



# DESPERATE SOULS, DARK CITY AND THE LEGEND OF *MIDNIGHT COWBOY*

Directed By Nancy Buirski



2022 | English | 101 min

#### Theatrical & Festival Booking contacts:

Nancy Gerstman & Emily Russo, Zeitgeist Films 212-274-1989 • nancy@zeitgeistfilms.com • emily@zeitgeistfilms.com

A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE in association with KINO LORBER

#### LOGLINE

This is not a documentary about the making of *Midnight Cowboy*. It is about a humane and groundbreaking masterpiece and the flawed but gifted people who made it. It is about a troubled era of cultural ferment, social and political change, about broken dreams and strivers, then and now. It is about an era that made a movie and a movie that made an era.

#### **SYNOPSIS**

A half century after its release, *Midnight Cowboy* remains one of the most original and groundbreaking movies of the modern era. With beguiling performances from Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman as two loners who join forces out of desperation, blacklist survivor Waldo Salt's brilliant screenplay, and John Schlesinger's fearless direction, the 1969 film became the only X-rated film to ever win the Academy Award for Best Picture. Its vivid and compassionate depiction of a more realistic, unsanitized New York City and its inhabitants paved the way for a generation's worth of gritty movies with complex characters and adult themes.

But this is not a documentary about the making of *Midnight Cowboy*: it is about the deeply gifted and flawed people behind a dark and difficult masterpiece; New York City in a troubled time of cultural ferment; and the era that made a movie and the movie that made an era. Featuring extensive archival material and compelling new interviews, director Nancy Buirski illuminates how one film captured the essence of a time and a place, reflecting a rapidly changing society with striking clarity.

#### **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT:**

Today, as political and cultural wars paralyze the country, causing chaos in a city known for unrest, we face painful reminders of our 1960s past. We see lost souls, much like Joe and Ratso, left behind by the elite one percent.

This is our real story.

*Midnight Cowboy* is a tale of a city, of broken dreams and strivers, then and now. The film lives on not through its collapsing of social and cultural norms but through our everlasting potential for love and salvation, offering grace to the most desperate. In *Midnight Cowboy*, one desperate soul tends to another out of compassion and their shared humanity. Only then do we know we are all savable, that everyone is worthy of love.

#### A Q&A WITH DIRECTOR NANCY BUIRSKI

## My first question is about the first time you saw *Midnight Cowboy*, the original film, and if you remember what your reaction to it was?

I honestly don't remember when it was, but I do remember thinking that I was seeing something radically different from what I'd seen before. I have memories of specific scenes in the film that stayed with me, such as the bathroom scene with Bob Balaban. Had we ever seen anything like that? Also, it's interesting that the way it was made *really* stuck with me, not just the content, but that it looked so different than other films. I knew then it was groundbreaking.

#### How did you become aware of Glenn Frankel's book, and what was your first impression?

Glenn has a trilogy of books, each looked at the biography of a film. I was thinking about optioning one of two other books he'd written - on *The Searchers* and the other on *High Noon*. I was on the phone with him and, coincidentally, The New Yorker review of the new book *Shooting Midnight Cowboy* had come out and I'd just read it. So I congratulated him on that. We continued talking about the other books, and as we were getting off the phone, I said, "I guess you've already had someone come to you about optioning the new book, right?" And he said no. So I said, "Wait just a minute. Don't move. That's the one I want to do!" It was serendipitous. He and I just hit it off. We got along really well - it was a kind of mutual admiration society. I loved his work. He loved mine. So, basically, over a virtual handshake we made the deal.

### What do you think about his style, and specifically his style in this book, that made you think it'd be a great documentary?

I like to think of his book as an inspiration. It's not about the style nor even the specific content but the overall conceit. Both of us are interested in putting our stories on larger canvases. He did that with his books on *The Searchers* and *High Noon*. Some of our documentary reflects his ideas and other parts veer off into totally new areas, areas he didn't explore. But I believe we've dealt with similar concerns – basically why this film was so powerful then and why it continues to be. So we're not always dealing with exactly the same canvas but the idea of doing it that way is what inspired me.

