

The unhappiness of youth

David Walsh reviews *Boys Don't Cry*, directed by Kimberly Pierce

By David Walsh
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Boys Don't Cry is a fictionalized account of a tragic series of events that took place in rural Nebraska in December 1993. Teena Brandon, a young woman of 20, moved to Falls City (a farming community of 5,200 people) from Lincoln, dressing and passing herself off as a young man, Brandon Teena. She befriended a number of people, including several local girls. When her secret was exposed, two erstwhile friends, John Lotter and Tom Nissen, beat and raped her. When local police failed to arrest them despite Brandon's identification, the two men shot and killed her and two potential witnesses a week later. In court Nissen testified against Lotter, and received three consecutive life sentences; Lotter is currently on death row.

Kimberly Pierce (co-screenwriter and director) and Andy Bienen (co-screenwriter) have done a remarkably sensitive job, by and large, of dramatizing this terrible story. It is always astonishing in America these days, given the official ignorance and reaction, to encounter a work that somehow gets things right, or even mostly right. From watching the mass media you would draw the conclusion that nobody in the US understands why anyone lives or dies, or does anything.

Boys Don't Cry is about young people in America; that is to say, it is about unhappiness. Unhappiness, and the various desperate attempts to overcome it, and the ways in which those attempts are suppressed or crushed. Teena/Brandon (Hilary Swank) dresses like a boy and goes off to Falls City because she is tired of being called a "dyke" in Lincoln. She thinks that in a new place where no one knows her, she will be happier. Lana Tisdell (Chloë Sevigny), with whom Brandon falls in love, works in a factory weighing spinach, lives with her mother who drinks too much, and dreams of being a professional karaoke singer. She falls for Brandon because he treats

her better than the other boys. She wants to go anywhere that's outside Falls City.

John (Peter Sarsgaard) and Tom (Brendan Sexton III) have little or nothing going for them. No jobs, no future. They've already spent time in the penitentiary. John used to go out with Lana and still feels something for her. They adopt Brandon as their pal. When "he" turns out to be a woman, they go crazy with humiliation and jealousy. But there is something satisfying in the discovery too. For these two, very near the bottom of society, here is someone apparently even lower.

Many things in *Boys Don't Cry* are wonderfully done. The despair is captured. Some of the early scenes with Sevigny's Lana are particularly acute. She first meets Brandon in a bar where she and a couple of friends get up and sing about "The Bluest Eyes in Texas." Sevigny has these sleepy eyes and a manner that combines arrogance and self-effacement in equal measure. "Who are you?" she throws out insolently as she passes Brandon for the first time. The next time they meet Lana is wandering around a convenience store, wasted, trying to convince the storeowner to sell her some beer.

The fashion in which the relationship between Lana and Brandon begins is handled well. They feel something for each other, and gender doesn't matter very much. Lana is provided with ample evidence that Brandon is a female, but chooses to ignore it. This seems believable.

In its own way, the story points to how scrambled social, family and sexual relations have become in the US. The world these young people live in has little to do with America as it officially presents itself. They live a kind of anarchistic existence, cut off from the direct influence of all the official institutions—parties, churches, unions—that carry on mostly out of inertia. It's hardly a utopia, this life of dead-end jobs, drinking, drugs, minor

and not so minor scrapes with the law. But Pierce and Bienen show that there is something else here too, or the desire for something else.

Some commentators write about these characters as though they represent an exotic life form. In respectable publications critics write with contempt about "trailer trash." In fact, tens of millions of people live in circumstances not too dissimilar to these. They are not participating in the stock market boom; therefore they don't count.

Another way of avoiding the social issue is to write about "homophobia in the heartland." Of course, anti-gay prejudice is a poison that needs to be specifically combated. But no one has the right to be astonished by the fact that conditions of such hopelessness and lack of culture breed backwardness. Outrage at the fates of Teena Brandon and Matthew Shepard is somewhat hollow if it is not accompanied by outrage at the wretchedness that helped produced the tragedies.

I don't know the immediate motives of the film's creators. Pierce obviously felt strongly about the tragedy. It took her five years to raise the money and assemble the cast of *Boys Don't Cry*. She told an interviewer: "My whole point was that I fell in love with Brandon. I felt his story needed to be told. The media coverage was very sensational from the beginning. Nobody got inside the character. No one ever really knew about the love story. My whole point was to honor him. My whole point was to explore the mechanics of hatred so that this stuff didn't happen again."

Whatever the limitations of her outlook, Pierce was honest enough to take a hard look at the set of circumstances surrounding Brandon's death. One might say that through her artistic integrity she stumbled on the general tragedy surrounding the individual tragedy.

I think the filmmakers, however, must have been made nervous at a certain point by the kind of film they found themselves making. If they had maintained their course and made the story of Teena Brandon's fate into a wholehearted indictment of American life, which of course is what it naturally tends toward being, the work would not have been well received in their own milieu or by the media. Unfortunately, the filmmakers "came to their senses" a little too soon.

So *Boys Don't Cry* loses its way as it approaches its denouement in Brandon's rape and murder. Or, rather, the film finds its way back to a somewhat predictable and well-trodden path, the story of saintly versus monstrous individuals. Whereas before we had bad, brazen Lana,

stumbling around malls in a stupor, now she sobers up and has the stereotyped look of "a woman in love." This is not necessarily progress. Swank as Brandon loses her edge. Tom and John become cardboard cutouts, mere villains. Everything in the film clogs up, slows down.

One example: Brandon and Lana have decided to run away together. Then Lana, not surprisingly, has second thoughts. When Brandon shows up in her room, she lets her and the audience know that she has reservations with body language, a grimace, monosyllabic responses. Why are we being handed the information on a plate all of a sudden? The film loses subtlety as it narrows its focus, as it turns its back on the bigger and more terrifying picture. This can be explained. As long as their understanding and intuition about the present state of affairs guide the filmmakers, events and dialogue flow organically, lightly, under their own steam. As soon as Pierce and Bienen begin to worry about fulfilling their own and other people's expectations for the film, when they limit themselves to exposing the mechanisms of a "hate crime," *Boys Don't Cry* loses its power.

The rape and murder are presented in extended and graphic detail. Again, this suggests that the filmmakers don't quite know how to end their story or what to emphasize, so they take the less demanding way out and simply horrify their audience. That's not so difficult to do. There are always plenty of things to horrify people with. Unfortunately, some spectators may take the easy way out too, and choose to remember the violence while forgetting the relatively clear-eyed portrait that came before of a segment of the population so brutalized and alienated that the ultimate explosion seems almost an inevitable consequence. In any event, there is enough here of a sober and accurate accounting to make this one of the better American films of the year.

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