

Kimberly Peirce

By Scott Tobias

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Kimberly Peirce spent more than five years researching and filming a dramatic treatment of the life and death of Teena Brandon, a teenage girl from Lincoln, Nebraska, who passed herself off as a boy and moved to nearby Falls City, where she was eventually raped and murdered. Originally conceived as a thesis project for Columbia Film School, the story was expanded into a full feature once Peirce hooked up with independent producer Christine Vachon, whose formidable track record includes *Safe*, *Velvet Goldmine*, and *Happiness*. The result was *Boys Don't Cry*, a remarkably assured and emotionally devastating debut that features a surprising and revelatory lead performance by Hilary Swank (*The Next Karate Kid*). In what might have been a mannered acting stunt, Swank lends charisma and vulnerability to Brandon and, in a love story that transcends gender barriers, Chloë Sevigny is equally fine as girlfriend Lana Tisdel. Rounding out the cast are Peter Sarsgaard and Brendan Sexton III as John Lotter and Tom Nissen, respectively, two ex-cons who initially accepted Brandon into their group, then killed her once the truth about her identity surfaced. Peirce recently spoke to *The Onion*.

*The Onion*: I guess I'll start with something obvious. What initially drew you to the story?

Kimberly Peirce: I was in graduate film school working on a thesis script about [Civil War figure] Pauline Cushman, an African American. They were locking up anybody with African-American blood, and she had the ability to pass as a man. So she passed as white, passed as a man, passed as a Southerner, became a spy for the Union Army, and saved herself from going to jail. Totally phenomenal and thrilling, and I love stories about women who pass as men. The problem was that, as I probed into it, I found out that she did it for survival reasons—and I was just more compelled by stories about identity. So when I picked up *The Village Voice* in April of '94, I was totally blown away by the story of the life and death of Teena Brandon. I felt this immediate kinship with Brandon because I know a lot of butch lesbians and transgenders, and I felt like I understood him. I fell in love with this trailer-park girl who didn't have any money and didn't have any role models, yet took this imaginative leap and transformed herself, which is extraordinary. She just put on a cowboy hat, put a sock in her pants, and started asking girls out. I started reading everything I could about this story, but I found that a great deal of the coverage was really sensational. People were focusing on the spectacle of a girl who passed as a boy because they didn't think most people understood that that happens, and that it's normal and human and natural. They were focusing on the brutality and gratuity of the violence that these boys [John Lotter and Tom Nissen] had exacted upon her without emotionally going underneath to determine why they had done that.

O: Is that the reason you felt you needed this fictional dramatic treatment? Is there something you can get at that, say, magazine articles or the documentary [*The Brandon Teena Story*] could not?

KP: Sure. First of all, Brandon: I had the opportunity to bring him to life. Not literally, of course, but I can bring a version of Brandon to life. Nobody can do that in any other medium. There will be a human being on that screen and you're going to identify with him, you're going to connect

with him, and you're going to watch him in action. The boys: Instead of reading about the violence, you're going to see the emotional mechanisms of hatred. You're going to see their attraction to Brandon, and you're going to see that turn into hatred. Not only is Brandon a more effective boy than they are, but they discover he's been pulling it off as a girl. You're going to see Brandon deal a double blow to their masculinity, and you're going to see them lash out. If you read about it, it's purely theoretical. On the screen, it's going to be entirely dramatic and human. You're going to enter into a love story, and you're going to make it true... I think part of the way that you overcome this hatred against difference is to bring someone like Brandon to life and let people see that he's just like anyone else. He had the same desires that everybody has. Brandon wanted love and acceptance, and [his relationship with Lana Tisdell] was a beautiful love story. You can talk about how beautiful it is or you can bring the audience inside of it. Feature filmmaking is an amazing gift: It's understanding in a different way because it's experiential.

O: Can you describe the process of researching the film?

KP: I researched it for four and a half years. When I first read about it and saw all the sensationalism, I started interviewing butch lesbians and transgenders on my own to figure out how they saw their own bodies, what their fantasy life was, and how they saw Brandon. First, just to get more inside of Brandon, but also to figure out some issues I had. Such as, "Why do butches feel satisfied dressing up as boys, but can still accept their female bodies?" and "Why do transgenders feel out of alignment and feel like they need to go farther, like dressing up is not enough?" For transgenders, performance is just the beginning and bringing themselves into alignment is the next step. I was just fascinated with that, because I identify with it. I have similar confusions and interests, and I like dressing up and changing my identity around. I don't know if it's more of a butch kind of thing or more of a transie kind of thing, but it's fun for me. I identify with that in Brandon. So then I hooked up with Transsexual Menace, because I realized that I needed to go where Brandon lived, and I went back to the murder town with them. Do you know who they are?

