

The humanity behind  
the homophobic  
cowboy: production  
troubles and 'dallas  
buyers...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Plagued with poverty in the rural Texas area, homophobic cowboy Ron Woodroof spends the majority of his time on his electrician practices and cheap sex. Through one of his sexual partners, Ron is infected with the AIDS virus, which at the time had a near perfect fatality rate. Woodroof was estimated to only have a few weeks to gather his affairs, when his denial of his diagnosis pushed Ron to survive for several years beyond that, helping thousands of others along the way. Ron's incredible and unconventional story is beautifully portrayed in Dallas Buyers Club, where Matthew McConaughey captures the authenticity of Ron as a tragic hero flawlessly, even though the film's journey from concept to screen was by no means easy.

Dallas Buyers Club collided with screenwriter Craig Borten's personal experiences, and was an under-budgeted, unhinged project attached to many names and many studios. Within 20 years of the making, the film found solace in a cast and crew who understood Ron's story, and could relate to the film's setting (the 1980's), while also seeing the humanity behind him that most didn't. "Be here tomorrow", Ron Woodroof said to Craig Borten regarding their interview that was to take place in the summer of '92. Craig Borten had come across the story of Ron's pharmaceutical ring by a friend and was eager to make a screenplay about Ron's coming of age. Craig filmed more than twenty hours of Ron's recount before Ron succumbed to his disease in September. After rewriting the script ten times, a loose trail of directors and actors were on and off the movie throughout a twenty-year period, waiting for a studio to greenlight the project. It was only after 87 rejections that Craig had stumbled upon Matthew McConaughey, an athletic

and handsome actor who couldn't be seen as a fragile and dying homophobe in a hundred years. However, Matthew McConaughey and his costar, Jared Leto, put on riveting performances that capture the attitude and effort the actors put in to change perceptions and challenge mindsets. A 2013 Hollywood Reporter article recounts the film's worrisome beginnings, as "Some worried that McConaughey, weakened and skinny, might fall on a trailer stairway, but it was Leto who really scared several colleagues. 'Matthew had been dieting for weeks, but Jared got there and almost quit eating,' says Garner. 'Jared said he woke up at midnight and his heart was pounding so hard because he hadn't eaten that he didn't know what was going to happen,' says Brenner. 'An insane, crazy feeling'" (Appelo, 88-90). The costars pushed their mental and physical health to ensure the film's authenticity. As Borten saw fit, Rayon's role in Dallas Buyers Club is the "great foil to Ron" (Myers, 1). When critiquing the movie, it could be expected that Ron, as the homophobic and terminally ill cowboy, would be the outcast in society. Rayon's role was to shift the societal pressure away from Ron and also to draw Ron's attention to the challenge of his own bias.

The choice to bring in Rayon as a fictional, yet definitive character in the film was bold. Small choices made by the screenwriters (Melisa Wallack also wrote a small portion of the film, along with Borten) casted Rayon, played by Jared Leto, as a pivotal role in Ron's awakening in light of his racism and homophobia. Craig saw Rayon as "a moment to actually experience a loss of friend, and maybe in a sense, his only friend ever that really maybe unconditionally loved him." (Myers, 1). Jared Leto is an acclaimed actor as well as musician, with roles in Suicide Squad, Fight Club, Blade Runner 2049,

this year's *The Outside*, and many more. As a teenager in the 1970's, the AIDS epidemic was emerging on the east, where he resided in multiple cities. Coming into that age of sexual experiences, Leto experienced a "very scary thing, especially for someone my age, just coming to sexual adulthood when it was really raging, it was frightening." (Patterson, 1). As seen in performances before, Leto has a history of getting into his characters intensely. In his 2016 appearance in *Suicide Squad*, Leto went as far as sending live animals and bullets to his co-stars. In response to the criticism that emerged, he wanted to create an experience in where he had no respect for other's personal space or well beings, much like the Joker did. For his role in *Dallas Buyers Club*, Jared Leto was just as dedicated, losing more than forty pounds to solidify his transgender, women-like figure. His strive for authenticity coincided well with his intensity. As a teenager exploring his sexuality during the film's era, Jared Leto all the more saw his fit in telling this story.

Matthew McConaughey left no room for comparison however, going to equally extreme lengths to get into character. McConaughey lost a severe amount of weight, even noting that "as soon as I hit 143 pounds, I started losing my eyesight" (Miller, 1). McConaughey compared his journey to that of hunger strikers two decades ago, and the side effects to their campaigning. McConaughey notes in 2014 BBC interview that the film was "vital. It has translated, it has communicated with people, it's become personal with people. That's something I'm very proud of." (Masters, 1). McConaughey "is superb, accomplishing a complete physical and emotional transformation to become the pallid, lonely, and resilient Woodroof." (Mullard 592).

McConaughey's documentation of his journey telling Ron's story shows attention to detail and authenticity above all else, and his on-screen performance (as well as his off-screen comments) positively reflect the film's motives and ambitions for the AIDS and LGBT community.

