

# *Dallas Buyers Club*: A “cowboy” style of fighting the authorities

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*Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée; screenplay by Craig Borten and Melisa Wallack*

Inspired by true events, Canadian-born director Jean-Marc Vallée’s *Dallas Buyers Club* is set in 1985 in Dallas, at a time when AIDS was ravaging the gay population and Hollywood icon Rock Hudson’s death from the plague was dominating the headlines.

Electrician and occasional rodeo cowboy Ron Woodroof (Matthew McConaughey) lives a rather unconscious existence saturated with drugs, alcohol and sex. Hospitalized for an injury, Ron is told he is HIV-positive and given 30 days to live. He is 35 years old.

A stereotypical homophobe, Ron at first refuses to accept the diagnosis. Before long, however, he springs into action and immerses himself in information about the disease, discovering that the drug AZT is his best bet.

Recently approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the drug is now in the human testing phase, which means that to be treated with AZT Ron must enter into a study at Dallas Mercy hospital being conducted by the hard-nosed Dr. Sevard (Denis O’Hare). From Sevard’s colleague Dr. Eve Saks (Jennifer Garner), he learns that there is a high probability he will be given a placebo.

Refusing to be a guinea pig for the medical establishment, Ron at first bribes a hospital orderly to steal vials of AZT. When the drug is put under lock and key, an ailing Ron travels to Mexico where an American doctor (Griffin Dunne), who has had his license revoked, is operating a clinic that dispenses a cocktail of vitamins, supplements and antiviral drugs as yet unapproved in the US.

Temporarily reprieved, Ron, disguised as a priest, crosses the border with a car trunk full of meds. There, he has his first of many run-ins with the FDA (this one, semi-comical). Back in Dallas, he begins dispensing the mélange of medicines to desperate sufferers from the

disease. In partnership with a wily, HIV-positive transgender man living as a woman, Rayon (Jared Leto), he sets up a “buyers club” in two rooms of a seedy motel. The therapies are therefore not sold but given out—with a club membership fee of \$400 a month.

Such clubs become a national phenomenon, as HIV-positive people seeking help in this alternative marketplace have either been made sicker by AZT or have not been able to afford it. (The film notes that when AZT was brought to market in 1987, it was the most expensive approved pharmaceutical ever sold, costing more than \$10,000 for a year’s supply.)

The increasingly successful Dallas buyers club becomes the target of frequent raids by the FDA, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and the tax hounds of the IRS, who confiscate Ron’s inventory. Always in the process of replenishing his stock, Ron’s ingenuity and irrepressible vigor lead him on globe-trotting drug-purchasing adventures. Towards the end of his life, he files a lawsuit against the FDA for denying him access to the then-unapproved drug Peptide T that he claims helps with his symptoms.

Ron succumbs to the disease on September, 12, 1992—2,557 days after his original 30-day diagnosis.

An interesting, well-meaning movie, *Dallas Buyers Club* is powered by the outstanding performances of its two leads. The heart of the film is the relationship between McConaughey’s Ron and Leto’s Rayon (each actor lost an astonishing amount of weight for his role), in which Ron transforms himself from a bigot to an enlightened crusader (and savvy businessman). Ron’s change is effectively done. The alluring, entertaining Leto is able to survive McConaughey’s emotional tsunami. They are riveting together, their interaction enhanced by the movie’s tight, lean aesthetic of natural lighting and digital camera work. Particularly memorable is the quiet scene in which Rayon the Drag Queen dons a suit to meet

with his disapproving, wealthy father (James DuMont).

O'Hare as a bureaucratic-minded physician performs well, but Garner is the film's weakest link. Not terribly believable as a medical professional, she also lacks the emotional depth and skill demanded by the film's intensity and fast-paced flow.

A great deal of time, effort and commitment went into the production. In the month before Ron Woodroof died, he met with screenwriter Craig Borten. When asked how he felt about his story becoming the subject of a movie, Woodroof said, "I'd like people to have this information and I'd like people to be educated on what I had to learn by the seat of my pants about government, pharmaceutical agencies, AIDS. I'd like to think it all meant something in the end." It would take nearly 20 years to bring Ron's tale to the screen.

The filmmakers have certainly taken pains to represent Woodroof's remarkable energy and determination on screen. Without hitting audience members over the head, *Dallas Buyers Club* clearly takes aim at anti-gay prejudice. Moreover, its setting in one of Texas' major cities (coinciding, ironically, with the 50th anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination in Dallas), home to more than its share of "rednecks," is clearly not accidental and an appeal to greater sensitivity and compassion.

With all of its commendable qualities, however, *Dallas Buyers Club* does sidestep certain larger issues. Celebrating the Herculean labors performed by Woodroof, which were forced upon him by official indifference or neglect, *Dallas Buyers Club* tends to make a virtue out of necessity and also, at the same time, narrows its focus.

Vallée's film implies at least that semi-libertarian, anarchistic individualism, or even the efforts of a small, tight-knit group, is a viable approach to problems such as AIDS and other afflictions in a modern, mass society.

At no point does the work even hint at one of the central issues of the AIDS crisis: why was there no globally (or even nationally!) coordinated, massively funded campaign to address the pandemic after its onset in the early 1980s?

Following the discovery of the first cases in 1981, the lack of response from President Ronald Reagan and the American political establishment was undoubtedly criminal. Reagan was politically associated with such figures as Jerry Falwell of the Christian right Moral Majority, who declared that "AIDS is the wrath of God upon homosexuals," and his communications director, Pat Buchanan, who asserted that AIDS is "nature's revenge

on gay men." Reagan did not publicly speak about the catastrophic disease until 1987.

The film's production notes cite bigotry and prejudice against the gay community as the source of "the US government's initial slow response to HIV, including insufficient funding for AIDS research. The association of AIDS with homosexuality triggered a ferocious anti-gay backlash, as patients died in the trenches of an undeclared war."

Both accommodation to social backwardness and the desire to whip up further backwardness for reactionary political gain no doubt help account for the Reagan administration's indifference to the AIDS crisis. However, those were not the only issues. In 1981, Reagan unleashed the biggest budget cuts in health and human services in US history. Bigotry also helped to justify, or underpin, a ruling class policy of deregulation and worship of the free market, aptly articulated by Margaret Thatcher when she said "there is no such thing as society," only "individual men and women and their families." Society had little or no responsibility or obligation to anyone, according to this line of reasoning. *Dallas Buyers Club* is an intriguing, moving story about a "cowboy" style of fighting the authorities, in the course of which the protagonist genuinely becomes a better and more understanding human being. AIDS, however, remains a major killer, especially in the most impoverished regions of the world. Some 1.6 million people died from the disease in 2012, and an estimated 2.3 million people were newly infected with HIV. More than 35 million people live with HIV/AIDS—70 percent of them in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 88 percent of the world's HIV-positive children live. The continuing death and devastation are bound up with social questions that the filmmakers, unfortunately, choose to circumvent.



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