

REVIEWS

FILM REVIEW

A Rape and Beating, Later 3 Murders And Then the Twist

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

THE BRANDON TEENA STORY

The young women whom Brandon Teena dated all agree about one thing. Brandon, a fresh-faced 21-year-old Nebraskan who was raped and beaten by two acquaintances on Christmas Eve in 1993, then shot to death with two others by the same pair a week later, knew how to treat a woman. He was courtly and sent flowers and was an excellent kisser. Growing up, the star he most idolized was Cher.

Even after Brandon's girlfriend, Lana Tisdel, discovered he was really a woman (he was born Teena Brandon) undergoing hormone therapy in anticipation of a possible sex change operation, she did not recoil in horror. But in the eyes of Brandon's male friends, Thomas Nissen and John Lotter, two shiftless young men from the rural Nebraska town of Falls City, to which he had just moved from Lincoln, once they discovered his sex, he became a freak. They felt at once betrayed and sickened.

"The Brandon Teena Story," Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir's riveting, understated documentary, bends over backward not to sensationalize a murder case that encapsulates the deep-seated fears about gender and alternative sexuality

Documenting the fears of alternative sexuality in heartland America.

harbored by millions of Americans, especially those living in the heartland. Falls City, an economically depressed small town with an all-white population of just under 5,000, epitomizes that sprawling rural and semi-rural section of the United States that might be described as the Land of the Pickup Truck.

Those who live and work here may have heard of gay liberation, but they've never met an uncloseted gay or transgendered person and have no desire to do so. Although Falls City prides itself on being a close-knit, God-fearing community, we learn that it has a high rate of domestic violence. You can sense these ominous undercurrents during a scene at a local demolition derby where all

the men are toting guns.

The film methodically interviews the surviving principals, including the killers, both of whom were convicted of first-degree murder and are now in prison, one of them (Mr. Lotter) on death row. We meet Brandon's parents, who talk sympathetically about their dead child's troubled life. Brandon had suicidal tendencies, and having no other means of support, eked out a living by forging checks.

When we first meet the killers, who are interviewed separately, they seem nice enough, although we later learn that each had already served time in prison. As they recall their early friendship with Brandon, it's obvious that they liked him and were fooled by his sexual charade. What's so unnerving about the movie, which opens today at the Film Forum, is how unemotional most of their recollections are. Their voices are as flat and uninflected as the austere Nebraskan landscape.

The film's most casually horrifying note is sounded by the sheriff in charge of the rape case, who offhandedly refers to the victim as "it." Because of his failure to prosecute the rape case vigorously, Mr. Nissen and Mr. Lotter were free to track Brandon down at a farmhouse on New Year's Eve and kill Brandon and his companions, 24-year-old Lisa Lambert and her friend Philip Devine, a visitor who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The grisly details of the murders are reconstructed through audio recordings made during Mr. Nissen's 1995 murder trial. Mr. Nissen, in exchange for testifying against Mr. Lotter, was spared the death penalty but sentenced to three consecutive life terms. Mr. Lotter's appeals are awaiting review by the United States Supreme Court.

"The Brandon Teena Story" shows us that in the Land of the Pickup Truck, the hatred and fear of unorthodox sexuality run deep. Instead of being shouted, it festers until it explodes in acts of violence whose cause even the killers themselves don't seem to comprehend fully.



Dan Zukovic plays Simon Geist, confronting a pop cultural wasteland and a lust for fame, in "The Last Big Thing," a satire he wrote and directed.

FILM REVIEW

Waging War Against the Cultural Status Quo

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

THE LAST BIG THING

Some nasty fun is to be had watching Simon Geist (Dan Zukovic), a bogus journalist, colossal misanthrope and art snob, make fools of the publicity-hungry show business hopefuls he interviews for a non-existent Los Angeles magazine in "The Last Big Thing."

As Simon, scowling like a rabid grand inquisitor, sneeringly rants about the death of culture at the end of a millennium, he sounds more and more like an unhinged devotee of the comedian Dennis Miller. His self-defining moment of revelation — the perfect post-modern image he flaunts to mock the trash culture he so despises — is a snapshot of his own distorted reflection in a metal trash can as he scrunches his face into a parody of Edvard Munch's painting "The Scream."

One of Simon's favorite pastimes is visiting a local comedy club where he heckles the mediocre talent with obscene catcalls. When he interviews a scuzzy rock band that specializes

in moronic ditties saluting the stars of 1970's television sitcoms, he makes sure the group discovers near the end of the session that there isn't any tape in his cassette recorder. His contempt doesn't prevent the band from hiring him to film what he intends to be the stupidest, most career-damaging music video ever made.

Mr. Zukovic not only plays Simon but also wrote and directed "The Last Big Thing," a satire whose sharpest moments echo the tone of a

Nathanael West novel. In the film's funniest scene, Simon dispatches an ambitious multimedia artist named Magda (Sibel Ergener) to the 13th floor of an office building where he promises she will be discovered by a famous star-making mogul. Rushing into the building, Magda, who suggests Courtney Love in catwoman drag, darts into the first office she sees, leaps onto the desk of an incredulous middle-aged businessman and starts writhing, growling, spitting and cursing.

