

## A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH KIMBERLY PEIRCE

*Boys Don't Cry* marked the arrival of three major talents: its two stars, Hilary Swank (who won the Oscar for Best Actress) and Chloë Sevigny, and its ferociously gifted director, Kimberly Peirce. Dramatizing the true story of Brandon Teena, a woman who was raped and killed by friends because she lived as a man, *Boys Don't Cry* is a gripping, tender, and sad love story with a deep feeling for the story's rural Midwestern location. Peirce talks about researching and preparing the film, making an engrossing drama on a tight budget, and being true to Brandon's heartbreak and compelling story.

### **A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Boys Don't Cry*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (June 9, 2002):**

**SCHWARTZ:** It's hard to talk right after seeing this movie. It's such an immersive, and such a complete experience in so many ways; it's so powerful. This was your first feature film. It's like a pitcher pitching a perfect game. There are so many things that came together, so many elements that are so strong. So I just want to ask what your experience was before this in filmmaking? I guess you'd done some short films...?

**PEIRCE:** Not a lot! And thank you. My experience had been, let's see, that since I was eight years old, I'd always made animations, things like that. Lived in Japan for a while, had a darkroom, shot all over Southeast Asia. Then went to grad school at Columbia, studied in the filmmaking program, and I made one film. So this was my second film, and I started it as my graduate thesis project, so it was supposed to be a short. I'd read the *Village Voice* article [about Brandon Teena] in 1994, and I was in my second year of grad school, so the natural thing for me to do was to make a film that was between 20 and 30 minutes long. And at that point I actually thought I could, and the movie ended at the rape. I ended up shooting that as my graduate thesis project, and somebody... stole a lot of money (laughs) so I ended up not being able to shoot the end of the movie. So we came back and all the people that I worked with were totally in love with making the movie. The actors were like, "We've got to make this into a feature." I said, "Well, first of all, we've run out of money for the short." Then I met

Christine [Vachon], and was lucky enough to develop it at the Sundance writing and directing lab. Then the short became a feature and it went through many years of rewriting. And then it became, you know...

**SCHWARTZ:** And what was the relation to the documentary—there was a documentary about this story, so was that something you had... What was the relationship between this film and that one?

**PEIRCE:** None; there's no relation. When I first heard about this story, what was amazing to me was, who was Brandon and why and how had he done this? When I looked at all the different press, there was the *Playboy* article, the *Village Voice*, and a bunch of stuff in *The New York Times*. Everyone seemed to be focused on the gratuitousness of the violence. The stripping, the rape, the murder. They would kind of focus on Brandon. Particularly in the *Playboy* article, it was like, "Let's get kind of excited about the perverse sexuality that this kid had. He kind of brought it on himself." I thought, Well, okay. The real heart and soul of this movie was Brandon.

So I went to Fall City with a group of fifteen transsexuals. I became friends with a lot of people from *Transsexual Menace* because I needed to understand: Was Brandon a butch lesbian, a transsexual, or was he somewhere in between? Ultimately that became a huge journey for me: to understand who and what Brandon might have been. So I traveled with them—which was great—and I was interviewing all the transsexuals, saying, "What are your fantasies like? What are your desires? What is your life like?" so I could get some

kind of composite as to whom this kid might have been, and how much he might have known, and where he might have been in this process.

We went to the murder trial and I ended up interviewing Lana and her mom. There's a lot of dialogue, actually—not a ton, but some dialogue that's very important—that I actually took from my interview with Lana and used in writing this. When Brandon says, "What are you going to tell them?" right before the stripping, and she says, "I'm going to tell them what they want to hear; tell them what we know is true." That's what *she* said. And when I interviewed her and she said that, she was like Rimbaud, she was like a poet. It was very beautiful, so that was amazing.

In the jail scene—"I don't care if you're half-monkey or half-ape, I'm getting you out of here"—she said that to him. And once I heard that...well, that's gorgeous. Because here was this girl who wasn't likely to be interviewing transsexuals and butch lesbians or living in a queer community, but somehow had this ability to accept Brandon and love him for what he was. That was extraordinary. She was hugely inspirational. That interview became the real core of the love story, so there was a major rewrite following that.

**SCHWARTZ:** In terms of dramatizing the material, how did that evolve? You said this was workshopped and done in a lot of different versions. Can you talk about how you came up with what your approach would be to filming [this story]?