The AIDS epidemic is a subject that has changed in representation throughout the decades. Dallas Buyers Club takes place in the 1980's, during the first alarming appearance of the virus. Dion Kagan is an academic and arts writer who is widely known for his publications in literary forums. His book, *Positive Images: Gay men & HIV/AIDS in the culture of ' post-crisis'*, is a detailed work of literature that examines the efforts, struggles, and historical relevancy that is gay culture. The lesser known era of AIDS, predominately the 1980's (and up until 1996), were viewed by the public as a fearful time for anyone plagued with the virus. Unlike previous viruses and epidemics, the visibility of " images and languages at a historical moment when communication technologies could produce, reproduce, and distribute those messages (about HIV/AIDS) more vividly and more extensively than ever before...this was an epidemic of the media age" (Kagan, 8). The first accounts of large groups of gay men associated with AIDS were in the west, where Ron resided and was diagnosed. The stigma that had developed around AIDS had already been pre-defined with the GRID label (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) was recorded in official medical and scientific records. HIV/AIDS was latched on to the " pre-existing ideas about modern identarian homosexuality" (Kagan, 8). A. Z. T, also known as azidothymidine, is an AIDS combatant drug that gained relevancy in the 1980's. The drug was marketed as a pain reliever as well as a temporary solution for AIDS victims, increasing

their chances of living longer (it is important to note that AIDS is still, to this day, is an incurable disease, and medication can only prolong the effects). A study was done in 1987 by The New England Journal of Medicine, conducting experiments with patients infected with immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). The side effects of AZT were severe, as some described “bone marrow suppression, nausea, myalgia, insomnia, and severe headaches” (AZT Collaborative, 192.) When Ron Woodroof started experiencing symptoms resulting from AZT, he stopped taking the drug and turned to alternative vitamins, unapproved by the FDA. He was able to get these vitamins in large orders and smuggle them across the border, selling them to his membership club.

Jean-Marc Valle led the production of the film with an aspiration to tell the humanity found throughout the story. The 5 million-dollar budget provided Jean-Marc Valle and his crew only gave him enough funding for a handheld camera and available light, but that was positive as it gave the film a gritty, richer surrounding. In a 2014 interview with Collider, Valle revealed that his vision for the film was to look for the “beautiful humanity in this story, in the subject and the stories. The story is true to Ron and faithful to the guy who did that (Matthew McConaughey).” (Roberts). When commenting about why Dallas Buyers Club was the story he wanted to tell, Valle said “it’s the life lesson behind it. I mean, when you’re told you’ve got 30 days to live, what do you do with them? ‘oh yea? There’s nothing out there that can kill me in 30 days. You watch me.’ The guy had no education. He became his own teacher, expert, and lab rat. He had some balls. He was a crazy cowboy who wanted to live” (Roberts). Jean-Marc Valle strived to achieve meaning behind

the picture, something people could relate to on a personal level too.. Ron Woodroof's go-hard ego and his desire to expand his life sentence found Craig seeing his own father, who battled with terminal illness as well. through Woodroof, as " he wanted to seek out alternative medications; the doctors were very cold. There was only protocol for certain chemotherapies, and we looked abroad. He never really faced death until he had to — on a physical level, but not on an emotional level" (Gettell). Craig also found Ron's answer to a particular question, why he wanted a movie made about his life, enticing. Ron believed that " people should ask questions" (Myers). Craig saw his father following the same belief.

Borten never revealed his father's illness or any personal details regarding his father thereafter; however, he has made it known in interviews that much of his vision for the screenplay came from his father and his experiences. His father and Ron's need to live reflected off of Craig's need to turn the story into a film, regardless if it took the twenty years that it did. After spending the three days of recording with Ron, in an AAA park, the script took a few years to write. Having told Ron before he passed away that he would promise to get the film made, Craig took the script to a producer, who then attached Ben Affleck and Matt Damon to the movie. After the project had fallen through multiple times, he took it to another small company that later passed it along to David Bushell, who put Craig in contact with Melisa Wallack. They wrote a book adaptation together and eventually sold to Universal. Universal poorly handled the film and left it in the shelf for a long time before Craig and Melisa bought it back from them, secured their own funding, and began an equally grueling process of filming the movie. Only

having 5 million for a budget was small, and the makeup department had to work with 250\$ for the entire film. Astoundingly, McConaughey looked deteriorated and pale, Leto managed to remain on screen with an entire face of makeup. In what appears to be a classic 'story to tell and writer looking for a break', Craig Borten and Ron Woodroof devoted equally emotional discipline to not only share the story, but to produce it.

Craig's personal experiences and strive for a successful and meaningful story as his first publicly released production motivated his 20-year journey into getting the film made with as little of a budget and crew as possible. His director and co-producer, Jean-Marc Valle and Melisa Wallack, shared the same intensity and purpose in their direction for the film as he did, trying to tell the story in a light where people understood Ron, not necessarily empathizing for him however. Crossing paths with Matthew McConaughey and Jared Leto payed off for Borten, as both of them were as excited and passionate as well. When telling stories that have so much intensity and social issue and impact behind them, it is essential to find the right people to work with on them. With an entire crew able to understand the story of Ron Woodroof and a plot that sought to not only tell the true story of his life to the best of capabilities, but the fictitious story of Rayon who could relate to the LGBT community, Dallas Buyers Club is a production of mass significance, as the people's behind the screen attempts were vigorously dedicated their time and effort to ensure that LGBT, AIDS, and communities alike would have a film to relate to.



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