

In 1994, the Associated Press broke yet another heartbreaking but familiar story of violence in the heartland. A popular young man, the new boy in town, was outed in the local press after being picked up by the police on a series of petty charges involving bad checks and "borrowed" credit cards. The blurb in the *Falls City Journal* indicated that the young man arrested, Brandon Teena, was in fact a young female. Soon after, on Christmas Day, Teena was kidnapped, raped and beaten by two of his buddies, and threatened with death should he tell what happened. He told. The police interrogated him about his sexuality, made joking references to the brutalized youngster ("You can call it 'it' for all I care") and did nothing to move on the rape charges. A week later Teena and two others were found murdered execution-style in a small farmhouse in Humboldt, Neb. Charged with the murders were John Lotter and Tom Nissan, the men Teena had named as his assailants in the rape case.

Teena's murder and its unsettling aftermath are chronicled in *The Brandon Teena Story*, which plays Feb. 19-25

at the Castro Theatre, 429 Castro St. The filmmakers responsible for this riveting documentary, Susan Muska and Gréta Ólafsdóttir of New York City, chatted with *SF Frontiers* about their current release.

*Why did you make this film? What drew you to this particular story?*

Susan Muska: It was brought to national attention by the AP wire. The title on the story was "Dressed to Kill." It implied that this person, because of the way he was dressing and living brought on the murders. It was sensationalized and tawdry and that piqued our interest in what the story really was.

*I understand that you spent quite a bit of time in Nebraska.*

SM: Oh, god. We were going out there for three or four years. We did rent an apartment.

Gréta Ólafsdóttir: Sometimes we made five or six trips a year. Every other month we were going. We went there a lot.

*It shows in the film. The people all seem as though they have known you for some time.*

GO: We spent a lot of time just to

get to know them as people. We weren't always talking about the film.

SM: We were there for weeks in the courtroom just meeting people.

*I thought that the film was as much a portrait of the town of Falls City and other towns like it—working-class, all-white Midwestern towns—as of Teena or any of the others.*

SM: We've said that ourselves. The film is the Brandon Teena story, but the film is really about the people in the story. It is more about their feelings and their interpretation of Brandon, because obviously Brandon can't tell his story.

*I got the sense that Teena was an unexplainable entity to them, whereas Lotter and Nissan were something they could get their minds around.*

GO: They had only known Brandon for a short period of time. But Lotter was from Falls City and Nissan had spent a lot of time there.

*They were the hometown boys.*

SM: Right. There was a lot more similarity between Lotter and Nissan and the other people in the town than there was with Brandon.

*I didn't get the impression that anyone considered Lotter and Nissan to be very far-fetched individuals at all.*

SM and GO: No, not at all.

*That was one of the things I found most chilling. That sense of Falls City being Everytown, Middle America, and the utter banality of the evil there. The murders came off as being almost inevitable.*

SM: Yeah. Of course, there is homophobia and transphobia everywhere, but you see it especially when you go into these nice small towns and communities where people aren't forced to get along with other people. It's really terrible, but I don't think it is that unusual. I think what was unusual to us, coming from an urban area, was, well, what was Brandon doing? It seems like an incredibly risky life to lead in an area where you know what the stakes are. You know someone could violate you or take out their rage against you because of who you are. And he kept living this life. That's the mystery of Brandon, and we'll never know.

*The small-town atmosphere came out even with the people who were completely inno-*

# The Brandon Teena Storytellers

*SF Frontiers*

interviews

filmmakers

Gréta Ólafsdóttir

and

Susan Muska

PHOTOS BY GRETA ÓLAFSDÓTTIR

Gréta Ólafsdóttir

by Jordy Jones

Susan Muska

cent and seemed really well-intentioned. One woman, when she was talking about going to the farmhouse and discovering the scene of slaughter, refers to Phillip DeVine as "a Negro." There wasn't any hostility, but it seemed very indicative of the mindset of the town. Forget out gays. They hadn't even progressed to using the word black, much less African-American.

SM and GO: You've got it there!

In your publicity, you call The Brandon Teena Story "a documentary about hatred and homophobia in the heartland." I was curious about that. Do you stand by that? Homophobia? Not transphobia?

SM: What really came across was that even though Brandon expressed himself as transgendered, people's reaction to him was homophobic. The girlfriends when we talked to them said, "Oh, he's going to become a man." But as soon as other people began to say to them, "Oh, you're a lesbian," that was the phobia. I don't think people understood the transgendered concept.

A lot of homophobia is also transphobic. Femme boys and butch girls and drags get a lot more harassment and violence than "straight-acting" gays. But in the minds of people who commit that sort of act, mainly a queer is a queer. I doubt very much that they make the sorts of distinctions that we make.

SM: Right. We are coming from an informed point of view, whereas the people who live in that community don't have that information.

GO: They are just not exposed.

I did some research on hate groups' presence on the Internet a few years ago. A phrase that kept coming up on site after site over and over again was "perverts and muds." It means anybody with a non-normative sexuality and anyone of non-European heritage—queers and colors of any stripe and shade.

GO: It is scary.

It's scary and it is also very sad. It's sad when people who should know better, don't. There is a lot of racism among queer people and homophobia in communities of color.

SM: Yeah, we should know better. We should be focusing on the people who commit these kinds of crimes. Who are these people? How can we change? How can we have a fair society for everybody? Those are things we have to work on in our own community, instead of being focused on how different we all are.

Sometimes when a group begins to get power, they start separating themselves from the most vulnerable of their own members. There's the idea that GLBTs are just the same as everybody else, that there are no specifically queer cultures.

Mainstream gays sometimes point out they aren't "men in dresses and leather freaks." There's also the idea is that once the most presentable members of the group get their rights, that they will come back for everybody else.

SM: Which is really not what is going to happen.

Historically, it isn't what happens. It was amazing in the film to see a teary-eyed Kate Bornstein open and close her mouth—and no words came out. That really spoke to me. I've never seen Kate speechless!

SM: Where were we, Gréta? We showed the film and someone from the audience stood up and said, "I thought it was really really strange that the only person who was upset in the film during the trials was that lady who wasn't even from there."

I thought your use of the road image was very interesting as a cinematic device. I found it a particularly touching metaphor in this film because we know where that road ultimately took Teena. He didn't escape, he never got to a shining new future.

GO: It's like the journey...

You never know where it will lead when you begin.

SM: No, you don't, and unfortunately for Brandon it was both moving on and constantly running away.

I was impressed by US Marshal Ron Shepard. He didn't try to explain away the crime in terms of Teena's embodiment. He put it on the killers. He said: "They are just cowards. They don't view people who are different than them as equal. They are just cowards."

SM: The marshals became our friends.

GO: They just nailed it. We actually met a lot of good people down there. We shouldn't forget that.

That's what struck me. They probably came out of a background not all that different than some of the other people. I don't know the answer, and I don't expect you to, but I wonder what makes one person not get it and somebody else get it so well. You've got racist queers, and queer-bashing colors and then you've got guys like these, straight white guys with no reason in the world to get it, but they do.

GO: That's one of these mysteries of life that we are never going to be able to figure out.

SM: Maybe there's a gene!

If we could figure it out, we could bottle it.

Jordy Jones is a Bay Area artist, writer and activist. As a transsexual and a faggot, he is deeply invested in facilitating dialogue and interaction between the trans community and the greater queer communities. He can be reached at [REDACTED]

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