**PEIRCE:** The first thing was, I read all these articles and they were all focusing on the gratuitousness, and nobody [talked] about Brandon. And we—I work with a writing partner—what we knew was that Brandon was the heart and soul of it. First of all, how could you depict Brandon so he made sense? That took many years of figuring out. What was he really after? Was it more important to be a boy, or was it more important to sleep with girls? That was an ongoing debate. What was his ultimate end? You start to understand that.

Then you start creating scenes that make that clear. Then you need the bar scene where he gets into a fight with the guys—because we know that Brandon would take on guys much bigger than himself, so we were like, "We have to have a bar

scene where he does that." We also knew he picked up underage girls, so we were like, "We've got to have a scene where he goes down to a skating rink and picks up girls."

We knew there was the basic structure of falling in love with Lana, the stripping and the rape and the murder. What we really had to work very hard on was the relationship with the guys. Because if you followed the real story, [they] probably knew he was a girl to begin with. It was a little bit like *Los Olvidados*, the Buñuel film—which is brilliant—which is misfits among misfits. We tried that approach for a while, where Brandon came into the town and he was this fucked-up kid—and they knew it. They kind of let him in, but you knew early on they were going to destroy him. We sort of played with that—in that John has a kind of malevolent relationship with him, and they're kind of on to him—but if we took it too far, then the story had no arc. So we had to pull that back. We also had to make it that you really like the guys, and that you bought the relationship with the guys, not just with Lana. Otherwise there was no arc. So we had to then create a situation in which Brandon really idolized these guys and wanted to be like them. That's how the whole opening really works. Then you degrade that relationship by degrees.

**SCHWARTZ:** A rape scene is depicted as being usually pure violence without any elements of sensuality.

**PEIRCE:** Yes, it's often depicted like that. What was so heartbreaking was that to be brutalized like that physically was terrible, but to have your friends do that to you was so much worse. So it was really important that we built the friendships in the beginning and that there were still remnants of the friendships all the way through the violence. And that on some level Brandon felt he was to blame. So that's why he's saying, "Yeah, this was my fault." Those guys would love him to adopt that narrative. And he borders on adopting it, for a while, until he gets to the sheriff's office and he finally breaks down, and he's able to...

**SCHWARTZ:** Now was the short film that you did also filmed in this area?

**PEIRCE:** No, because I didn't have any money. Not that we had a lot of money when we finally made

the movie. (laughs) It's so funny re-watching it, because I can see in a lot of scenes, "My God, we were supposed to shoot in four set-ups and we did it in one." There's actually one in the barn scene: if you watch it closely, it goes from night into day; the sun is rising within the three minutes that the camera is rolling.

When I shot the short I paid for all of it. It was \$20,000, and we were going to shoot in either Long Island or upstate New York. So I looked all over Long Island and found all this farm country, which was great, but ultimately it didn't have the feel of the Midwest. We went upstate and that felt more like it, but you could never get a wide shot, because it was never flat enough. So you were really compromised in terms of your ability to capture what usually is.

**SCHWARTZ:** I ask that because what is so powerful about this film is the physicality, on so many different levels. You start with the physicality of the performances, the nuances and detail. Every element of how you use the landscape and physical setting adds to it.

**PEIRCE:** That's the one thing I can say to anybody who makes a low-budget film. If class is important to you, and landscape, try to set it in a time and a period that you can actually get access to. When I went to Texas, we actually just walked into the farmhouse we used for Candace's farmhouse. We picked it because the woman who lived there basically lived at the same class level as our characters. So already—structurally, the landscape—everything was echoing the right thing. If you don't have much money, you've got to go to ready-made sets.

Because what would end up happening was that the day runs out; so we were shooting nights. The night would run out at seven a.m., and all of a sudden you have ten minutes before you're shutting down and you literally just point the camera and let it roll. You barely frame it, because you're just stealing. So many shots in *Boys* were things we stole at the very tail end—because you need them when you're cutting. "Look, we got the farmhouse; we got the sunrise; we got the sunset"—things like that.