### Could you talk a bit about the collaborators that you had on this project, and how the production got started?

Susan Margolin, who was my producer on my two previous films, was the first person I discussed the project with. And I knew Simon Kilmurry, who was stepping down from his leadership role at

the IDA at the time and has been a colleague and a close friend for many years, was thinking about producing. I figured this was the time to grab him. I knew the kinds of films he was interested in and felt that this project would speak to him. He'd been very collaborative on my previous films, so I called him immediately. He called me back two days later, holding the book to the screen, and said yes! Additionally, I'd worked with Claire Chandler on 3 previous films – she's the kind of producer that makes things happen – almost effortlessly. From there we talked with former Executive Producers, like Jamie Wolf, Reginia Scully, Geralyn Dreyfous and Mark Trustin. Simon introduced us to James Costa who could not have been more excited about the film. To round out our amazing team, we're supported by J.C. Mills and everyone at Cineflix Productions.

### So once you had the team together and the book optioned, did you do additional research? What was that process like?

Definitely. You go down a rabbit hole, and we began to look at all sorts of things that were related to *Midnight Cowboy*. I did research on John Schlesinger and was very fortunate to already know Ian Buruma, John Schlesinger's nephew. We hadn't spoken in years, so it was quite the reunion! Much of the research was suggested by Glenn's' book but we wanted to go deeper and explore what could work on screen. We had to consider how this would weave together; I found myself thinking about the Vietnam War quite a lot, as well as the protest movements that were taking place in and around New York, especially, but also around the country and around the world.

The interviews I did informed my research a great deal. Some were with people Glenn Frankel spoke with and some were not. One of the interviews, with writer and critic Lucy Sante, I found incredibly important because she makes the key point that sometimes we don't even know what the zeitgeist is when we're living it. That point really resonated because *Midnight Cowboy* is not about the protest movements. It's not about the liberation movements. It's not about any of that specifically, but it's in the air. The idea that there was also a profound change in the way people were making movies speaks to the change that was in the air - and we wanted to explore that.

You balance all these different themes in the film - the changing way of telling stories, the Vietnam War, the social unrest, where New York is at the time, but also the life of John Schlesinger and what it was to be a gay man of his era, especially a gay man from the UK where it was, for the most of his life, illegal. How did you and your editor work together to balance all of that and make a cohesive story out of so many different themes?

That's the alchemy of it. It's kind of like having a conversation. I do this with my editor Anthony Ripoli, and I'm in the edit every day. He and I worked very closely together (as we have on three previous films), because the way these things are woven together is delicate, and kind of magical. When you have this conversation, you're free associating, and you often move from one idea to another without necessarily planning it out. Your conversation evolves. That's the way I see this film - almost more than any other film I've made - that it was very much like a conversation that I was having with the subject, with the film *Midnight Cowboy*, and with all the things that surrounded *Midnight Cowboy*. It's as if I were talking to you and explaining to you

what was important about *Midnight Cowboy* in that era and as I'm explaining it to you I'm putting it on the screen.

After seeing an early cut, my producer Simon Kilmurry called it a kind of kaleidoscope. That freed me up to not worry about "structure" but let it move in whatever direction made sense in this conversation. A kind of loop de loop, with themes overlapping one another and circling back. I hope audiences will stay for the ride!

#### How did you go about deciding which interviews you wanted to feature on camera?

Basically we tried to include any cast members who are available. Of course, some of them have passed like Sylvia Miles. But Brenda Vaccaro, Jon Voight, Jennifer Salt, and Bob Balaban, they were not only available but were very forthcoming. They were all wonderful to speak with. We also reached out to Dustin Hoffman, who was not available. We'd hoped to get him but we just couldn't make it work.

In terms of the archival footage, specifically, I thought the use of Schlesinger's home movies and documentary work was really interesting. I don't know that I had seen any of it before. How did you get these movies and the documentary footage?

We had much more, which I wish I could have gotten into the film. But then it would have been a film just about John Schlesinger; and our first cut was almost that. John Schlesinger's nephew Ian Buruma made those home movies available. He became a consultant on the film and was extremely helpful in allowing us to use those home movies as well as his conversation with his uncle. That audio was a conversation he'd taped for his book "Conversations with John Schlesinger". And thank goodness for our wonderful sound engineer Dan Timmons who managed to clean it up - when Ian taped them years ago, he had no idea they'd end up in a film. That was a treasure. And as I said, we had many more documentaries directed by John Schlesinger. That work had a direct impact on his approach to *Midnight Cowboy* and on his choice to work with Adam Holender, a fresh, new cinematographer from Poland.

