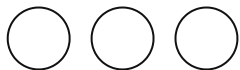


"Brandon Teena": A crime of outrage

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THERE ARE CRIMES so raw, so foul, they leave you fighting the dry heaves, wiping bile off your beard and clenching your fists together until your fingers go numb. Gang rape. Crimes against children. The killing of hostages, one by one.

That's the way the murders in "The Brandon Teena Story" leave you - angry, muttering, helpless: The documentary, which opens Friday at the Castro Theatre, recounts a triple murder in Nebraska, the triple murder of a 21-year-old woman living the life of a man, the mother of a young child and a black man who, in that favorite blotter line, was "in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Put together by Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir, "The Brandon Teena Story" follows a woman - Teena Brandon - for two months of her life, in Lincoln and Falls City, Neb. It ends with her murder Dec. 30, 1993, by two honestly evil ex-cons, and the trial that follows. Before it's over, the film offers a bald look at the poor white trash of Falls City, giving those caught up in the saga, including the killers, ample room to make themselves sound stupid.

Muska and Olafsdottir, who won the best documentary awards at the 1998

Vancouver and Berlin film festivals with "Brandon Teena," want to argue that Midwestern homophobia and the inability to deal with gender confusion was at the heart of the triple killing. What comes out of the "The Brandon Teena Story" is a study in stupidity that is proud of itself, stupidity that hates anything outside of the everyday.

Brandon, dressing as a man throughout her teenage years, wooed half a dozen women in Nebraska, including one that accepted a proposal of marriage. The women interviewed agreed Brandon's best quality was the ability "to know what a woman wants." A friend said, "Teena knew who a female was, because he was female at one time, and he knew what a male was, 'cause he was male now. It was great."

Brandon's lovers talk vaguely about touching and kissing, none acknowledging she actually knew Brandon was a woman. One says, "They told me, and I'm like, 'Hermaphrodite?' What are you talking about? I was really freaking out - 'You mean I'm dating an animal?' "

Brandon, befriending people in Falls City, told them she was in the last stages of a sex-change operation, which led to confusion and anger in the community of less than 5,000. Things started to unravel when Brandon was arrested on bad-check charges Dec. 16 and broke down Christmas Eve when John Lotter and Thomas Nissen partially stripped Brandon in front of her lover to show her Brandon was female.

That led to Brandon's back-seat rape and the filing of charges against Nissen and Lotter, both unemployed ex-convicts. Much of the rest of the documentary is taken up with tapes of Sheriff Charles Laux interviewing Brandon, a miserable litany of embarrassing, unanswerable questions ("What do you mean by "sexual identity crisis?" ").

Lotter, 22, and Nissen, 21, were called in to the sheriff's office on Dec. 28, told of the

charges against them and released. Two days later they hunted down Brandon at the home of a friend, Lisa Lambert, and shot both of them, along with Philip Devine, leaving a 9-month old boy crying in his crib.

They were arrested and Nissen confessed, saying Lotter pulled the trigger, and both are serving life sentences. U.S. Marshal Ron Shepherd said, "These are gutless,

cowardly people. They're just punks. . . . All we needed to do was get Nissen to squeal like the pig that he is."

Muska and Olafsdottir offer evidence that the reason Brandon and her friends were murdered was because of homophobia, citing Nissen's fear that the rape left him open to charges of being homosexual. Michelle Lotter, John's sister, condemns Brandon with the words, "What did he think he was doing, bringing this s- - to a small town like this? I wanted him to go back to Lincoln. I wanted him away."

Lotter, interviewed in prison, talks matter-of-factly about the rape, saying, "I couldn't get it up, you know? She was very, very quiet, didn't say nothing . . . "Ouch." He admits threatening Brandon, but "just 'cause you say something doesn't mean you're going to carry it out. If I did, there'd be a lot of people dead."

The documentary is full of strange interludes. Brandon says Nissen turned to her after the rape and asked,

"We're still friends?" And Lambert's father, talking about the murder of his daughter, mother of the 9-month-old left alive, finds himself lost in a monologue about his car's transmission ("I didn't know that much about a hydraulic clutch").