To Be a Man: "Boys Don't Cry" and the Story of Brandon Teena
- David Steinberg

At face value, Kimberly Peirce's brilliant film, "Boys Don't Cry," is the true story of Brandon Teena, born Teena Brandon, who created a male identity for himself and was accepted and appreciated as male by the people around him in a small Nebraska town, only to be horribly raped and murdered when his biological sex was eventually discovered. The year was 1993. Brandon was 21.

It's the kind of stranger-than-fiction story that could motivate any number of really bad movies, movies that could deliver emotional impact in any number of simple, obvious, and ultimately cheapening ways. How easy it would be to exploit the titillating, attraction/repulsion dynamic we so easily feel for anyone we see as "other," anyone we define as radically different from ourselves. (See strange Brandon. See Brandon run. Run, run, Brandon.) Or to manipulate the upset and anger most people feel for anyone who challenges our either/or, male/female notion of gender. (Look at Teena trying to be a boy. Why doesn't she get it that she's really a girl? What do you expect if you act like that?) Or, from a different angle, to turn Brandon's story into a complacent fable of good and evil easily identified and distinguished, of cowboys in white and black hats, of the purity of innocence vilely deflowered by a big, ugly place full of bad people just waiting out there to hurt the rest of us.

Happily, "Boys Don't Cry" rejects any such one-dimensional premises and easy answers, refuses to demean the power and impact of what happened to Brandon Teena by turning his story into either a freak show or a sob story. Instead, it offers us the opportunity to identify with Brandon rather than distance ourselves from him, to see complexity in both Brandon and his tormentors rather than just simplify and judge them, to see the connections between us and them rather than dismiss them as if they had no relation to us. It also invites us to think of Brandon's tragedy as something more significant than a random, deranged act of good boys gone bad -- something that goes beyond even the issues of gender transformation and the potential for violence that lurks barely beneath the surface of small town, working class, America.

In "Boys Don't Cry," nothing is simple, certainly nothing in a world of limited scope and vision that has no room for individuality, that scrapes the souls of its people down to narrowly defined, bruised shadows of what they might otherwise be. The film's multiple and conflicting
emotional planes are sustained by the brilliant performances of Hilary Swank as Brandon, Chloë Sevigny as Lana (the girl Brandon falls madly in love with), Peter Sarsgaard as John (Lana's other, occasionally psychotic, on-and-off

boyfriend, eventually one of Brandon's rapists and murderers), and Jeanetta Arnette as Lana's loving but totally overwhelmed mother.

Scene after scene takes place on several emotional levels at once, with love, hate, confusion, courage, yearning, hopelessness, strength, and desperation all thrown into the mix. We see a rich collage of conflicting emotion sweep over Brandon's face as he struggles to tell police the story of his rape in all the excruciating detail they demand. Lana shows us a similarly complex mix of feelings when she and Brandon are making love and she tries to reconcile the body she discovers with who she understands Brandon to be. In the space of a few seconds, we watch her go through surprise, aversion, and confusion before arriving at a fundamental acceptance, affirming the core of who she knows Brandon to be over the less significant details of his anatomy.

Even the villains in this story are complex, with John paradoxically attached by his affection for Brandon, even after he comes to despise and rape him. "Are you ok?" he strangely asks Brandon after the rape, his rage slaked for the moment, as he, Brandon, and Tom sit together, trying to make sense out of what has just happened. ("Yeah, I'm ok," Brandon lies, reassembling his tattered male pride with eerie dissociation, as if his assault has nothing to do with the man sitting next to him, as if the two of them were still buddies.)

If "Boys Don't Cry" did nothing more than tell the story of Brandon Teena respectfully, did nothing more than further awareness and understanding of transgendered people, it would be a major accomplishment. But "Boys Don't Cry" is more than just the story of Brandon Teena, more than just a story about what it means to violate society's rigid rules about gender identification. For director and writer Peirce, the real tragedy of Brandon Teena's humiliation and death is not that two crazed, small-town losers went off their nut about a gender-creative person they were unable to understand. Rather, as its title suggests, "Boys Don't Cry" lays the horror of Brandon's story at the feet of an emotion-denying, humanity-denying, truth-denying definition of masculinity that saps the life out of all of us --women as well as men -- every day of our lives.

