

NIGHT IN WEST TEXAS

A Film By Deborah S. Esquenazi



Production Company: Myth of Monsters, Texas Monthly, Naked Edge Films

2025 | USA | 83 mins

English • Color • 5.1 • 1:78:1 (16x9) (HD) • 23.98
Virtual DCP Flat Encrypted • Downloadable MP4

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Logline

Forty years after a gay Apache man is framed for the brutal murder of a closeted Catholic priest, a police chief uncovers long-buried evidence that shakes up the small, oil-rich West Texas town that imprisoned him.

Synopsis

In 1981, Father Patrick Ryan, a closeted Catholic priest, was found murdered in a seedy motel in a West Texas boomtown. The crime scene suggested a brutal act of “overkill.” A year later, a 23-year-old out-of-work oil engineer, James Harry Reyos, who was the last person seen with the victim, was charged with the priest’s murder. James was convicted to a 38-year sentence, despite the fact that he was out of the state at the time of the crime.

Law enforcement in the oil-rich town of Odessa, Texas, knew they were targeting an innocent man, but James was seen as a “throwdown character”—he was closeted and Native American, two characteristics that the prosecution used to exploit rampant homophobia and racism locally.

But times had changed when forty years later under a new Odessa Police Department, Chief Mike Gerke, reopened Reyos’ case when his daughter-in-law, a true-crime podcast fan, raised questions about the conviction after listening to an episode of “Crime Junkie.” Gerke’s re-investigation uncovered a massive oversight: latent bloody fingerprints from the scene had never been processed through AFIS (Automated Fingerprint Identification System), technology that didn’t exist in the 1980s. After reinvestigating the prints, three suspects emerge to breathe new life into Reyos’s battle to clear his name.

NIGHT IN WEST TEXAS, a feature documentary by Peabody & Critic’s Choice-winning journalist Deborah S. Esquenazi, embeds with the Innocence Project as they forge a rare alliance with the Chief of Police and the District Attorney’s office to rebuild James’s case, despite the slim odds of exonerations granted to defendants in the State of Texas. Will James win and live free after 40 years?

Director's Statement

In crafting NIGHT IN WEST TEXAS, I revisited my love of the Revisionist American Western, both on film and in literature. The film Midnight Cowboy, set in the town adjacent to where Father Ryan was murdered that dealt with pains of the closeted drifter, and John Steinbeck's essays on the struggles of living in Dust Bowl-era poverty - the shared region of where this film is set - served as significant inspirations. Our hope was to create a striking film that conveyed the horror of a brutal murder with intense emotional resonance of a man wrongly framed. Driven by verité footage, I hope we've created a film that feels immediate, gritty, and atmospheric. I hope it seethes with homoerotic tension. My dream is that a strong sense of place and high stakes result in an epic story that captures a harrowing 40-year arc.

Director Filmography

Southwest of Salem: The Story of the San Antonio Four (director)

El Vacio (director)

A Killing on Park (screenwriter)

Night in West Texas (director)

Director Bio

Deborah S. Esquenazi is a two-time Emmy nominated, Peabody-winning film director, screenwriter, and investigative journalist.

In late 2025, Deb will debut her new investigative doc, *Night in West Texas*, executive produced by Texas Monthly (CAA). Embedding once again in a multi-year investigation with the Innocence Project of Texas, her second feature tells the story of James Harry Reyos, a gay Apache oil engineer who was wrongfully convicted of the brutal 1981 murder of a Catholic priest in West Texas.

Esquenazi's first feature, the critically acclaimed documentary *Southwest of Salem: The Story of the San Antonio Four*, won the Critic's Choice Award for 'Best First Feature', garnered her first Emmy nomination for 'Outstanding Social Issues Documentary', a Peabody Award, and won a GLAAD Media Award for 'Outstanding Documentary', among other distinctions. The film helped exonerate the 'San Antonio Four' and is mentioned in the opening passages of the Writs of Habeas Corpus in *Ex Parte Anna Vasquez*, *Cassandra Rivera*, *Elizabeth Ramirez*, and *Kristie Mayhugh*.

Her documentary short, *El Vacio*, produced by Concordia Studios/New York Times, was nominated for an Emmy as part of the series *From Here to Home*. She was a 2020 Sundance Momentum Fellow for her thriller, *A Killing on Park*, a fictional work inspired by one of her early criminal investigations. *A Killing on Park* was also chosen as Cannes' Inaugural List of Best Screenplays by Women.

She is the former Senior Producer of *STORIES FROM DEEP IN THE HEART*, a teen radio program that partners Texas Folklife with KUT-NPR (Austin). During her tenure she produced over 80+ stories, many of which made the "Best of" list of PRX.

She has also been a Sundance Screenwriting Intensive Fellow (2019), a 2022 Women @ Sundance fellow, a Sundance Documentary Film Fellow, a Sundance Creative Producing Fellow, and a Firelight Film Fellow.

She lives in Austin, Tx. with her wife and two sons.

Director

Deborah S. Esquenazi

Producers

Daniel J. Chalfen, Adrienne Collatos, James Costa

Executive Producers

Scott Brown, Megan Creydt, Jim Butterworth, Trevor Burgess, Gary Hess, Ken Nolan, Christina Nolan

Editor

Liz Perlman

Cinematographers

Maria Forsythe, Deborah S. Esquenazi, Rachel Mueller, E.J. Enríquez, Mike Attie, Rachel Anderson

Sound

Marcelo Teson

Cast

James Harry Reyos, Allison Clayton, Carlos Patino
A Texas Monthly presentation of a Myth of Monsters / Naked Edge Films production