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## The Brandon Teena Story

Produced, directed, and written by Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir; cinematography by Muska and Olafsdottir; edited by Muska and Olafsdottir; executive producer, Jane Dekrone; music by Lorrie Morgan, Dinah Washington, April Stevens and The Brown Brothers. Color and black and white, 90 mins. Distributed by Zeitgeist Films, 247 Centre Street, 2nd Floor, New York, NY 10013, phone (212) 274-1989.

## Boys Don't Cry

Produced by Jeffrey Sharp, John Hart, Eva Kolodner, and Christine Vachon; directed by Kimberly Peirce; screenplay by Kimberly Peirce and Andy Bienen; cinematography by Jim Denault; production design by Michael Shaw; edited by Lee Percy and Tracy Granger; costume design by Victoria Farrell; music by Nathan Larsen; starring Hilary Swank, Chloë Sevigny, Peter Sarsgaard, Brendan Sexton III, Alison Folland, Alicia Goranson, Matt McGrath and Jeannetta Arnette. Color, 114 mins. A Fox Searchlight Pictures release.

The desire and ability to reinvent oneself is a particularly extolled virtue, one which looms large in the American imagination. One imagines the 'self-made man,' for example, the bold entrepreneur who overcomes all obstacles to become a financial success. Yet there are certain rigid rules and codes that determine what types of self-recreation are acceptable and which parts of one's identity are fixed. Brandon Teena, a native of Nebraska—the epicenter of America's heartland—transcended, albeit briefly, one of the traits considered the most immutable: gender. Born as the biologically female Teena Brandon in 1972, Brandon began living and passing as a young man in his teenage years, successfully wooing and courting several smitten young women—literally embodying the notion of the 'self-made man.' Brandon, believing himself to be a heterosexual man, had what is known

in cold, clinical terms as 'gender dysphoria' or a 'sexual identity crisis.' When his 'transgression' of the gender code was discovered, he was beaten, raped, and murdered just a few weeks after his twenty-first birthday.

The incredible trajectory of Brandon Teena's short life is the subject of two recent films—Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir's 1998 documentary *The Brandon Teena Story* and Kimberly Peirce's 1999 feature film *Boys Don't Cry*. The former film considers Brandon's life posthumously, assembling numerous interviews with his family, friends, lovers, and murderers in an attempt to make some sense of the hatred that killed him; the latter film, centering on the last six weeks of Brandon's life, is more narrowly focused on the exhilaration he feels as a sexual being. Although quite different in sensibility, both films are powerful, smartly and respectfully treating the themes of gender, identity, and sexuality.

Muska and Olafsdottir's soberly earnest documentary is conventionally structured, its assiduous assembly of interviews of Nebraska locals pieced together in an attempt to illuminate not only Brandon Teena's charismatic effect on people but also the abject fear and hatred that led to his violent death. The most remarkable series of interviews are with young women who dated Brandon, all of whom echo similar statements about what a great boyfriend he was. "Brandon was every woman's dream—he knew how to treat a woman," effuses Daphne, an ex-girlfriend from Lincoln, his hometown. Most of these women confess to being completely oblivious to Brandon's anatomy; apparently they never had any reason to doubt that he was indeed a man. For Lana Tisdell, Brandon's last girlfriend whom he met in Falls City, a hamlet in the very

southeastern part of Nebraska, the revelation that Brandon is really a 'she' made no difference. Shifting regularly from masculine to feminine pronouns when discussing Brandon, Lana's comments reveal that her love for Brandon, regardless of gender, was the only thing that mattered.

The testimonials of these young women give us the clearest sense of just how extraordinary Brandon's faith in himself must have been. These interviews, supplemented by a handful of photos that exist of Brandon—which show him as a slight, handsome young man with a winning smile—are the strongest tributes in *The Brandon Teena Story* to his ostensibly indefatigable spirit and his unswerving commitment to pursuing his desires, however great the risk.

Brandon is remembered as not only a skillful seducer of young women but also as "buddy" to John Lotter and Tom Nissen, ex-boyfriends of Lana's and part of the tight-knit group of friends who befriended Brandon in Falls City. "We'd go around and talk about women," Tom recalls, underscoring Brandon's status as "just one of the guys." When John and Tom discovered Brandon's "secret," however, they responded with unbridled fury. Punishing Brandon for his "betrayal" and "deception," Lotter and Nissen brutally beat and raped Brandon on December 24th, 1993; after Brandon pressed charges against them, they killed him and two other friends who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time a week later on December 31st.

