film review

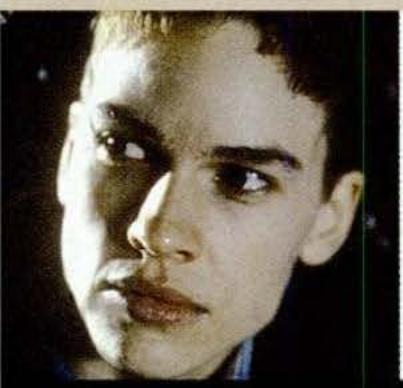
River of tears

Moving performances fuel a powerful *Boys Don't Cry* By Jan Stuart

Boys Don't Cry ■ Written by Kimberly Peirce and Andy Bienen ■ Directed by Peirce ■ Starring Hilary Swank, Chloë Sevigny, and Peter Sarsgaard ■ Fox Searchlight

Shakespeare is venerated for understanding the human heart, but then what did he know from Falls City, Neb.? When a woman impersonates a guy in Shakespeare's plays, she wins the man she loves and everyone gavottes with a hey-nonny-nonny to celebrate their union. When a woman cross-dresses in *Boys Don't Cry*, she wins the woman she loves, then gets raped and slaughtered for upsetting the social equilibrium.

According to director and coscripter Kimberly Peirce, you can still see the blood on the floor of the Nebraska farmhouse where Brandon Teena was shot in the head almost six years ago for the crime of being true to himself. Pierce spent years interviewing Teena's surviving circle in situ, and the research shows in every frame. *Boys Don't Cry* heats up with the stark authenticity and zonked-out feel for rural ennui that Richard Brooks brought to *In Cold Blood* more than three decades ago.



From left: Hilary Swank as Brandon Teena; Chloë Sevigny, as Lana, with Swank

At the hub of this remarkable directing debut is the captivating and utterly credible performance of Hilary Swank as Brandon, a 21-year-old car thief in the midst of a "sexual identity crisis." Unsurprisingly, the crisis is manufactured by the straight men around Brandon (née Teena Brandon), a low-key type who otherwise had no problems with strapping up his girl breasts and stuffing a sock down his boy slacks to be closer to the guy he felt himself to be.

For a time, Brandon pulls it off. After narrowly escaping a barroom brawl in Falls City, Brandon enjoys the camaraderie of paroled thugs John Lotter (Peter Sarsgaard) and Tom Nissen (Brendan Sexton III), who are drawn by their new buddy's aw-shucks charm and outlaw spirit. Before long, he is courting John's emotionally parched ex-girlfriend Lana (Chloë Sevigny). While Peirce tantalizes us with the sexual obstacles of Brandon's seduction, *Boys Don't Cry* achieves its thematic poignancy from the social hurdles of his male-bonding rites with the guys. So big deal, Julie Andrews smoked a cigar. Swank has to bronco bust the back of a Ford pickup.

The actors are sensational. As Brandon casts his spell, you can see Sevigny melting down from a hard-bitten B-movie moll to a blushing fool for love. Alicia Goranson makes Lana's sweet-souled girlfriend Candace instantly appealing. Sarsgaard and Jeannetta Arnette as Lana's mom successfully subvert their daytime-TV looks with complex characterizations.

Although Jim Denault's high-contrast color photography is a bit too studied and overlit, his artful country tableaux aptly remind us that ugly things happen in pretty places, as anyone who has visited Ravensbruck, Germany, knows too well. ■

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