Brandon wants to be a real man more than anything. He gets into a fight at a bar defending a girl he has just met from the insulting come-ons of a guy twice his size. He risks his life and the lives of the others in his car dragging down a two-lane country road, on-coming traffic be damned. He plays the local game of trying to stand upright on the bed of a veering pickup truck (an automated version of rodeo steer riding?) because "that's what guys around here do." He drinks beer with the best of them. He is 21, going on 14, trying on the postures and gestures of being a man for the first time to see what fits, exulting every time he plays a role

successfully.

Call it macho -- that exaggerated, heavily codified notion of masculinity that boys measure themselves against as they become men. It's the overwhelming need to be acknowledged as a real man, to be received as one of the boys, as a member of the lodge. It pushes men to do things that they would otherwise avoid like the plague, things like working dangerous jobs at low pay, or going off to die in wars of dubious purpose. Anything to not be considered soft, a sissy, a pussy, a woman. As a gender code, it's a direct route to the respect of other men and to the amorous attention of women, but it costs lumberjacks their limbs, football players their health, and thousands of soldiers their lives.

Whatever it is, Brandon's got it bad. He wears the bruises and scars of each of his rites of passage with pride because each represents a moment of self-definition, a victory on the path to his self-realization as a man. He endangers himself intentionally, even joyously, again and again, because his notion of what it means to be a real man gives him no other choice. Eventually, he dies because his killers' notion of what it means to be real men gives them no choice either, no choice but to destroy him.

The one way that Brandon steps out of the designated male role is in how he relates to women. Unlike the other guys in Falls City, Brandon truly likes women. He wants to celebrate Lana, not subjugate her. He woos her with adoration rather than abuse, with tenderness and personal courage rather than power posturing. His affection and undiluted humanity are novel and compelling in the world of Falls City, Nebraska. As a result, Lana and Candace come alive in Brandon's presence in a way that is otherwise impossible for them. They have an affection for him that their other boyfriends will never see. John, as perceptive as he is violent, catches it right away -- the special twinkle in Lana's eyes and voice when she speaks of Brandon. He's the first to realize they are being sexual. And, although he sublimates his jealousy into a kind of buddy sharing with Brandon, that is the moment when his relationship with Brandon begins to sour and, ultimately, disintegrate.

The Brandon Teena portrayed by director Peirce and a luminous Hilary Swank is as seductively attractive to us as he was to the girls in his real life. Sure, Brandon's a liar and a thief, but just about everyone in this movie lies -- not because they are people of poor moral character, but because, in this world, the consequence of telling the truth to unsympathetic ears is just untenable. Unlike the more conventional liars and thieves around him, however, there is an underlying truthfulness to Brandon that calls us to like him, draws us to him, makes us sympathetic to his dilemma even though we can see that he is headed for deep trouble.

Brandon's infectious charm, beautifully expressed in Hilary Swank's adolescent gestures and winning smiles, derives from his unprotectedness, from his emotional transparency, from his adventurous, blindly optimistic, determination to live life to the hilt. Presenting himself as a genetic man, he is something of an illusion, to be sure. But there is something unmistakably genuine about Brandon, illusion notwithstanding, and that fundamental honesty eclipses the lesser significance of literally telling the truth. There is, after all, more to being truthful than simply not telling lies.

Brandon embodies this deeper truthfulness in many ways. Most essentially, there is the basic way in which Brandon is being true to himself by daring to present himself to the world as male, the way he remains true to who he knows himself to be despite the inevitable consequences of such a basic social transgression. Brandon is willing to endure the danger of discovery, potential violence and, ultimately, even death, in order to establish for himself a basic sense of personal integrity and authenticity. Beyond this, there is the emotional honesty with which Brandon relates to the people around him, even as he deceives them about his sex and about his elaborately fabricated personal history. We see it in the straightforward way he expresses his love for Lana, in the unhesitant way he defends Lana's friend Candace from insult, in the way he even challenges John when he feels John has blamed him unfairly.

The truth to which Brandon is faithful is larger than whether or not he makes up stories to impress the girls, whether he lies to stay out of jail, or whether he has a vagina instead of a penis. It is the truth of emotional reality emotionally expressed, the truth of being caring and appreciative of the people around him, the truth of being spontaneously and vigorously alive.
It is Brandon's romantically heroic belief that the truth will make him free that is both his gift and his curse, both his undoing and the reason we walk away from this film feeling so affectionate toward to him. Brandon's unflagging belief in truth, his unquenchable desire to forge a life in which emotional validity triumphs over fear and misunderstanding, speaks to something we all carry inside us. In the end, Brandon's yearnings, and the personal core to which he ultimately returns for meaning in a confusing and confused world, are very much like our own.

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