In one of the more harrowing moments of the documentary, fragments of an audio tape are played of Brandon being questioned by Sheriff Charles Laux after he presses rape charges against Lotter and Nissen. Taunted by Laux's heartless, insensitive need to know



The real-life Teena Brandon (right) and Brandon's last girlfriend, Lana Tisdell in the documentary, *The Brandon Teena Story*.



Lana (Chloë Sevigny) and Brandon (Hilary Swank) in Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (photo by Bill Matlock).

why he “pretends he’s a guy” and “goes around kissing girls,” Brandon—in a small, tearful voice—confesses, “I have a sexual identity crisis.” Yet what is really in ‘crisis,’ as Muska and Olafsdottir suggest, is not Brandon’s sexual identity but the male, heterosexual identity inhabited by people like John Lotter and Tom Nissen—an identity so fragile that, when threatened by Brandon’s ‘masquerade’ of masculinity—knows no other response but violence, a violence which also manifests itself in the high rates of domestic assault which plague small, isolated towns like Falls City. Lotter and Nissen’s masculinity crisis, Muska and Olafsdottir further intimate, is itself a product of the socioeconomic crisis gripping Falls City and thousands of other economically depressed American cities whose denizens can only move from one dead-end job to the next. Lotter and Nissen’s rage, then, partly stems from a life in which hope has been extinguished.

Although the focus of the latter half of *The Brandon Teena Story* is on Lotter and Nissen’s trial for Brandon’s murder, hovering dangerously close to *A Current Affair* true-crime documentary esthetic, the complete lack of remorse the killers reveal is particularly illuminating and crucial to Muska and Olafsdottir’s interrogation of hate-based violence. Historically, transgender individuals like Brandon have been the ones deemed aberrant for their refusal to inhabit the gender ‘naturally’ assigned by their anatomy. What Muska and Olafsdottir wisely suggest is that it is male heterosexuality—culturally assumed to be a firmly entrenched, inalienable identity—that shows the greatest signs of sickness and is in dire need of reconfiguration.

Kimberly Peirce’s *Boys Don’t Cry*, although informed by the director’s five years of research on Brandon Teena’s life and death, distills the narrative of this incredible life to emphasize Brandon’s desire and the exhilaration felt upon recognizing oneself as a sexual being. *Boys Don’t Cry*, Peirce’s first feature, is extraordinary because of its ability to surpass the limitations of the docudrama genre; Peirce frames her Brandon Teena story as a love story with overtones of classical tragedy, resonating strongly with *Romeo and Juliet*. Brandon, in Peirce’s film, is less the martyred icon whose death provokes sociological analysis in *The Brandon Teena Story* and more the mythic, mysterious outsider. Noteworthy for its fine ensemble cast, the sheer emotional power of *Boys Don’t Cry* is almost unimaginable without the distinguished performances by Hilary Swank as Brandon and Chloë Sevigny as Lana—the two star-crossed lovers whose devotion to each other represents their only chance to escape a world of limitations.

Despite the newfound joy Brandon feels in his masculinity and sexuality, Peirce also conveys that accompanying this exhilaration is danger and often violence. Brandon’s swagger is a tenuous, hesitant one; his mimicry of the codes of masculinity suggests a gallant yet fragile bravado. Meeting a blind date at Lincoln’s local roller rink, Brandon is at first completely confident in his ability to pass as a man; donning a black cowboy hat, he reveals that he knows all too well the posture of manhood, American heartland style. Yet after a panicky rebuff by his gay cousin Lonny (Matt McGrath), who fears for Brandon’s safety, Brandon tones down his machismo performance. As he skates with his date Nicole, she notes, “You don’t seem

like you’re from around here. You seem like you’re from someplace beautiful.” Here Brandon emerges as the dreamy outsider, a chivalrous ‘stranger’ in the otherwise bleak terrain of relations between men and women trapped in isolated, impoverished American towns.

The vicarious thrill accompanying Brandon and Nicole’s passionate goodnight kiss—we are almost as ebullient as Brandon about the glorious erotic possibilities of his reimagined self—is quickly complicated in the next scene by the immediate danger surrounding him. “Fuckin’ dyke! Freak! Faggot!” scream a gang of men chasing Brandon, their choice of homophobic epithets betraying the fact that they simply cannot make sense of Brandon’s body, gender, or sexuality—a confusion which often finds its only articulation through violence. “Why don’t you just admit that you’re a dyke?” asks an almost equally confused and frustrated Lonny, suggesting that if Brandon would just concede to being a lesbian, he would at least make “more sense.” “Because I’m not a dyke,” Brandon matter-of-factly responds, a terse reply emphasizing his firm belief in himself as a man, regardless of the peril involved.