O: No.

KP: They were a group of 15 transsexuals who were staging a vigil on Brandon's behalf. So we went and staged the vigil. Then I retraced his steps with [transsexual performance artist] Kate Bornstein, went to the murder trial for John Lotter and Tom Nissen, and went to the farmhouse where Brandon was executed. I came back to New York, worked on a script, made the film into a short as my graduate thesis, met [producer] Christine [Vachon], then went back to Falls City in July of '96. I mostly hung out with kids at the Quik Stop, because I wanted to absorb what life was like there. I wanted to understand the class stratification, I wanted to understand the kids, and I wanted to understand how they spent their days and nights. I wanted my movie to be an absolute reflection of their reality. Then I got to meet Lana, and that was extraordinary.

O: Tell me how those interview sessions with her evolved. [Editor's note: On Oct. 19, after this interview was conducted, Lana Tisdell—who still lives in Falls City—filed a lawsuit charging that Boys Don't Cry uses her name without permission, portrays her in a false light, and invades her privacy.]

KP: I went to the Quik Stop, I saw her, and then I set up a meeting to talk about the movie. I went to her house the next day, knocked on her door, and nobody answered at the time I was supposed to be there. I came back later and, finally, her mom let me in and started talking about how they were unhappy with portrayals of them in the media. So I said, "Well, the whole point of making my film is that I want to get at the emotional truth, so if you share the emotional truth with me, that's what I'm going to base my depiction of you on." She shared her story with me, and then Lana came out of her room about an hour later and hesitantly sat down with us. Eventually, she said, "The reason I didn't answer the door was I thought that you were Brandon." Now, I don't look like Brandon, but it's not so much that I look like him as it was she was still looking for him to be alive, which for a director was like a dream come true. You want those emotional floodgates to open up, so when I had her saying that, I knew the door was open.

O: But you said she was hesitant at first. Were there pieces of information that you really had to dig at?

KP: Oh, I had to dig at everything. And the truth came out in forms that were very interesting to me, and that were very encoded in the ways she kept her fantasies about him when he was alive, and even now.

O: How much did you allow yourself to stray from the facts of the case?

KP: I never really look at them as "the facts" of the case, because for most people, there were very few facts, and for me, there were five and a half years of facts. If you think about what the facts were for me, they were the whole interview [of Brandon] with the sheriff to talk about John Lotter, they were John Lotter's entire life, they were Brandon's entire life, they were Lana's entire life... When you say "stray from the facts," here's the movie [Peirce draws a diagram of a small square on a piece of notebook paper] and then here's what happened [Peirce draws an enormous rectangle around the small square]. So it's interesting when people say, "What did you change?" Well, you can't look at it that way. Here I was, trying to find the underlying emotional truth, and from that [points to rectangle], I told one story with incredible focus to it, which was patterned after the life and death of Brandon. Ultimately, that was the story that attracted me, the tragic events which were motivated by his passing as a boy. Then, what I had to do was yank-yank-yank-yank. Basically, I had to focus on what I call "privileged events": You knew that you needed the first night he passed as a boy. You knew that you needed to explain what happened in his hometown that made him get kicked out. You had to show him arriving in Falls City, however he got there. You had to show him meeting Lana, however he met her. You had to show John being a participant. You had to show them accepting Brandon into the group, thinking he was a boy. You had to start showing the tides turning. You had to show the stripping, and then after the stripping and into the rape. But then you have to ask, what happened after the stripping? What was everybody's role in aiding or abetting [the rape]? Who was pushing it forward and who was pushing it back? On a dramatic level, you had to personify every single person, and I had chronologies that literally went moment by moment for each of them. That was the reality, and then the dramatic truth was a distillation. "Okay, for these 20 million things that happened, John is going to do this. John's going to say this one line."

O: I watched the documentary [The Brandon Teena Story] last night, and I was struck by how all your characters come across as more sympathetic than their real-life counterparts. Was this a conscious decision on your part?

