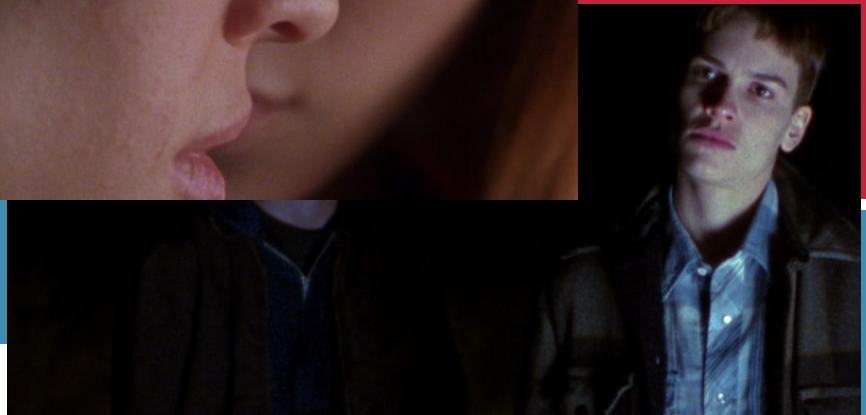


Treasures from the Yale Film Archive



Boys Don't Cry

Thursday, February 1, 7 p.m.

Humanities Quadrangle Lecture Hall

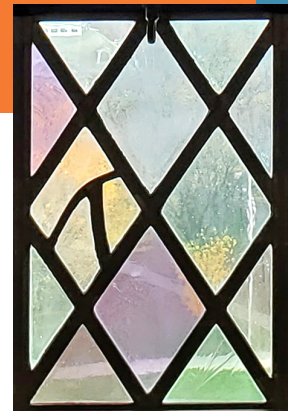
Directed by **Kimberly Peirce**

Screenplay by **Kimberly Peirce and Andy Bienen**

Cinematography by **Jim Denault**

Produced by **Fox Searchlight Pictures** (1999), 118 mins.

Starring **Hilary Swank, Chloë Sevigny, Peter Sarsgaard, Brendan Sexton III, Alicia Goranson, and Jeannetta Arnette**



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A SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

It is almost impossible to overstate the significance of Kimberly Peirce's debut feature, *Boys Don't Cry*, the first mainstream American film to center on a trans man. Peirce was a graduate student in film at Columbia University in 1994 when she read a *Village Voice* article about Brandon Teena, a 21-year-old trans man who, a year earlier, had fallen in love with a woman in Nebraska, and had been a victim of horrendous hate crimes. Peirce was immediately entranced by "the intensity of his desire to turn himself into a boy, the fact that he did it with no role models. The leap that he took was completely overwhelming to me: the courage, the audacity, the invention, the humor, the naïveté to live so authentically and boldly as he wanted." Peirce traveled to the site of the events, Falls City, Nebraska, where she did extensive research, conducted interviews (notably with Brandon's girlfriend Lana Tisdel and Lana's mother) and attended the perpetrators' trials, then made a short film about Brandon, *Take it Like a Man* (1995), for her Columbia thesis. After producer Christine Vachon saw the short, Vachon and Peirce began what became a three-year project to assemble funding for a feature film. Peirce worked for 18 months with Andy Bienen on the screenplay, which involved additional research on site, and consulting the 1998 documentary *The Brandon Teena Story*.

Filming occurred over just five weeks, in October and November 1998, in and around Greenville, Texas, substituting for Nebraska. Through a combination of gritty realism and hallucinatory surrealism, Peirce captured the dusty, desolate world of bars, trailer parks, sleazy ex-convicts, narrow-minded police, and road-to-nowhere landscapes: a place where, in the words of Rona Murray (*Studying American Independent Cinema*, 2010), "narrow prejudice and atavistic rituals of masculinity keep order against those who look for greater freedom and difference." Peirce attempted to place us as fully as possible in Brandon's point of view: "I wanted the audience to enter deeply into this place, this character, so they could see him as deeply human." As Judith Halberstam observes (*Screen*, 2001), Peirce "establishes the legitimacy and durability of Brandon's gender by forcing spectators to adopt, if only for a short time, Brandon's transgender gaze."

DID YOU KNOW The MPAA, disturbed by the film's violence, originally rated it NC-17 (created in 1990 to replace "the X" rating), which would have severely limited its commercial viability. Principal objections were to two shocking scenes, which Peirce and the producers agreed to trim by about half, resulting in an R rating. The scenes are still terrifying.

Opening in October 1999, the film received widespread critical acclaim. Janet Maslin (*New York Times*) called it "stunning, tough, and insightful." Owen Gleiberman (*Entertainment Weekly*) termed Swank "a revelation...it's as if we were simply glimpsing the character's soul, in all its yearning and conflicted beauty." Kenneth Turan (*Los Angeles Times*) wrote, "*Boys Don't Cry* is an exceptional – and exceptionally disturbing – film." In 2000 Hilary Swank won Best Actress Oscar (and Chloë Sevigny was nominated for Supporting Actress), which helped propel the \$2 million film to a \$20 million worldwide gross.

For years the media had characterized Brandon in misleading, often derogatory ways. As Trish Bendix (*New York Times*) wrote in October 2019 on the occasion of the film's 20th anniversary, "For trans people, *Boys Don't Cry* was simultaneously a much-needed representation and an unavoidable illumination of a societal blind spot. Nick Adams, director of transgender representation at GLAAD, which tracks LGBTQ representation in the media, described the film as 'a vital and high-profile correction to that biased news coverage.'" In December, 2019, when *Boys Don't Cry* was selected for the National Film Registry, Jude Dry (*IndieWire*) observed, "In her acceptance speech, Swank thanked Brandon Teena using he/him pronouns, a courtesy missing from much of the press, and even from some film critics. For many trans men, *Boys Don't Cry* was the first time they had seen themselves onscreen. For others, it was their introduction to the very concept of a transgender identity."

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NEXT UP Wim Wenders' latest film, *Perfect Days* (2023), nominated for the Best International Feature Academy Award, screens on Thursday, February 8 at 7 p.m. Then on Friday, February 9, the Yale Film Archive welcomes director James Ivory for a 35mm screening of *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965), followed by a conversation with the filmmaker, at 7 p.m.