Brandon’s belief in himself as not only a man but also a lover is most beautifully portrayed and performed, however, in his relationship with Lana. Having befriended John (Peter Sarsgaard) and Tom (Brendan Sexton III) during a barroom brawl in Lincoln—a typical slugfest which becomes for Brandon a rite of passage, initiating him further into the world of masculinity—Brandon tags along with them to Falls City. Brandon delicately positions himself as their ‘sidekick,’ a drinking buddy who defers to their ‘bad boy’ cachet. When Brandon first meets John and Tom’s friend Lana, he is instantly mesmerized; her seductively languid karaoke performance of “The Bluest Eyes in Texas” is absolutely transfixing. Sevigny, just as expertly as Swank, powerfully conveys the thrill of attraction and the liberation that follows when desire is awakened.

Brandon has indeed aroused Lana from slumber, from the kind of deadened stupor that plagues young people in economically depressed towns where, as Lana says stumbling home drunk from the Qwik-Stop, “There’s nothing to do but chase bats and bumper ski.” Brandon and Lana’s first kiss seems so magical because of its transformative powers. It is a kiss which inspires in both of them the hope that they will indeed be able to transcend the obstacles in their lives: Brandon will finally be able to escape the tyranny of a culture that deems him an aberration, as Lana escapes the tyranny of the economically stagnant, small-town life she hates.

Peirce heightens the mystical element of Brandon and Lana’s courtship by using sumptuous lighting. As Brandon gazes up at Lana, framed by a window in the cannery where she works the night shift, she is

bathed in a light blue halo, a scene suggesting just how strongly she looms as an otherworldly figure in Brandon's erotic imagination. When Brandon and Lana first have sex, the *mise-en-scène* alone suggests the almost mythical nature of their union: the lovers themselves are the ones radiating light, the golden hue emanating from their bodies spilling onto the inky mystery of night. Rarely has a film scene seemed so erotically honest or affirming. Swank and Sevigny, just as much as their characters, transcend the limitations of the perfunctory sex scene; their passionate kisses and lingering touches beautifully convey the amount of sheer pleasure—if not hope—Brandon and Lana find in each other's bodies. Even when Lana suspects the 'authenticity' of Brandon's manhood, it makes no difference to her. "That's your business," Lana quickly responds when Brandon nervously tries to explain his 'situation' as hermaphroditism, clearly indicating her willingness to believe in Brandon's reinvented self.

The only false note in *Boys Don't Cry* emerges toward the film's end when Brandon and Lana decide to jettison their previously assumed erotic roles and make love as two women. "I don't know if I'm going to know how to do it," Lana sheepishly confesses. "Oh, I'm sure you'll figure it out," Brandon assures her—an odd response considering that Brandon himself is as new to 'lesbian sex' as Lana. Having adamantly denied earlier that he is a 'dyke,' why would he want to discard his belief in himself as a heterosexual male now?

Lana's love and belief in him notwithstanding, Brandon knows full well the precariousness of his situation. From the very beginning of *Boys Don't Cry*, desire is almost inextricably linked with danger; that Brandon will meet a violent end seems an almost foregone conclusion. Scenes of Brandon binding his breasts and hiding tampon wrappers reveal the many rituals performed covertly both to conceal his anatomical identity and to maintain the viability of his masculine gendered identity. When Brandon's 'secret' is revealed to John and Tom, hapless ex-cons whose turf has already been threatened by Brandon's popularity and his romance with Lana, they detonate.

Staggeringly brutal, the scene of John and Tom raping Brandon is never sensationalistic. Peirce's direction in this scene emphasizes the rabid pathology present in John and Tom's conception of masculinity, one which assumes that committing acts of violence is their natural birthright. As the violence escalates at the film's end, a shrieking Lana is powerless to stop John and Tom's ruthless murder of Brandon. Placing her body on top of Brandon's corpse, Lana suggests Juliet to his Romeo. A tragic couple shaped by passion as much as violence, the Brandon and Lana of *Boys Don't Cry* assume their place within the pantheon of legendary lovers.—Melissa Anderson