The film is at its best in the bits like these, in which Simon gleefully vents what appears to be Mr. Zukovic's own free-floating disgust with the pop cultural wasteland and the lust for fame that is becoming a national pathology. A little of that anger goes a long way. And once Simon has made his points, his sour pranks begin to seem redundant.

Where the movie falls flat is in telling the story of Simon's relationship with his roommate and disciple, a dysfunctional young woman named Darla (Susan Heimbinder), whose father pays the couple's rent on a

sterile suburban tract house in the Los Angeles suburbs. While Simon is carrying on his one-man guerrilla campaign against the cultural status quo, Darla is dreaming up her own magazine dedicated to chronicling Simon's cause.

The joke of the movie, of course, is that Simon, for all his pretenses of alienation, is at heart an outsider who wants in. The moment an attractive model he interviews takes a romantic interest in him, the purity of his intentions becomes suspect. And Darla, who until then has been a true believer in the holiness of his little war, becomes jealous and resentful. From here on, Simon's unmasking is only a matter of time.

"The Last Big Thing," which opens on Friday at the Angelika Film Center, is a movie that will not date well. Especially in its mockery of pop music and music video, its sensibility is already a decade behind the times.

"The Last Big Thing" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes profanity and sexual situations.

FILM REVIEW

Uplifting Lessons in a Sweet, Tumbledown World

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

More than half a century after the full employment during World War II put an end to the Great Depression, that agonizing era is serving a new generation as a fount of wisdom: Hard times teach hard but useful lessons.

In films like "The Grass Harp" and today's arrival, "Shadrach," a generation raised in prosperity turns to a difficult past, suffuses it with a romantic glow and gazes with something like envy on its simple ways while tapping its people for insights into life's eternal verities, like death.

On more than one level, the slight, sweet, sentimental "Shadrach" is a labor of love by Susanna Styron, the film's director and co-writer, from an autobiographical tale by her father, William Styron, published in Esquire in 1978.

The events of "Shadrach," which unfold in the Tidewater country of Virginia in 1935, are seen through the eyes of 10-year-old Paul Whitehurst (Scott Terra), a clean-cut, well-brought-up only child of respectable parents whose best friend is Little Mole (Daniel Treat).

Little Mole is one of the Dabney clan, descendants of pre-Civil War tobacco plantation owners who have now plummeted to the category popularly known as white trash. The boys are unwashed, and the girls are slatternly, except for young Edmonia (Monica Bugajski), the apple of Paul's eye. Presiding over this brood are Trixie Dabney (Andie MacDowell), the beer-swilling, warmhearted mother (Deborah Hedwall) and Vernon Dabney (Harvey



Andie MacDowell and Harvey Keitel in Susanna Styron's "Shadrach."

Keitel), the embittered, foul-mouthed, unemployed sire who ekes out a living as a moonshiner.

For young Paul, life is about to become complicated. His mother is in the early stages of illness. His parents are called away to a distant family funeral, and the boy wins permission to spend a few days with the Dabneys. At the same time, a foot-sore old black man is making his weary way north from Alabama.

His name is Shadrach (John Franklin Sawyer), and when he reaches the Dabneys' littered yard after a 600-mile journey, he reveals that he is a 99-year-old former Dabney slave who has come back to die and asks to be buried on the grounds of the old plantation, where the Dab-

neys still maintain a tumbledown shack.

So Paul and the Dabneys and the incontinent Shadrach set out in Vernon's rickety car to fulfill the old man's wish, only to be told by the not unfriendly local sheriff that laws have changed, and it is now illegal to bury someone on private property.

Not only does the sheriff imply that he will shut down Vernon's still if he is disobeyed; he also puts Vernon in the position of having to come up with the near-impossible sum of \$35 to pay for a funeral and burial in a cemetery.

As Shadrach sinks toward death and the Dabneys and Paul take turns tending the old man, the question hangs in the air: Will the Dabneys

SHADRACH

Directed by Susanna Styron; written by Ms. Styron and Bridget Terry, based on the short story by William Styron; director of photography, Hiro Narita; edited by Colleen Sharp; music by Van Dyke Parks; production designer, Burton Rencher; produced by John Thompson, Boaz Davidson and Ms. Terry; released by Columbia Pictures. Running time: 133 minutes. This film is rated PG-13.

WITH: Harvey Keitel (Vernon), Andie MacDowell (Trixie), Monica Bugajski (Edmonia), Deborah Hedwall (Mother), Darrell Larson (Father), Scott Terra (Paul), Daniel Treat (Little Mole), Jonathan Parks Jordan (Middle Mole), Erin Underwood (Lucinda), John Franklin Sawyer (Shadrach) and Martin Sheen (Narrator).

(Vernon, that is) honor their promise?

And for Paul, these few days overshadow his mother's impending death.

While confronting life and death and growing up, Ms. Styron does not shy from dealing with segregation, with black and white children separated in a theater while watching a Stepin Fetchit comedy, and white men like Vernon using uninhibited language to designate blacks and President Franklin D. Roosevelt as the source of their woes.

At the same time, she evokes the simple decency of people who manage to retain their fundamental humanity in the face of hardship.

"Shadrach" is rated PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned). It contains foul language, racial epithets and profanity, the nude buttocks of happy children swinging over a swimming hole, a used condom and a dead body.



Lana Tisdel, left, the last girlfriend of Brandon Teena, right.

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