Midnight Cowboy really captures an era in New York and sort of shaped a new perception of the city and a greater perception of the city that would follow it. Could you talk a bit about both how impactful and different this vision of New York was?

Schlesinger and Holender shot the film as if they were making a documentary using almost exclusively available light. They originally wanted to make the film in black and white, but the studio pushed back. They still chose to use a color that was not the overly saturated, unlike the MGM Technicolor look - it was a softer, light infused color, which made it feel very real. The goal was to capture reality as much as humanly possible, given the fact that they were staging it, and make it feel like you're looking at something like a documentary. That comes through - that grittiness you feel is because they actually captured the grittiness they saw on the street. Jennifer

Salt says this beautifully in our film when she's talking about how these are things that had never been seen before on screen.

What was your philosophy in choosing the clips to show how New York was shown before, and then sort of the films that came after *Midnight Cowboy* to show its impact? What was your thought process there?

The key is finding the clips that are speaking to what you want to communicate. The montage in the beginning of the film, which has *Midnight Cowboy* clips juxtaposed with actual real scenes of New York, is a way to remind you how well they succeeded in creating that feeling - that you were looking at a real New York. The clips just spoke for themselves. For example later, you find a clip of Joe Buck and Ratso Rizzo running down the street in a dark New York scene. It made me think of a very similar moment in Mean Streets. It's exciting to put those things together.

You also use a lot of clips, as you spoke, about the Vietnam War and the way it was televised. As well as Chicago 1968. What was the process in choosing which clips to show to represent that?

First it begins with our wonderful research team. Then choices emerge out of my visual background, years of working in photography. I was a photojournalist for many years and a photo editor, at Magnum and The New York Times. You just look at certain things and they speak to you. It's finding an image or clip that elicits a specific emotional response. I hope that I'm a good barometer for the audience. That's the way I've made all of my movies. When I'm choosing things, suddenly something will move me and I know that it has to be in the movie. It's subjective. And it's emotional. Great visual material has the power to do that.

The film itself is definitely a queer film, and Schlesinger really grew up in a time where it was hard to be who he was. Could you talk a bit about how you pulled those themes through from his own life, and also how it's represented in the original film?

It's obviously a very important part of the film. His nephew was extremely close to him and had inspired him to talk about a sensitive part of his life that he'd not discussed previously. We're extremely fortunate to have this in our film, most of which people would not have had access to.

I think the key to *Midnight Cowboy*, for me, was that I believe Schlesinger was trying out what it was like to express queer themes, themes he'd then express overtly in *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. I saw *Midnight Cowboy* as a kind of Trojan Horse for these ideas, moving them through the film, but not making it a "gay film," because these two men were not lovers. He doesn't try to make them that. But he's experimenting and exploring what it's like to introduce these themes in this film. We also explore the idea that some felt the film was homophobic. Ian Buruma makes the cogent point that, on the contrary, he's trying to show you how difficult it was to live life as a gay man. That's why there's the violence in the film. It's not anti-gay, it's about showing you the violence gay people experienced in daily life.

That's a really great point. I feel like modern audiences see the scene with Bob Balaban, and it's hard to see. But if you have that context of why it happens, I think that helps the reading of the film immensely. *Midnight Cowboy* is famous for being the only Best Picture to have an X rating and it had an X rating mostly for the controversial queer subject matter. Can you talk a bit about the struggle to keep that in and sort of keeping this X rating?

The X rating was due to one of the executives at United Artists who'd been advised by a psychiatrist that so much homosexual content would make it appear "gay friendly." That due to its gay subtext they needed the X rating to warn vulnerable people away from the film. So he convinced them to request the X rating to protect the studio. But when the film won the Academy Award, United Artists came back to Jerry Hellman, the producer, and said, listen, if you just change one frame, we'll give you the R, because it really didn't deserve the X rating in the first place. Both Hellman and Schlesinger said, "We will not change one frame of the movie." They gave them the R rating anyway.

### Do you feel that with the X rating and winning Best Picture that it opened sort of the floodgates to more queer cinema?