**SCHWARTZ:** At what point was Hilary Swank cast? [Hers] is obviously one of the great performances.

**PEIRCE:** Three years later. Three years after I started working on it.

**SCHWARTZ:** Really...

**PEIRCE:** Yeah. Because I knew a bunch of things. I knew I needed a girl who could pass as much on screen as Brandon did. I knew I needed a girl who could act. And I kept having these two camps of people—because we started in '95. I would get people who could pass as boys—because I'd go through the butch lesbian community, and I'd go through the transsexual community—and they could pass, but they couldn't capture the character. None of the actresses would come out. In 1996, it wasn't cool yet.

Then Ellen [DeGeneres] came out, in 1996, and it became cool. Then I got flooded with all these actresses who were totally effeminate, and they were like, "I want to be Brandon." And I'd say, "Did you ever want to be a boy? Do you have any sense of what butch is?" They're like "Yeah, yeah, yeah... Well, no, not really." Then I'd coach them. "You've got to lower your sexuality, find your masculinity." They'd go away with all these exercises, march around with socks in their pants, a big hat on. It had kind of come down a little bit, but they weren't anywhere near... So I still had these two huge camps, and we were about five weeks before shooting.

I marched into [producer] Christine [Vachon]'s office. I said, "Look, I cannot make this movie unless I have a girl who passes as a boy and can capture this." I had gone to Sundance, and the girl didn't pass, and it was like a white elephant in the room—it's like writing a thesis about it. She said, "Well, I think you'll find the person."

We sent our casting agent out to L.A., and I was like, "We *have* to find the person." All these tapes came back, and then one night we put this tape in. We didn't think anybody on the tapes could ever work; I'd had so many bad Brandons. I even had a period when I had African-American Brandons, which was great because you don't say on the casting things "This person has to be white," because we didn't want to sound racist, which we

aren't. But the story happened to be all-white—if you happen to have an all-black community, that'd be great, but we happened to be doing it in an all-white community. So we had all these African-American Brandons coming in, and they were fabulous. They could pass as boys, they were super-cool. We were like, "Oh my God. We wrote the part for an African-American Brandon." But that wasn't going to work.

So we finally put this tape in, and it was the first time in all the years of looking that somebody actually blurred the gender line. I had had girls in who could pass in real life, but when you get them on screen—but if they couldn't act, it was just dead. That's why you have to work with actors, or non-actors who can act. That was the first time seeing—she had these huge brown eyes... Actually, I just put together a documentary with IFC, and I put in the casting tape—It's great, because she's got the square jaw, she's got the nose, the ears, the big eyes; she blurred the gender line. You're not sure if it's a boy or a girl, but she has so much warmth and energy and love and a sense of humor, that suddenly everything became possible. Because a lot of girls—when girls pass as boys—they would get very serious, kind of shut down. And that was the last thing you wanted, because Brandon was a charmer. It was an acting job whereby the actor had to do what Brandon actually did in real life: find a way to open these people up, and find a place in their lives.

**SCHWARTZ:** There's such a sense in many of these scenes of menace in the atmosphere. A tension that's hard to put into words exactly, but it's there. And I just wonder if you could talk about how you create that—how you build that—because it's so palpable when you see the film.

**PEIRCE:** The first thing is to build it into the structure. I've noticed this in my new film, too. There's a kind of structure that I like where you have a mini-escalation in the beginning that's a foreshadowing of the big crisis. If you notice Brandon being chased by the boys—when it's raining and the cousin's saying "You're going to get in trouble, get hurt..."—that's the mini thing that says, "Watch out, this is a dangerous situation and it's going to get more dangerous."

Plus, I think most people bring to that situation of a girl passing as a boy, and not telling people she's a girl—"Danger ahead." That was important. Also, to ride this line whereby the guys are scary, but you like them. So they were likable, yet they were explosive.

We had to be careful, because for a while, John exploded too early. There's the scene where his daughter pees on him. It used to actually be a close-up. He says, "You little bastard, you pissed on me!" The camera was right up close, and he was screaming into the camera and getting mad at the little girl, and when people watched it—it was a really good note that somebody gave me—they said, "He blows his lid too much. I know he's going to explode." That was a thing that I thought was really important, but it was too highlighted, so we had to pull back. Then there's the next scene where he blows up at the car race, where he gets mad at Brandon. We had to make it so we know he can explode, but not so much that he steals the thunder of the rape scene. You're always building the arc where you're giving just enough violence...

