

= Skin & Bone (film) =

Skin & Bone is a 1996 American drama film . It is the story of three Los Angeles @-@ area hustlers , or male prostitutes , and their female pimp . The three men are at different stages of their hustling careers : Dean is just beginning ; Billy is somewhat more experienced but still naive ; and Harry actively wants to get out , and is looking to break into film acting . Ghislaine , the pimp , sends each of the three young men into increasingly dangerous scenarios with clients , until both Billy and Harry are killed . The film stars B. Wyatt as Harry , Alan Boyce as Dean , Garret Scullin as Billy and Nicole Dillenberg as Ghislaine .

Director Everett Lewis financed the film almost entirely , using money earned working on other films . Skin & Bone was originally intended to be entirely improvised , but after a year of filming Lewis decided to script some of it to add shape to the story . The film alternates between black and white and color , marking shifts between depictions of a character 's fantasy and reality .

Critical responses to the film were mixed . Some reviewers thought it little more than pretentious titillation , while others praised the performances and direction and congratulated Lewis for raising some difficult questions .

= = Plot summary = =

Skin & Bone is an episodic account of three Los Angeles @-@ area hustlers , Harry , Billy and Dean , and Ghislaine , their pimp . Ghislaine (Nicole Dillenberg) constantly drives the streets of Los Angeles arranging client appointments . She relies on Harry (B. Wyatt) , the most experienced member of her stable , to train new recruits , including Billy (Garrett Scullin) and Dean (Alan Boyce) .

Harry services both male and female clients and always acts as a top ; many male clients hire him to beat them . He fantasizes about a woman (" Lovely Girl " [Susannah Melvoin]) he once knew . He has convinced himself that he is not a prostitute but an " actor " providing " fantasies . " In his unsuccessful pursuit of an acting career , Harry goes on a casting call for a cop movie . The casting director asks if he will do nudity , implying a casting couch scenario . Harry says he 's an artist and loses the role .

Billy , though experienced , is still somewhat goofy and absent @-@ minded . He sometimes helps Harry with scenes and Harry tries to convince him too that he is an actor and not a prostitute . On several occasions , Billy picks up men only to discover that the man is not actually his client . In one case he and the man fall in love and they plan to get Billy out of the business and start a life together . Shortly thereafter , Billy mistakes a man (Michael Haynes) for a client in a public restroom and that man stabs him to death .

Dean is Ghislaine 's most recent recruit . While training him , Harry again tries to impart the notion that their job is just acting . Following his training and first successful trick (with a woman) , Dean is humiliated when two women force him to start and stop masturbating seemingly at random . Dean then performs as a " nude cleaner " for a client . He learns that the client is an ex @-@ Marine who was paralyzed in combat and still longs for the boy with whom he fell in love , who was killed . The client is still able to achieve an erection and Dean has sex with him .

Harry is at an appointment with a regular , a uniform fetishist called " The General " (Wynston A. Jones) . Usually Harry beats him , but unknown to Harry , the client has arranged for something different with Ghislaine . After showing Harry a picture of himself in which he closely resembles Harry , the General orders Harry to strip . When Harry hesitates , the General attacks him from behind , binds his hands with tape and rapes him .

Harry asks his acting agent to set up an " interview " with another casting director . He lets the man fuck him . Later at Dean 's place , Harry finds Dean sitting alone burning himself with a cigarette . Dean tells Harry he ran away from home after his father had him arrested at age 14 for stealing a candy bar . Dean was put in a cell with several men who took turns raping him .

After allowing himself to be used by the casting director , Harry gets a small role as a cop in the film for which he had previously been rejected . On @-@ set he impresses the producers and they offer

him a part in a TV series .

Ghislaine sends Harry to the local morgue with \$ 2 @, @ 500 to bribe an attendant (James Michael White) . Harry sees Billy 's body and realizes that Ghislaine is acquiring it for a client . He confronts Ghislaine , accusing her of arranging Billy 's murder , and tells her he wants to quit and take Dean with him . Ghislaine agrees , if Harry and Dean perform one final scene .