It opened the floodgates for more expressive cinema overall, not only queer cinema. There were lots of barriers that came down once it was perceived that a film like *Midnight Cowboy* could get an X rating and still win Best Picture. It didn't open the floodgates for pornographic movies either, but it did open the floodgates for more sexual behavior on screen. That wasn't the only thing that had changed - the Motion Picture Production Code had changed; which, going back to the 1930s, had made it impossible to do any of this on screen. It was just around the time that *Midnight Cowboy* came out that the restrictive code was dropped and Jack Valenti was put in charge of the MPAA. Things opened up tremendously.

I love there's a line in your film where it's stated that it was rated for "mature audiences", but really, it was a film that spoke to young audiences. Why do you think at the time, other than the Code obviously, that Hollywood was still so afraid and do you think it was helped by having a film like this win Best Picture?

Yes, it was one of many things that helped. But all the other things that we talked about in the film, the protest movements, this sense that things were changing, that barriers were coming down around many things - not only about gay life, and not only about sexuality. People were questioning rules, they were questioning authority, they were questioning all the dictates that were forcing people to do and behave in certain ways. Charles Kaiser said this is much due to the reaction to Vietnam. At the same time this is going on in the culture, Hollywood is discovering that movies made under the code were not making money. It was time to question this, too.

Right. It was the movies that were made by the Brian De Palmas and the Martin Scorseses and people like that, which were making money. So they said, as De Palma says in the film, "we don't know what these kids are doing, but let's let them do it." So not only was there gay liberation and Black liberation and women's liberation, but there was film liberation. It was liberating the way people began to make movies.

# Do you think Waldo Salt's experience with the blacklist really helped him with this material and helped him push Hollywood?

I think his experience with the blacklist reflected who Waldo Salt was. Waldo Salt was a man who cared about truth and honesty and was not going to be duplicitous in any way. And that included not giving names during HUAC. That didn't change after 11 years of not writing a script under his name. He was the same person who cared about truth after the blacklist as he did before the blacklist. I don't think the blacklist changed him; the blacklist is one of many things that reflected who Waldo Salt was.

That's an interesting way to put that and flips the narrative of how you can think about the blacklist. I also really liked the way you discuss the scene in *Midnight Cowboy* that reflects the underground film scene in New York at the time the Paul Morrissey films, the Jonas Mekas films. Could you talk a bit about how that scene in New York is reflected in *Midnight Cowboy*?

It's all part of what's taking place in the world around them; it's in the atmosphere, it's what people are breathing. It's opening up an opportunity for people to become experimental in filmmaking like they are in life. It wasn't just about what was allowed in terms of sex and homosexuality on the screen, but also the very vocabulary of films, the language that filmmakers were using to put their stories on screen. But it's not just the creators who were making the change, but it's also the audience who was receptive to it, who was willing to watch and get excited about it. That was changing too because it's all in the air. So it's not just film; it's art, it's literature, it's everything one was living with. The '60s was an incredible period of seismic change in all these areas.

And do you think, do you think because film is such a melting pot of all these different arts, that that's part of why *Midnight Cowboy* was able to funnel all of this into one piece of work?

You know, that's an interesting question. *Midnight Cowboy* is not as experimental as some of the other things that were happening then, but it touched a chord. And I think that's one reason I wanted to make this movie. It wasn't just because I read Glenn Frankel's marvelous book; it's because I'm interested in what makes art last, why art resonates when it does, and why it continues to resonate over many years. Here we are more than 50 years later, and this movie still resonates.

#### How do you think this documentary fits into your overall body of work?

Most of the films I make are about individuals who have either been struggling against a corrupt system or standing up for their rights, people who have strong moral compasses. I've tried to put them on larger canvases and portray the world they're living in, often a world of political strife and change. This one fits into that; it's what I care most about. John Schlesinger is looking at these two people who are struggling, but as Jon Voight says at the end of our film "somehow they make it" and even though the Dustin Hoffman character dies at the end, they've achieved a tremendous amount by coming together and caring for each other. I hope that compassion comes through in my other films as well.

