

It's a small matter, really

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Both of LGNY's film critics alerted me in early October to dash out to the cinema, but only in mid December did I finally catch a screening of *Boys Don't Cry*. Very few films have packed the narrative and emotional punch I experienced from Kimberly Peirce's stark telling of Brandon Teena's 1993 murder in Nebraska.

What impressed me more than anything else about the film was its success in creating empathetic audience identification with Brandon, a transgendered young man. As the story opens, Brandon's gay cousin watches him fidget in front of a mirror and says, "Why don't you just admit you're a dyke?" From that moment on there is never a doubt that Brandon's tragic odyssey is a search-and-discovery mission for his authentic male identity. Sitting through this film, I really got that—and it was striking because that's not a point I fully appreciated before in considering Brandon's fate. I first learned about Brandon in the lengthy *New Yorker* piece that ran about a year after his murder. The story *The New Yorker* told was compelling, but when I think back on it five years later, I remember it vaguely as a thriller about confused identities.

Maybe it's a measure of my recent education on gender issues, or perhaps my reaction to the film reflects Peirce's brilliant direction and the awesome performance of star Hilary Swank. Either way, it is clear to me that Brandon's murderers cheated him not only out of his life but also out of his chance to be himself, to set the terms of how he would live in this world. It's a small thing but also an essential step in the dehumanizing that makes murder possible.

When I saw the film I was already aware of the Best Actress awards Swank and costar Chloë Sevigny had snagged from the Los Angeles Film Critics, and I looked forward to the announcement set for December 16 of the New York Film Critics Circle awards.

The notice in *The New York Times* December 17, which ran without a byline, could not have been more jolting. As in L.A., Swank walked away with Best Actress honors. The *Times*'s account explained that she played "a young woman who is killed after she was discovered to be impersonating a man." I might hope that the news blurb was cobbled together by someone inartful in writing about gender identity who had not seen the film. It is inconceivable to me that someone exposed to Peirce's sensitive story could come away thinking that Brandon's experiences had anything to do with impersonation.

I'm not sure I recognized this when I read about Brandon in *The New Yorker*, but *Boys Don't Cry* is a story about trying to live with integrity. That is a story that every lesbian and gay man ought to be able to embrace. And yet even with lesbian and gay writers who have a byline, dustups over how we talk about these matters continue. On December 13, protesters who were led by a New York transgender advocacy group, the Metropolitan Gender Network, and who included a number of the city's leading gay groups found themselves in the unusual position of picketing outside *The Village Voice*. Their target was a November cover story that Norah Vincent had written about Drew Seidman, a 23-year-old female-to-male transsexual.

Prior to publication, the story had been eagerly anticipated by gender activists in New York who were happy that, contrary to the usual media fixation on male-to-female transsexuals, Vincent was focusing on an FTM. Vincent's story drew fire for a number of reasons, beginning with the cover graphic. A female doll had been cut up, with a male chest and crotch stitched into place. To activists this imagery evoked stereotypes of transsexuals-as-freaks. Critics charged that Vincent contributed to this perception by focusing excessive attention on the intricacies of Seidman's surgery and physical adjustments.

"The cover was truly offensive," activist Rusty Mae Moore told LGNY's Duncan Osborne. "It looks as though we are Frankenstein monsters.... It should have said, 'Here is a person who has gone through a lot of introspection, and he is now going through a transition.... In reality he has always been a man.'"

Another point of contention for protesters was Vincent's recapitulation early in the article of Brandon Teena's murder. Vincent wrote that Brandon "manag[ed] to fool her group of intimate friends and even the teenage girls she dated into believing she was male." (Discussing *Boys Don't Cry* in the January 18, 2000, issue of *The Advocate*, Vincent describes Brandon as a "young woman who disguised herself as a young man.")

In the wake of the protests at the Voice, Vincent expressed puzzlement about the flap. "I guess I'm really baffled because I thought that piece was a paean to transsexuality and to this woman's courage," Vincent told Osborne. "I certainly intended no offense whatsoever. I thought I had written this blushing piece, and I think I did that. If there were any misuses of pronouns, they were entirely unintended and understandable. There was certainly no malice whatsoever." Even in dismissing her critics, however, Vincent persisted in referring to Seidman as a "woman," a habit she said was "a slip." Denying any agenda on her own part, Vincent was not so trusting of her critics: "I slip, and it really bugs me that there is this police force that says that slip was done with malice."

Vincent's crack about a police force is telling; it betrays an impatience with the niceties of political correctness that Bill Maher has turned into a national sport. Certainly fussing about pronouns can sometimes seem a game of "gotcha," and there are plenty of people honestly confused about the language appropriate to discussing transgendered people.

But words are important, and we use them best when we use them to help others understand better. The hes and the shes aren't nearly as important as the assumptions and worldview that underlie them. That's where I have to differ with what I've read in the Times and the Voice. One point of view centers on impersonation, disguise, and fooling. A starkly different interpretation, however, comes from a compassionate reading of Brandon Teena's life. That young man's struggle, ultimately fatal, was all about honesty.

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