

Program note for **Pinewood Dialogue with Kimberly Peirce** and screening of **Boy's Don't Cry**
June 9, 2002

Series: *CHRISTINE VACHON AND KILLER FILMS*

BOYS DON'T CRY

Fox Searchlight, 1999, 118 mins. 35mm print source: Fox.

Directed by Kimberly Peirce. Written by Peirce and Andy Bienen. Produced by John Hart, Eva Kolodner, Jeffrey Sharp, and Christine Vachon. Cinematography by Jim Denault. Editing by Tracy Granger and Lee Percy. Original Music by Nathan Larson. Production design by Michael Shaw. Art direction by Shawn Carroll. Costume design by Victoria Farrell. Principal cast: Hilary Swank (Teena Brandon/Brandon Teena), Chloë Sevigny (Lana Tisdel), Peter Sarsgaard (John Lotter), Brendan Sexton (Marvin Thomas Nissen), Alicia Goranson (Candace), Alison Folland (Kate), Jeanetta Arnette (Lana's Mom), Rob Campbell (Brian), Matt McGrath (Lonny), and Cheyenne Rushing (Nicole).

Review by Stephanie Zacharek, *Salon*, October 11, 1999:

Like the threat of heat lightning on a sultry summer evening, a vapor of menace hovers over Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* almost from the first frame. The movie, an account of a real-life multiple murder, unfolds in such a leisurely way that it seems like one long premonition: Something very bad is going to happen to a character we're rapidly growing to care about, and our increasing feelings of helplessness sweep the story forward, toward inevitable tragedy. *Boys Don't Cry* is gripping, and it's moving, but it isn't particularly subtle. There's a strong thread of tabloid drama running through its core—but at least it's sensationalistic storytelling with a heart.

That may be the only honest approach, since Peirce is dealing with such sensationalistic material: *Boys Don't Cry* tells the true story of Brandon Teena (played by Hilary Swank), who was raped and murdered in a small Nebraska town in 1993. Brandon's secret was that he was, biologically, a woman—an assigned role that had never felt right to him. Thus Teena Brandon became Brandon Teena, dressing like a man, cultivating male mannerisms and pursuing the attentions of women. In other words, he lived his life as the man he wanted to be.

The charismatic Brandon was hugely successful with women—they seemed to have little trouble buying his identity as a man—but he repeatedly found himself in scrapes with the law, tangled up in crimes that included forgery and auto theft. His murderers, ex-cons John Lotter and Thomas Nissen (played by Peter Sarsgaard and Brendan Sexton III), were two locals from Falls City, the Nebraska town he'd drifted into. According to Peirce's telling of the story, they had become friends with Brandon, and there was the additional complication that one of them had long been obsessed with a young woman Brandon had fallen in love with (Lana Tisdel, played by Chloë Sevigny). When Lotter and Nissen discovered Brandon's "real" sexual identity, they brutally raped him. When Brandon went to the authorities (who, apparently, were not particularly sympathetic), Lotter and Nissen tracked him down and killed him, along with several of his friends, in order to silence him.

Peirce, who also co-wrote the screenplay with Andy Bienen, covers an extraordinary amount of territory, not just in terms of dealing with Brandon's sexual-identity and self-fulfillment issues, but also in trying to

understand the lives of those around him. She's never condescending in her view of small-town life—she doesn't go out of her way to make it look depressing and dismal, and with the reality of Falls City, she doesn't have to—but she's also clear-eyed about the fallacy that small towns are necessarily sweet, safe little places somehow less threatening than cities. Her vision of Brandon's Nebraska (the movie was shot in and around Dallas, as Peirce discovered that Brandon Teena's murder was still too hot an issue in Falls City) takes the measure of roadhouses where pals congregate at night, of highways that seem to stretch into nowhere, of dingy homes rendered bleakly cheerful by framed prints.

Occasionally, when one of the characters is confessing a long-cherished dream, or making a hopeful assertion that the world really is a beautiful place, Peirce cuts to an eerily lit dream landscape that's almost David Lynch-like in its beauty, dotted with simple elements like water towers, naked trees and low ceilings of clouds. It's as if she and cinematographer Jim Denault (who also shot the starkly evocative 1996 *Ill town*) want to assert that there can be beauty in bleakness, and vice versa. The landscape around Brandon—changeable at any given minute but mostly stuck somewhere between stark ugliness and naked splendor—acts as a kind of mirror for the dueling elements of his own identity. The movie's surface is charged with tension; Hilary Swank's Brandon, with his gently curved cheekbones and smooth skin, is all about tension lurking just beneath the surface.

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