#### What do you think that this film still has to say to contemporary audiences?

That we can't be fearful of change. Young people are pushing boundaries all the time; there must be a give and take on the part of creators and audiences to come together and understand what's happening in the culture. The other thing that's incredibly important, and we do stress this in the film, is that the economic disparity you see in *Midnight Cowboy* is every bit as bad - if not worse - today. We have the 1% with as much wealth as the bottom 99% in this country. We have people living on the streets. The characters of Joe Buck and Ratso Rizzo are a composite of so many of the people we see struggling to survive, living on the bottom rung of the ladder.

What makes *Midnight Cowboy* something that people can embrace and connect to, when in some ways it's a hard movie to watch, is that these desperate souls come alive through indelible performances. And because they care for each other. There's a compassion that comes through in this movie that you don't often see. John Schlesinger allowed us into their story, allowed us to understand who these people really were and how they connected to each other. The tenderness that comes through between these two characters, I think, is what keeps this movie so resonant today and what inspires people to react to this film so strongly.

#### ABOUT THE TEAM

#### Nancy Buirski - Director / Co-Producer / Writer

Previous to DESPERATE SOULS, DARK CITY AND THE LEGEND OF MIDNIGHT COWBOY, Nancy Buirski was Director/Co-Producer/Writer of A CRIME ON THE BAYOU (2021), which had its World Premiere at DocNYC, a 20-City theatrical release by Shout! Factory and is streaming on STARZ. It received 2 Critics Choice Awards nominations and is also at 100% Rotten Tomatoes.

She was Director/Co-Producer/Writer of THE RAPE OF RECY TAYLOR (2017) with a World Premiere at the Venice Film Festival and the NA Premiere at the New York Film Festival. It was awarded the Human Rights Nights Award at 74° Venice Biennale and received NAACP Image Award and Peabody Award nominations. It is being broadcasted on STARZ/HULU.

She was Director/Co-Producer/Writer of BY SIDNEY LUMET (2015), which had its World Premiere at Cannes and its NA Premiere at Tribeca. It began its U.S. Theatrical release at Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, one of the last films to screen at the legendary cinema. It was broadcast on American Masters.

She was Director/Co-Producer/Writer of AFTERNOON OF A FAUN (2013) that had a World Premiere at the New York Film Festival and its International Premiere at the 64th Berlinale. Released by Kino Lorber it had a record-breaking 7-week theatrical run in New York. It, too, was broadcast on American Masters.

Buirski's first film was THE LOVING STORY (2011), which she directed, co-produced and wrote. It enjoyed Full Frame and Tribeca premieres. It was Oscar shortlisted and won Peabody and Emmy Awards. It was co-produced with HBO and is one of the few documentaries to be relicensed twice by HBO/HBO MAX. It, too, is at 100% Rotten Tomatoes

She originated and produced LOVING (2015), directed by Jeff Nichols, alongside Colin Firth. It was released by Focus Features and garnered an Oscar nom for Ruth Negga. It is the Winner of the PGA Stanley Kramer award.

Buirski was a Special Advisor to SUMMER OF SOUL (2020), the winner of Academy Award for Best Documentary. As the Founder of the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival she directed it from 1998-2008. Then and now, she consults on documentaries, serves on juries and lectures on the art form.

Buirski began her career as a painter and photographer. She was the Foreign Picture Editor at <u>The New York Times</u> (1982-1996) and an Editor at Magnum Photos (1977-1981). She is the author/photographer of <u>Earth Angels: Migrant Children in America</u>.

#### Simon Kilmurry - Producer

Simon Kilmurry is a documentary producer, executive producer, and consultant. He has received one Prime Time Emmy Award, 17 News & Documentary Emmys, and eight Peabody Awards. He is a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, the Producers Guild of America, the Television Academy, and has served on the board of jurors of the Peabody Awards since 2016. He is a board member of Jewish Story Partners and an advisor to The Redford Center and Firelight Media.

Current productions include: Producer - "Desperate Souls, Dark City and the Legend of Midnight Cowboy" directed by Nancy Buirski; Executive Producer - "My Name is Andrea" directed by Pratibha Parmar, "El Equipo" by Bernardo Ruiz; and Consulting Producer - "The Human Trial" directed by Lisa Hepner.

