

A Filmmaker Fictionalizes to Get at Difficult Truths

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In 1994, when Kimberly Peirce decided to make a short film about the life and tragic death of Brandon Teena, she didn't know that she was beginning a five-year odyssey that would result in the making of her first feature-length movie. Nor did she realize the difficulty of finding the story within the morass of contradictory details. And she had no idea that she was wading into a contentious and continuing debate over artistic license and a filmmaker's obligation to accuracy.

All she knew, she recalls now, was that she couldn't let Teena go. "I fell in love with her," she says.

Peirce said that early drafts of her script hewed closely to the facts, but she couldn't get the story to work dramatically. "It was unwieldy," she said. "I hadn't yet found the underlying emotional truth and the mythic structure."

But the sister of one of the main characters in the movie said she has asked the local theater not to show the film when it reaches Nebraska.

"I'm trying to do everything in my power to stop it," Leslie Tisdale said. "It's a lie of a movie."

Originally named Teena Brandon, Teena had been a sexually confused Nebraska youth who, without role models or support, had tried to make a new identity for herself. She was killed in 1993, at age 21, by men who were incensed when they learned she wasn't a man.

Peirce, then a graduate film student at Columbia University, made two research trips to Nebraska. Tom Nissen and John Lotter were convicted, and eventually Peirce amassed 10,000 pages of trial transcript and performed numerous interviews. Still, much about the story remained submerged.

“A lot of things people said conflicted with each other,” she said. “Many times people contradicted themselves. It took a storyteller to figure out what the truth was.”

Her movie, “Boys Don’t Cry,” released last October, has won critical praise and garnered awards for its star, Hilary Swank. But it also has come under attack for the liberties it takes with the facts. It’s another recent example of how based-on-fact films--particularly contemporary stories such as “The Insider and “The Hurricane”--can run into problems with those who participated in the real-live events.

Lana Tisdale, Teena’s lover, who is portrayed in “Boys Don’t Cry” by Chloe Sevigny, has sued the filmmakers and the film’s distributor (Fox Searchlight), alleging that because of the film, friends and family members now scorn her as “a lesbian who did nothing to stop a murder.”

The movie’s producers also have been sued by author Aphrodite Jones, whose nonfiction book on the case, “All She Wanted,” was to have been made into a movie starring Drew Barrymore. Her lawsuit contends that Fox Searchlight tied up the rights to her book in bad faith. The same studio now is distributing “Boy’s Don’t Cry.”

In her small town, Tisdale had been subjected to abuse even before the movie was made. Many locals reacted with less outrage to the murders than to Teena’s deception. Her killers, after all, were local boys, and Teena was from someplace else. She had come into town, tricked the men and romanced the women. She had made fools of them all.

“Once the town of Fall City found out that he was a she, the whole town went ballistic,” said Leslie Tisdale, Lana’s sister. They’re still continually talking about her.”

Jones, too, said some of the movie’s inventions disturbed her, especially the way it places Lana Tisdale at the scene when the shooting occurred. There was conflicting testimony at the trials as to Lana’s whereabouts, and placing her there might suggest that she was an accessory to murder, Jones said.

Many of Peirce’s early drafts included the character of Philip Devine, a 22-year-old black man who had been living at the home of Lisa Lambert, where Teena also was living when the shooting took place. Devine was Leslie Tisdale’s boyfriend. Teena,

Lambert and Devine all were killed, but Peirce eventually cut Devine out of the movie and changed the name of the Lambert character.

“I frown on that,” Leslie Tisdale said of Devine’s omission. “They’re just looking at Brandon Teena, and they’re not wanting to think about anybody else. It’s like, ‘There were two other victims? Who cares.’ ”

Jones, too, said she is bothered. “Philip Devine was someone who climbed mountains on one leg, literally, in his lifetime, and he was a good soul.”

But leaving him in would’ve required adding Leslie Tisdale as a character to explain who Devine was, said Peirce. “I already had seven main characters,” she said. “I didn’t have room for Lana’s sister.”

Peirce maintains that her greater obligation was to Teena. It was her fascination with Teena that caused her to devote five years making the movie, she said. “If I couldn’t do honor to Teena, then I couldn’t do honor to anybody.”

It was revelatory, she says, to watch the story grow stronger as she deleted material and altered facts. “It blew my mind,” she said. “You’re allowing the myth to take over, which is really what movies are.”

Peirce speaks eloquently about the value of myth, of dreams, to illuminate truth, in art as well as life.

“I don’t think most people understand the power of dreams,” she said. “Dreams take things that are confusing and scary and transform them so that we can understand them.” That is what she did with the movie, she said.

“We tell stories so that people can express the things that they are frightened of.”

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REALITY AND THE MOVIES

This is the second of a two-part look at the truth-in-movies debate. The first ran in Sunday Calendar.