**SCHWARTZ:** So it's keeping the whole film in mind when you're shooting each individual moment.

**PEIRCE:** It's keeping the whole film in mind in terms of building towards violence, and it's also keeping in mind this character. It had to be enough that Brandon was getting the warning signs of the tragic inevitability: "This is bad." But not so much that Brandon is psychotic if he stays. You want that feeling of "Get out now. Get out now." So that's part of it.

The other thing was coming out of Neorealism, like Pasolini and Rossellini—particularly *Accattone*, which I think is gorgeous. Then going into Scorsese, and the stuff in the 1960s, and Nick Ray in the 1950s. There's a kind of... movies that grab you by the balls; that kept you on edge. That's shooting stock and the way that you move, in the hand-held. I don't know if you noticed, but we don't go overboard with hand-held, we're very careful. In the stripping scene, you're on sticks. In the rape scene, you're on a combination of a dolly. In the murder scene, you're handheld.

**SCHWARTZ:** "On sticks" means on a tripod.

**PEIRCE:** Yeah, a tripod. But we are very careful to build an emotional arc, whereby it's scary... but again, if you scare somebody too much, you can't scare them again, so it's keeping it at a certain rate. There's also a lot of use of tones, these musical tones that are riding underneath. There's like a soundbed that's going the entire time, so that's vibrating. We use stuff on the subwoofer; there's a lot of bass in there.

**SCHWARTZ:** But that comes in later...

**PEIRCE:** That's all post, but it's written into the script. What's written into the script is the arc of the characters, and then it's on set saying, "I want this to feel like this Neorealist stuff." That's how falsity is built. Edgy and rough. You don't want it to have a gloss.

**SCHWARTZ:** So many independent films you see don't have this kind of immersion in the story. It just seemed different to me than a lot of things that you see.

**PEIRCE:** I was fortunate in that I had a classical structure. A lot of times independent films are wonderful because they're very personal and fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants. That's a quality that we wanted, but we also really wanted a classic narrative. We knew that the only way you were going to make it from the beginning to the end is if we had a good three-act structure. It's making sure to work that stuff out.

And also that thing of, "Wouldn't it be fun to have hand-held here and here and here?" Actually, no. It'd be better to be on sticks here, on dolly here, and on hand-held here. So actually I'm giving you something in the murder scene that you haven't yet had. You've maybe had it in bits, but... it's that thing—don't know if [Paul] Schrader said it, but a lot of people have said it—"A great scene isn't great unless it's at the right point." Oh, it's *The Bad and the Beautiful*, when Kirk Douglas decides he's going to direct. He makes a climax of every single scene, and then he has to fire himself because it's terrible. So it's having to be disciplined.

**SCHWARTZ:** And you have a great cinematographer, Jim Denault.

**PEIRCE:** Jim was wonderful. What was great about Jim was—I had to fire the other DP two weeks before. So Jim came in with no prep. People were literally being hired on the shoot, and throwing up and quitting. It was so scary, the amount of work. People were freaking out. It was a thirty-day shoot, seven pages a day. Unthinkable. And Jim was extraordinary. He could get in there and was like, "We've got to shoot four scenes today," which was crazy. He'd say, "I know you want five setups in *this* scene, but if you do it in one set-up you can have four setups in *that* scene." He would just diagnose the problem and then he'd say, "You don't have much time to think about it so you better start shooting." That was it.

Also, he always emotionally knew where to put the camera. So, instead of having coverage, which was deadly... Coverage is where you get all your masters, all your close-ups, all your blah blah blah. You end up in the editing room and there's no point of view. You have tons of coverage, but you don't have what you really need. The best thing is to come in and be like, "I'm shooting this whole thing in one shot, or I'm shooting this whole scene from two angles." Jim could do that.

**SCHWARTZ:** The stop-motion landscape scenes, where things are speeded up, that was...

**PEIRCE:** Last-minute.

**SCHWARTZ:** Was it?

**PEIRCE:** Totally. (laughs) We had written all these beautiful sequences—we thought they were beautiful—where you, you know, Neorealism was half the stuff but we wanted it to be like *Peeping Tom* or [Douglas] Sirk, wanting to be super-imaginative, like you're going into the landscape of Brandon and Lana's minds. Then it was the day to shoot all the beautiful, imaginative landscapes, and I said, "It's the day to shoot all the beautiful, imaginative landscapes—where are the sets?" Nothing had been planned. So Jim, which was great, said, "Okay. I have this great idea. I have this guy I know who can shoot stop-motion." I wasn't sure. He had shot all this stuff at Joshua Tree. We looked at it and it was good, but kind of sentimental. I said, "I don't know, it needs to be kind of rough." So we brought the guy out. And while we were shooting all night long, he went

out...and those shots, like underneath the tower. And what was amazing to me—I mean, normally it's 24 frames per second. Stop-motion means you're doing maybe one frame per second. So you're shooting a minute in an entire night. So you were seeing the night in a minute, and it totally solved the problem. So there you go!

