

Brandon Teena: Anatomy of A Murder

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Women who dated Brandon Teena say he was kind, considerate and knew how to treat a lady. He should have known, because he was one. Teena was born Teena Brandon and flip-flopped his first and last names so he could live life as a man.

What sounds like the basis for another raucous episode of "The Jerry Springer Show," where genders blur and fur flies daily, turns out to be a tale told with intelligence and compassion in "The Brandon Teena Story," a 90-minute documentary premiering tonight at 11 on Cinemax, HBO's sister channel.

Homophobic hate crimes that make the national news tend to concern gay male victims. Teena's case got relatively little attention, but this film helps correct that. Heart-breaking though it is, the story deserves to be told.

Brandon-Teena-Brandon was a victim from birth until death—a victim of being biologically "different," genetically on the borderline between male and female and a victim of bigots who saw this as some sort of affront.

Filmmakers Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir let the story un-

See TV PREVIEW, C7, Col. 1

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Brandon Teena (formerly Teena Brandon) with a girlfriend.

On Cinemax: Engendering Inhumanity

TV PREVIEW, From *CI*

fold slowly, gathering power as it does, always refraining from ponderous preachments. Although we hear three shots fired in a small Nebraska town at the outset, and see a TV news report about three people being murdered in an isolated cabin, we don't know who or why.

Then flashbacks and interviews with real-life participants unravel the mystery and offer a portrait of Teena, a young person who seems confused, perhaps, and guilty of a few check forgeries (so he could buy gifts for his girlfriends), but otherwise the absolute opposite of a threat to the community.

The community was the threat.

Two dimwitted ex-cons, Tom Nissen and John Lotter, are incensed by Teena's continuing masquerade. On a Christmas Eve, they expose him at a party as being a "her" with no male genitalia. Then, later, they rape him. On the following New Year's Eve, they take action to make sure Teena will never testify against them.

The filmmakers have relatively little visual material at their disposal. There is no film of Teena, but we do see several still photos, with Teena smiling contentedly, dressed in men's clothes. Obviously, it isn't easy to keep that a great big secret in a wee small town, and the smallness of the town was part of Teena's undoing.

"People are cruel," understates Teena's mother, JoAnn, one of many locals and intimates interviewed, as are the men convicted of the murder.

The filmmakers appear to agree with friends of Teena's who say that local law enforcement officials failed to investigate the rape after Teena reported it and thus failed to prevent the murder. We hear a recording of Teena being badgered by the sheriff after the rape as if Teena were more culprit than victim. Finally, in a frail, soft voice, Teena says, "I have a sexual identity crisis."

Sometimes the filmmakers stoop to cheap tricks, like having "Silent Night" played on a toy xylophone as the rape is graphically described. They raid their record collections for songs to underline irony. Stupidly, they begin the film with their company logo, a spoof of M-G-M's famous lion that suggests a comedy to come. But the pathos, poignancy and senseless brutality of the story come through, a reminder that not all "American tragedies" involve the rich and famous.

Teena's death, and the deaths of two friends trying to protect him, say something grimly pertinent about small-town America on the dawn of a new millennium. How new will it be? How many mindless prejudices will survive into the next millennium—and the next?

A TV newscaster in the film says the murders and the trial "could leave a lasting scar on this close-knit community." Aww. Isn't that just too bad? If "The Brandon Teena Story" helps keep the scar fresh, so much the better.