

The Changeling



This Charming Man: The charismatic life and horrific death of Brandon Teena

The tragic 'Brandon Teena Story'

By [Richard von Busack](#)

In one version of an ancient Greek myth, the clairvoyant Tiresias was transformed from male to female. Jupiter then struck him blind as punishment for answering the question whether men or women enjoy sex more. Those born between sexes, as Teena Brandon was in Nebraska in 1973, have a sort of secret knowledge that the rest of us can only guess at it, bounded as we are by the fact of our own gender. The envy that knowledge arouses can be fatal.

The young Brandon, who switched his/her name to Brandon Teena when taking a male identity, is the subject of the harrowing documentary *The Brandon Teena Story*, playing at the Castro Feb. 19-25. The documentary is an obsessive, deeply researched study of the last year of Brandon's life--a life that ended with murder just weeks after his/her 21st birthday. Filmmakers Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir interview the

dozen or so people who knew Brandon in the small town of Falls City, Neb. The scrupulous details make this story all the more sickening. The worst part of the film is an audiotape and transcription of Brandon's interview with the sheriff, shortly after Brandon was driven out to a field and raped twice on Christmas Eve 1993. On the tape, then-Sheriff Charles Laux of Richardson County makes it plain that he has no compassion for freaks and makes the experience as degrading as possible for Brandon.

The Brandon Teena Story is an outrage. This documentary stirs fury and despair--and a feeling of regret. Brandon was good-looking, had plenty of charisma and lots of girlfriends--"he was a girl's dream," says one of them. We're told that s/he knew how to kiss, how to treat a lady. A young girl identified as Gina, from Brandon's hometown of Lincoln, not only believed Brandon was a boy but accepted his proposal of marriage. Apparently she slept with Brandon a few times. Far from being shocked, she's plainly delighted by the memory. "I don't know why it worked so well," she tells the interviewers, smiling furtively.

It's easy to draw the conclusion that Brandon would have had a better chance at life away from the Midwest. Still, the visual scheme of the documentary seems slanted. Much of the police investigation source material for this story is on audiotape. Needing visuals during the legal testimony, Olafsdottir and Muska take in Super-8 stock winter landscapes of the prairies and the unlovely towns of Nebraska, slowing the film down to make the scenery look haunted and otherworldly. Synthesized bells toll--a nod to transsexual Wendy Carlos' soundtrack from *A Clockwork Orange*? The filmmakers visit a demolition derby and photograph the wrecks churning the mud; they study the mean-looking young men in the audience. It's understandable that Muska and Olafsdottir, both New Yorkers, wanted to create a somber mood. Certainly, Falls City wasn't a place you'd want to be if you were gay. A

policeman quoted here says he feels there's more than the usual amount of wife beating in the town, due to the depressed local economy. But Muska and Olafsdottir's Nebraska death trip puts up a layer of glass between the viewer and the viewed. This disdain is what Stephen Holden of *The New York Times* applauded when he described the territory of the film--and, by extension, anything west of the Hudson--as "the Land of the Pickup Trucks."

Thomas Nissen and John Lotter, the two men convicted of abusing and killing Brandon, would have been bad seeds anywhere, even in New York City. Both were ex-cons who killed their rape victim for fear of being sent back to the joint for good, and the fact is that a story like this could be repeated anywhere in the world. The snow-bordered tombstone memorializing Brandon Teena/Teena Brandon as "Beloved Daughter" is especially sad--it fixes Brandon's sex in bronze, though life had made the matter far more elusive.