KP: Well, it's an absolute decision on my part. I'm a dramatist at heart. I'm a storyteller. First of all, as a director, you love characters—it's just what you do. Your actors come on set and you're totally happy that you're going to create a character. If I want to tell a story, my job is to involve you emotionally as deeply as possible, bring you in all the way. How can I bring you in all the way? Make my characters as empathetic and understandable and human as possible. Make everything they do something that you recognize you or somebody else might do. Make Brandon somebody everyone can enter into. Keep him totally specific and don't water him down. He's deeply human, so find what his life need is that everybody can connect to, which is that he wants to find love. When you meet John and Tom, you don't make them bad to begin with; you make them understandable. You see them through Brandon's eyes and make them totally charismatic and funny. You start painting a world that people can recognize. Brandon was probably attracted to them because they were fun in the beginning. There wouldn't be much drama if they were going to kill him right up front. The drama is that he got seduced into thinking he might be safe and created a family out of them. It's all about making it understandable: The more human and empathetic they are, the more we identify with that friendship. Then, as it starts to turn with John and Tom, [the viewer] starts to deny it and not acknowledge it, which is exactly what Brandon did.

O: Were you concerned that if people knew the facts of the case going in, there wouldn't be much suspense?

KP: It's more suspenseful if you do a good job. It's like Titanic or reading Oedipus or reading Romeo & Juliet, or whenever you know the ending. Can it be suspenseful? It can if the storytelling is really clear and nothing is wasted. Aristotle says that you need to aim for organic unity and throw out anything that's not necessary, because if it's not necessary, you're detracting from the whole. So ultimately, you end up with a structure. Whatever you consider a good structure: five-act, three-act, it doesn't matter. Isn't there something beautiful about listening to or watching something over and over if it's really well-crafted? Great piece of music, great story: You know what's going to happen, yet there's a joy in it because the storytelling has a kind of ease to it. So even though people knew what the ending was, you try to work against that. Sometimes it works in your favor. Most people tell me there's tension from the very beginning with this story, because even though they knew Brandon was going to die, they were willing to engage in the story because they loved him so much.

O: Have the people in Falls City actually seen the film?

KP: Lana has seen it.

O: What was her reaction?

KP: I can't wait to hear.

O: You haven't heard?

KP: No.

O: You're still in contact with her?

KP: We were in contact and then, during this period, things got a little complicated, and then we weren't in contact anymore. I wish we were.

O: The film seems to fit in a tradition of American films and literature about the dark underbelly of the Heartland. What were your influences?

KP: First was the Italian neo-realists. Pasolini, Accatone—that was a big influence. Rossellini's Rome: Open City. Gorgeous, rough, male. Scorsese's early stuff: Who's That Knocking At My Door, Mean Streets. There's just a real grittiness. For the performances, Cassavetes. In terms of literature and also movies, Badlands, Executioner's Song, Bonnie And Clyde. So, I think two influences: One was all this Americana stuff, which I live and die for, and then the neo-realist stuff because that was the style I needed to capture the kids. River's Edge, Over The Edge, Gus Van Sant's early work. Then also this pure sort of magic realism: Michael Powell's Peeping Tom, with its oversaturated colors, The Wizard Of Oz. Mizoguchi's Ugetsu Monogatari. Murnau's Sunrise. Faust. You know, these things that were just bursting out of the imagination. Because it's like a language poet; you want it to be visceral. You want the audience not to just follow the narrative, but to be inside of it and the way it's cut. My editing was influenced by The Pawnbroker.

O: It's strange that you mention your editing was influenced by The Pawnbroker. Maybe I don't remember the film correctly, but The Pawnbroker has these snap-flashes of memory that I don't recall in Boys Don't Cry.

KP: The rape scene. John's rape is all done in four-frame flashes. Teena's head hits [the car seat], four-frame flash. John says, "Move your fucking hands," six-frame flash. He's pulling her pants off, seven-frame flash. They are just above the register of perceptibility. They're meant to hit you in the nervous system. Because Brandon doesn't want to remember the rape afterwards, and there's the rape knocking on the door. I don't have as many of them [as The Pawnbroker does], but it was the only way I could do that rape. In real time, it wasn't effective.

O: Why do you think Brandon moved to Falls City?

KP: That's the biggest dramatic question in the world. It's totally self-destructive: Why would you go to a smaller town when you were operating under kind of a queer identity? Well, Brandon told his mom he was a lesbian when he was 14 years old, and his mom put him in an institution, so that eradicated "lesbian" as an identity. So Brandon now thinks that gay is bad. Brandon then thinks, "I will be straight. Straight is good." Brandon wants to be straight, and he still likes women, so he says, "I want to be straight. I like women. I look like a guy. Oh, I'll be a straight guy." Then it's, "I want to go to New York. You can't be a straight guy in New York looking the way I do. I'll stay right here, where it's much easier to pass as a boy. Then I get to stay home because I really want to live in a trailer park and basically live the way I live." Then you begin to get inside the choices he makes, because it's all about satisfying life needs. "I want love and acceptance." A short-sighted answer to a very complicated question, but that's what he did. And that's what I love about Brandon.