The scene is a cop / prisoner scenario which begins with the cop beating the prisoner then the prisoner overpowering the cop , binding and beating and finally shooting him . Harry plays the cop and Dean the prisoner . Bound and gagged , Harry sees Ghislaine switching his gun (loaded with blanks) for another gun , but fails to convey the danger to Dean . As Ghislaine and the client watch and the client tapes the scene , Dean pulls the trigger and kills Harry . Harry meets " Lovely Girl , " who asks him how he feels being dead .

Six months later , Dean is living on the streets . Ghislaine finds him and convinces him to return to work .

= = Themes = =

Reviewers agree that Skin & Bone is as much about Los Angeles and the film industry as it is about prostitution or even homosexuality . Writing in Bright Lights Film Journal , critic Gary Morris suggests that the film is " inevitably set in Los Angeles , amid that city 's arid strip malls , newsstands , and endless dusty streets " and he points to the significance of Ghislaine 's constant movement through the city , " looking glamorous and inscrutable in her opaque sunglasses " .

For Anita Gates in the New York Times , " the film 's strongest message " is " a questioning of the actor 's trade . " For Gates , the film comes to sympathize with Harry 's notion that prostitutes are in fact actors , or perhaps vice versa : " Mr. Lewis 's point seems to be that it 's all the same . What 's the big difference , he asks , between acting out the fantasies of one rich old man or those of a few million ticket buyers ? "

Lewis himself seems to give some weight to these interpretations when he describes Skin & Bone as being about " giving your soul away and rationalizing the loss as a bonus , " and as a metaphor " for the experiences I suffered attempting to make a film at an evil film company . "

= = Production and style = =

Lewis became interested in making a film about hustlers because (despite there being films about hustlers dating back more than three decades) he had never seen such a film . In Lewis 's own words , " When I started , there were no hustler movies and now there 's a whole genre . " His original concept for Skin & Bone was that it would be a series of 70 one @-@ minute shots . Lewis changed his mind about the concept following some improvisation with actor B. Wyatt in creating the Harry character . Much of the film was improvised . After a year of filming improvisation sessions , Lewis wrote some scripted material to provide some story structure . Shooting took several years to complete because the film was almost entirely self @-@ financed .

The film alternates between color and black and white sequences . Black and white usually denotes that the scene involves one or more of the hustlers engaged with a client , and indicates that one or more of the characters (not necessarily the client) is fantasizing . But the scheme is not always consistent : for example , when Dean has sex with the paralyzed client the scene is in color ; and Harry also has an S / M scene that 's all in color (although his client never appears on @-@ screen) . Equally , Harry 's fantasies about " Lovely Girl " (who is apparently dead) are occasionally in color . In their final scene , Harry and Dean are in black and white , but when the client and Ghislaine are shown watching they 're in color , raising the question of exactly who is having the fantasy . According to Lewis , the convention grew out of the fact that the initial improvised sequences were shot in black and white ; he acknowledges that by the end the distinction had become " very confused . "

The film features a number of songs by the queercore band Pansy Division . David Arquette has a cameo appearance as " Buzz Head , " one of Ghislaine 's regular clients . Arquette himself played a

hustler in the film johns , also released in 1996 .

= = Critical reception = =

Reviews for Skin & Bone were decidedly mixed . The New York Times called it a " bleak , disjointed movie " that " often comes across as if it had been planned like a pornographic feature . " Director Lewis is praised , however , for " effectively mix [ing] us up as to what 's real and what isn 't . " Bright Lights Film Journal had stronger words of praise for the film , calling it " intense [and] sometimes unsettling " with a " conceptual richness and mocking wit , " while also noting the " element of genuine pathos [that] runs beneath the sardonic wit and brutal , sometimes lethal sex . "

The Village Voice was much more dismissive , panning the film as " fitfully comic , pitifully pretentious soap opera [that] runs out of promise so quickly that only the most tenacious (or desperate) viewers will hang on till the sorry end . " Echoing the Voice , TV Guide , while praising Lewis 's " icy style , " nonetheless suggests that the film is a half @-@ hour too long and " doesn 't really offer much to justify its existence beyond the obvious titillation . "

One near @-@ unanimous critical note concerns Nicole Dillenberg 's performance as Ghislaine . While the actors playing the three hustlers are variously described as " really quite competent " and " game , gesturally hip and highly empathic , " Dillenberg is judged " too callow for Ghislaine " and " stiffly plying monotonous attitude in lieu of creating a real character , rather like a female impersonation of female impersonator Jackie Beat . "