He served as executive director of the International Documentary Association (IDA) (2015-2021) where he oversaw IDA's programs and established the Enterprise Documentary Fund, providing over \$5 million in funding to documentary films. Prior to IDA he was the executive producer of "POV", the PBS showcase of independent documentaries (2007-2015) and co-founded the WORLD Channel documentary series "America ReFramed".

He has served on film festival juries around the world, including the Sundance Film Festival, Visions Du Reel, Shanghai Film & TV Festival, Astra Film Festival, DocAviv, Movies that Matter, Nordisk Panorama, Big Sky Documentary Festival, Dokufest Kosovo, Tribeca Film Festival, Woodstock Film Festival, Jhilava Film Festival, Mountain Film Festival, and Zurich Film Festival amongst others.

#### Susan Margolin - Producer

Susan Margolin is a pioneer of digital film distribution and a dedicated creator and supporter of independent film and television with over 25+ years' experience. She founded New Video, a leading global force in independent home entertainment. New Video's library of films, television and web content, featured programming from leading brands including A+E, History Channel, Monty Python, Thames Television, Sundance Institute, Tribeca films, Major League Baseball and Scholastic, amongst others.

Through Docurama Films, a subsidiary of New Video, Margolin championed more than 400 award-winning non-fiction films, from Academy Award nominees including Kirby Dick's and Amy Ziering's *The Invisible War*, Joe Berlinger's *Paradise Lost* trilogy, Danfung Dennis' *Hell and Back Again*, Nancy Buirski's *The Loving Story* to D.A. Pennebaker's *Bob Dylan: Dont Look Back*. New Video/Docurama Films became the largest independent digital aggregation company in North America. Margolin sold New Video/Docurama Films to Cinedigm in 2012. As Co-

President of Cinedigm Entertainment Group, Margolin released many critically acclaimed independent films including Daniel Destin Crettin's groundbreaking *Short Term 12*.

In 2016 Margolin launched St. Marks Productions LLC, a production and distribution services company. She recently produced Nancy Buirski's *Desperate Souls, Dark City, and the Legend of Midnight Cowboy* and Trish Adlesic's feature documentary *A Tree of Life*(HBO) about the 2018 shooting at A Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, as well as Buirski's 2021 film entitled *A Crime on The Bayou*(Starz). She produced Alexandra Codina's feature documentary, *Paper Children*, for YouTube Originals, Buirski's critically acclaimed feature documentary, *The Rape of Recy Taylor* (Starz), and Cheryl Miller Houser documentary feature *Generation Startup* (Executive Producer). She is an Executive Producer of Judith Helfand's *Love and Stuff*, and of Zeva Oelbaum's and Sabine Krayenbuhl's *Obsessed With Light*.

Margolin serves on the Board of Directors of Chicken & Egg Pictures, the Documentary Producers Alliance, Manhattan Neighborhood Network, the Hamptons DocFest, the Advisory Board of New York Women in Film and Television, and she served on the board of BAFTA New York for over a decade. She is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), the Producers Guild of America (PGA), and the British Academy of Film and Television (BAFTA). Margolin lives in NYC with her husband and two children. She is a graduate of Brown University.

#### **CREDITS**

#### Director

Nancy Buirski

#### Produced by

Nancy Buirski Simon Kilmurry Susan Margolin

#### Featuring

Bob Balaban
Ian Buruma
Michael Childers
Brian De Palma
J. Hoberman
Adam Holender
Charles Kaiser
Jennifer Salt
Lucy Sante
Brenda Vaccaro
Jon Voight

### Written by

**Edmund White** 

Nancy Buirski

#### Inspired by

Shooting Midnight Cowboy: Art, Sex, Loneliness, Liberation, and the Making of a Dark Classic By Glenn Frankel

#### **Editor**

Anthony Ripoli

#### **Assistant Editor**

Colleen Haggerty

#### **Director of Photography**

**Rex Miller** 

#### Co Producer

Claire L. Chandler

### **Consulting Producer**

Robert Hillmann

#### **Executive Producers**

James Costa
Geralyn Dreyfous
J.C. Mills
Glen Salzman
Regina K. Scully
Nathalie Seaver
Mark Trustin
Jamie Wolf

#### **Production Assistant**

Estelle Girard Parks

#### Produced in Association With

Cineflix Productions
Foothill Productions, LLC

© 2022 Cowboy Documentary LLC