this 1980 release about a cop (Al Pacino) who goes undercover in New York City's leather bars to find a serial killer who targets gay men.

Gay rights groups argued with good reason that *Cruising* equated gay sex with death, and they sabotaged the production by yelling in the background and blowing loud whistles. As a result Friedkin had to spend three months finessing the sound mix. His perseverance resulted in savagely negative reviews and a pitiful haul at the box office.

After this introduction you're probably wondering why the hell you'd bother watching *Cruising* now that Warner Home Video has released it on DVD for the first time. The whole film seems fueled by the idea that gays corrode morality, and as a mystery it stinks because the "resolution" isn't even remotely satisfying or logical.

Still it's a fascinating historical document, a nasty portrait of a libidinous gay subculture through the eyes of a heterosexual director. In the DVD featurettes Friedkin maintains that this is a thriller that just happens to take place in leather bars where guys in cop uniforms suck on nightsticks and other fellows grease their arms up to their elbows for fisting fun. You'd at least think he'd have the decency to admit that *Cruising* wasn't an especially sensitive ambassador to mainstream audiences at the dawn of the AIDS crisis.

Pacino looks really cute when he first dons a leather vest, but he's positively frightening by the time he's wearing full S/M regalia, snorting drugs from a bandanna and dancing like someone shoved a cattle prod up his ass. Like Gina Gershon post-*Showgirls*, he refuses to talk about *Cruising* to the press, and he's conspicuously absent from the DVD featurettes.

What was he thinking when he strolled through a set filled with guys waving their bare asses in the air? Did he actually think this was his best career move since *The Godfather*?

—Stephen Blair

Desert Hearts

Desert Hearts came about partly because producer/director Donna Deitch wanted to

make a lesbian movie "that didn't end in a bisexual triangle or a suicide." Her legendary 1986 film, based on Jane Rule's acclaimed novel *Desert of the Heart*, has only the merest hint of bisexuality and nary a glimmer of suicide. The film wisely replaces such tired motifs with unabashed images of two gorgeous, vibrant women in love.

Set in 1959, *Desert Hearts* is bookended by train scenes, comings and goings. Uptight Columbia University professor

Vivian Bell (Helen Shaver), who looks like one of those grim, "glacial" blondes from a Hitchcock movie, has come to Reno to get a divorce. We don't learn the details of her backstory, but we see her consistently struggling to keep her hard mask of composure intact. Soon she meets local wild woman Cay Rivvers (Patricia Charonnbau), who'd love nothing better than to remove that mask and spends much of the film trying to do so. Along the way are a variety of subplots involving Cay's friends like ranch owner Frances (Audra Lindley), her chanteuse pal Silver (Andra Akers) and her love-struck boss Darrell (Dean Butler). All this is enriched by period country tunes from Patsy Cline, Jim Reeves, etc. and some spectacular Nevada desert scenery.

Desert Hearts is not without its problems. The dialogue is often stiff and sometimes smarmy. "He reached in and put a string of lights around my heart" would surely fit better on a Hallmark card. And it's a question whether Reno in 1959 could really have been as gay-friendly as it appears. Homophobia is barely evident in this world—even the good old boys at the local casino are accepting.

But ultimately the film is about love, not homophobia, and on that basis there's much to recommend, not the least being the acting. Shaver and Charbonneau manage to overcome the script problems to emerge as authentic, complex people, while Lindley is especially effective as a lonely, confused woman whose motherly interactions with Cay hint at deeper needs. Most powerful is the long-awaited love scene between Cay and Vivian. Some recent gay films have reverted to old

bad habits in avoiding the details of queer bodies going at it, particularly when the stars are 'fraidy-cat heteros. Happily, *Desert Hearts*, starring two apparently straight actors, keeps it real in a full-throttle scene of sex and love-making that remains one of cinema's best, gay or otherwise.

—Gary Morris 10