O: Do you feel that he was secure in his identity at any point?

KP: I don't think you're ever secure in an identity that's not true to yourself. I think he was always sowing the seeds of his own destruction to set himself free of his identity [as a female]. But I think that identity gave him a sense of himself that was necessary, but was a stepping stone to something deeper. Playing "Brandon" was wonderful and it was brilliant and it was an adventure and it was complete in moments, but it was never fully complete because it was an artificial identity. I think we all seek to come clean. Have you ever lied about something?

O: Of course.

KP: It feels bad. You usually end up revealing it. I do. If I even tell anything false, within one minute I have to come clean. And I think most people, even if they're not that direct, it comes out in indirect ways. If somebody cheats on you, they end up telling you they've been spending all this time hanging out with that person. Why? Because nobody can bear a lie. A lie won't stay silent. It makes noise. I think that's what happened with Brandon's lies.

O: I never asked you about Hilary Swank. How did you come upon her?

KP: I started auditioning these butch lesbians and transgenders, who were wonderful, but they couldn't carry it off onscreen. There were no actors who could pass as boys in '96. The agencies wouldn't send them out because they didn't want them stigmatized as queer. In '98, I got flooded with them, but none of the girls could pass as boys. I knew I needed an unknown. I needed a girl who could pass onscreen as much as Brandon passed in real life. I spent three years looking for Brandon. Finally, it's about four weeks before shooting and we're hurtling towards production. I told Christine, "We need Brandon or there's no reason to make the movie. I won't make a movie that doesn't have a Brandon." There was no guarantee that the world was going to create another Brandon for us, yet we needed to find her. So a tape finally came back one night and a beautiful androgynous person floated across screen—cowboy hat on, sock in the pants, gorgeous boy jaw, boy ears, boy eyes, boy nose, boy mouth, Adam's apple. Finally, a girl who had all the traits that begin to blur the gender line. But the most important thing was, she smiled. She loved being Brandon, and that joy just emanated from her. So she flew out and blew everybody away. I said, "You can have this role under one condition: You have to fully transform yourself into Brandon the way Robert De Niro did in Raging Bull." We went to a place to get her an \$8 haircut. The woman who was cutting her hair didn't want to do it, but we found someone who would. At the end of it, we had Leonardo DiCaprio-slash-Matt Damon: a beautiful teen icon with blond hair. A blond-haired boy would have gotten the shit knocked out of him in Falls City, so we dyed her hair chestnut brown and I saw a vision of Brandon before my eyes that was just stunning. The next step was I shared all the psychological history that I had amassed of Brandon in four and a half years, then got her a voice trainer and a physical trainer, and she went back home and lived as a boy for four weeks.

O: The other actors joined in this research as well? You had footage to show them?

KP: Yeah. For Brandon, we had audio footage. For Lana, I had video and audio footage. For the guys [Peter Sarsgaard and Brendan Sexton III], I had video footage. I had case histories of Ted

Bundy and Gary Gilmore... I allowed all this psychological material to enter into [the actors'] system, and I allowed them to study it and make their own transformations.

O: What was the filming process like for you? Was it a difficult movie to shoot?

KP: It was incredibly difficult—not enough time, not enough money—but that's the nature of it with full creative control. You've got to bend somewhere. It's very difficult, but it's my vision and I won't give that up for anything. I had as much money as you probably could have gotten for a first-time director working with tough material. I couldn't do wrong by Brandon. I think that was the hardest part. But the actors were wonderful; they were such a gift to work with. They all profoundly entered into the story, and I needed that, because there's only so much a director can do. It's up to your actors to love it and connect with the truth of it. When you go truth into fiction into truth, and that last part is the re-truthing, you have to trust them.

O: What's next for you?

KP: I have another script that basically picks up where [Boys Don't Cry] leaves off, because I tend to work in these big emotional cycles. I'm really excited about that. I'm taking my time, and I'll be setting up a situation where I can co-write that script and oversee another one. I really want to carve out a real life as a co-writer/director and hopefully at least stick with creative control and let money follow, not ever switch it around. [I want to] stay in New York, which the smart agents are saying is where I should stay. And hopefully, I'll just get better and better at what I do. I love what I do so much. There's something so beautiful about being able to work with people and bring them to these new places. I think it's such a gift.