**SCHWARTZ:** We have time to take questions from the audience. Does any one have questions?

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Congratulations on the film. When this film came out, I was afraid to see it. I didn't know who Hilary Swank was, but she gave a magnificent performance, and Chloë Sevigny, too. With the chopped hair, she really passed as a boy there. Do you know if she had to lose weight for that?

**PEIRCE:** I put her into training for six weeks. Once I hired her and she blurred the gender line, part of the role was, I said, you have to live as a boy, get a voice trainer and a physical trainer. So she had all those things, because the big thing was to lower her voice. It wasn't an anorexic thing: "You have to lose weight for feminine ideals." (laughs) She ended up losing weight because she was working out so much. Then we had her start living as a boy. Because it was the only way to figure it out. I said, "You better go to the shopping center and see if you can pass before you show up on the film set."

In terms of Chloë, I think she did a wonderful job, and it's not always recognized, so I try to talk about it. Hilary's performance would not work without Chloë's performance. Chloë was the way in for most people, because most people would identify with her. And it's a harder role, I think—well, it's a different role, to play the supporting character. In a supporting role, there's always the temptation to upstage the other actor and get the attention, because Hilary has the more physical, more active role. Because when you watch Chloë, that's when you buy Brandon, and the love story. And that's what's ultimately going to matter to people, the love story. I was very lucky that it really worked.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I think I remember reading that the two rapists were never caught. Did you use artistic license, or is that what really happened to them, they're in jail on death row?

**PEIRCE:** Yes, as it says at the end, Tom turned state's evidence against John, so they're both in prison. That's all true. John is on death row and Tom will probably get out soon.

**SCHWARTZ:** Go ahead.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Did Brandon plan on getting gender reassignment surgery?

**PEIRCE:** That was huge issue of debate, and the reason I interviewed the transsexuals and butch lesbians. From everything that we knew, he certainly had read pamphlets about it. He had considered taking testosterone. I don't think he did. But what we loved about Brandon, what we think was true, too: he was full of these pipe dreams. They were organizing principles. "Yeah, I'll get a sex change down the line, but as long as I can pass and get laid, I'll do this." (laughs) He was a very meet-my-needs-now kind of guy.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** First I want to say that the performance blows me away every time. This is a really small thing, but it is something that has always fascinated me. When she gets her period, or he has his, she uses a tampon instead of a pad. I always thought that using that would make him very aware of what was down there. I was wondering if that was a conscious choice. Why did you decide to do that?

**PEIRCE:** It's a good question. It was a point of constant query with every transsexual, every F-to-M that I talked to. "Do you use a pad or do you use a tampon?" At first we didn't want it to be a tampon because it was so invasive. We thought it would remind Brandon that he's a girl, and it's kind of like rape. We talked about the pads. But the transsexuals said, "Yeah, but the most important thing is that you pass." If you're passing, and you've got a pad on—and the mess, having the blood be exposed to themselves and then having to throw out the pad, they said that was a bigger reminder of being a woman. Once you put the tampon in, that was it. It was like putting the dick on. And then it could be clean. There was something about blood being a reminder of femininity.

I was very sensitive. I didn't want to offend. My biggest fantasy was that transsexuals and butch

lesbians and transgenders and everybody in that big spectrum would look at it and not feel that I took the liberty to define Brandon, but that I gave him an authenticity as a character, and gave them room to fill in. I didn't want anyone to feel that I thought that I owned him. Nor did I want them to feel violated in their own experience. We asked lots of questions and then hoped that it ultimately made sense. And

it made sense to me, the blood stuff, not wanting it to be shown.

**SCHWARTZ:** That's actually a question I would have never thought of, so thanks for asking. Congratulations again on such a great movie, and thank you for coming. (applause)

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