

Double Trouble
The two lives and one murder of
Teena Brandon.

By Jared Hohlt
Posted Thursday, Oct. 7, 1999,

(Note: "Life and Art" is an occasional column that compares fiction, in various media, with the real-life facts on which it is ostensibly based.)

Boys Don't Cry--a just-released dramatic film about a woman who was raped and murdered in a small Nebraska town for pretending to be a man--hews fairly closely to what really happened to 21-year-old Brandon Teena (nee Teena Brandon).

In the film--as in life--Brandon (who never used the last name Teena; he was called "Brandon Teena" only posthumously) had already been wooing young women as a man in his hometown of Lincoln before arriving in Falls City (population 5,000) in late 1993. He begins dating a 19-year-old named Lana and quickly becomes part of her circle: Lana's mother, a few female friends, and two ex-cons named John Lotter and Tom Nissen. (John and Tom weren't old friends as the film makes them out to be. They met only a month before Brandon's murder.) The marginalized group spends its time drinking, playing cards, and "bumper-skiing" from the back of a moving pickup truck by holding a rope attached to the cab. Brandon, who has a history of forgery, ends up in the women's section of jail. Lana helps post his bail.

Brandon's acquaintances become suspicious of his gender, and John and Tom become hostile toward him. (In real life, John had been involved with Lana, and Tom may have been briefly, too, but the film avoids this history.) The two men pull down Brandon's pants, exposing his genitalia, then later beat and rape him. Though Brandon is warned to keep quiet, he reports the rape. In the movie, the sheriff sounds like a blame-the-victim monster when he questions Brandon about the attack, but this account jibes with what happened in real life. (Sheriff Charles Laux, who is not named in the film, wanted to know why Brandon was masquerading as a man and asked him if he'd helped one of the rapists get an erection.) A few days after the rape, Lotter and Nissen track

down Brandon at a farmhouse and kill him.

Brandon seduces women with his good looks and his great kissing in the film, but he charms them by just listening. In 1994, Brandon's girlfriends told the *Village Voice* that Brandon was their best boyfriend ever. One woman who was engaged to Brandon for three months said he was a "good lover." Did they know that their perfect boyfriend wasn't a boy? Brandon passed as a man by securing his breasts with Ace bandages, keeping his clothes on while snuggling with lovers, and occasionally using a fake penis during intercourse, all of which is covered in *Boys Don't Cry*. But he also told some women that he was going to get a sex-change operation and others that he was a hermaphrodite, a fact that his mother denies.

When did Lana discover Brandon's true gender? Both the film and the record oscillate on this question. In a telephone interview, *Boys Don't Cry* director and co-writer Kimberly Peirce says that Lana told her that "she knew Brandon was a girl the first time she met him." But in subsequent conversations, Lana claimed that she didn't find out until Brandon was jailed or until John and Tom had taken his pants down or until he'd been raped.

Although Lana knew Brandon for only a month before his murder, the filmmakers make their relationship seem longer and more serious, perhaps to give their affair epic status. Indeed, celluloid Lana (played by Chloë Sevigny) and Brandon (Hilary Swank) almost escape the obstacles posed by her family and the hatred of the community by running away together.

And at one improbable moment, they almost discover themselves as lesbians. In a lovemaking scene that occurs after the rape, Brandon finally takes off his shirt. Lana says, "I don't know if I'm going to know how to do it." Brandon responds, "I'm sure you'll figure it out." As best we know, Brandon did not identify as a lesbian, saying he was disgusted by the idea of loving a woman that way.

One also supposes that the real Lana was a bit more confused and angered by the public revelation of Brandon's gender than the movie suggests. JoAnn Brandon, Brandon's mother (not depicted in the movie), asserted on Geraldo that "Teena" told her that "she thought Lana had set her up for the rape." This accusation, however, seems very much at odds with the fact that Brandon and Lana spent time together after the attack. In the film, Lana tries to prevent John and Tom from finding Brandon by asking them to go get a drink. Instead, they drive her to the farmhouse, where she then tries to stop them from killing both Brandon and their friend Candace. (Candace is fictional. There were two victims besides Brandon: a woman who had been involved with Brandon and a man who was visiting the area. Tom takes aim at Lana, but the bullet misses because John shoves him. The men leave and Lana lies next to Brandon's body, and the movie ends a few minutes later with a music video-ish sequence of Lana driving out of town. Boys Don't Cry's postscript explains that she eventually returned to Falls City, where is she currently raising a child.

Nobody actually knows if Lana accompanied the two men to the farmhouse. Tom and John did swing by Lana's house before heading to the scene of the murder, and John reportedly said to Lana and her sister (who does not figure in the movie), "I feel like killing somebody." Lana's mother, Linda Gutierrez (not her name in the film), told them where they could find Brandon.

Lana and her family have been criticized for not warning Brandon that trouble was on the way. It's possible that one of the reasons they didn't phone Brandon was that Lana went with Tom and John. As Aphrodite Jones recounts in her book about the incident, *All She Wanted* (for which Diane Keaton has bought the movie rights), Tom told a police officer that Lana "was in the car" but didn't go into the farmhouse. "She stayed in the car the whole time." Later, Tom testified against John so as to avoid the electric chair. (John maintains his innocence from death row. Tom is serving a life sentence.) On the witness stand, Tom said that he and John were the only ones in the vehicle. And as John Gregory Dunne reported in *The New Yorker*, Tom's initial allegation "was not vigorously pursued in testimony."

Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir, who made the 1998 documentary *The Brandon Teena Story*, say Lana "was adamant that she wasn't there." *Boys Don't Cry*'s Peirce struggled over whether or not to place Lana at the murder scene. "Is Lana actually going to sit in her house and let Brandon be murdered?" Peirce asks. As to whether Lana would have sat in the car, Peirce admits that it's possible, but that it wouldn't have been as dramatic.

Why did John and Tom feel as though they had to kill Brandon? They had to be worried about the rape allegation, although as Dunne points out in *The New Yorker*, it doesn't make sense to try to escape a rape charge, which is difficult to prosecute, by committing murder. But these were not especially bright ex-convicts. They tossed the murder weapons into a river, which was frozen at the time. And Tom would later describe the murders to a *Playboy* writer before his trial (the writer was called as a witness).

Both John and Tom were troubled. Boys Town rejected John for admission when he was a child, and Tom had been abused and liked to mutilate himself. They were no doubt enraged by Brandon's deception and angered by his identity, as the film implies. Perhaps they were also disturbed by the meaning of the rape. In the documentary, Tom's girlfriend says someone told her Tom was a "faggot," and a lawyer asks Tom: "After this sexual assault ... didn't [your girlfriend] tell you people were calling you a pervert? ... You had just had sex--forcible sex--with a woman who was dressing as a man. How did you feel about that?" Tom replies, "I didn't feel very good about it at all."