



# The **Brandon Teena** Story

a film by Susan Muska and Gréta Ólafsdóttir



a Zeitgeist Films release

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## Synopsis

When 20 year old Brandon arrived in rural Falls City, Nebraska, in 1993, his handsome looks and boyish charm won him several friends in town and even a pretty young girlfriend. But only three weeks later, on Christmas Eve, Brandon was brutally raped and beaten by two of his friends, who became enraged when they discovered that he was actually a woman. A week later, on New Year's Eve, the same two men murdered Brandon, along with a young mother and another man with whom he had sought refuge miles away.

**The Brandon Teena Story** is a documentary about hatred and homophobia in the heartland. In focusing on the last few weeks of Brandon's life, it tells the tale of Brandon's coming of age struggle with identity and how his gender ambiguity induced feelings of betrayal, confusion, and hostility among the residents of an isolated American township still attempting to understand what happened during his fateful final days.



**The Crime.** December 30, 1993: Another cold winter night in rural Nebraska. Three friends were hanging out in a small farmhouse south of the town of Humboldt. Lisa Lambert, 24, lived there with her nine-month old son, Tanner. That night she had opened her home to Brandon, 21, and Philip, 22, who had no other place to go to.

It was dark and cold and no one felt like doing much, so they spent the evening munching popcorn, drinking Dr. Pepper and watching tv. By midnight they would all go to sleep. A couple of hours later they were brutally woken up by two intruders kicking through the front door, screaming at them not to make any moves; within seconds the first shot was fired.

Lisa, Brandon and Philip were all dead within minutes, shot in the head, stabbed and left lying in a pool of their own blood. Lisa's baby, Tanner, was the only survivor, wailing in his crib. Through the slats he could see the motionless bodies of his mother and friends who had lovingly just hours before put him to bed. The two men turned around, leaving the baby there with the dead, walked out and drove away.

The next morning Lisa's mother Anna Mae drove up the long dirt driveway to the house. She noticed that the front door was dangling open, and oddly no one seemed to be awake. She called Lisa's name. No answer, but she could hear Tanner crying in the back of the house. Anna Mae hurried through the front door and was greeted by the body of Philip Devine, propped up against the sofa. Not stopping to look closer, she went straight into the back bedroom where she saw the bodies of her dead daughter and Brandon, both laid out on the sagging waterbed. The floor was a sea of reddish fluid. She picked up Tanner and called 911.

Later that same day, December 31, 1993, Thomas Nissen, 21, and John Lotter, 22, residents of Falls City, were arrested for the murders. Thomas Nissen confessed that he had driven John Lotter out to the farmhouse and once there John had killed everyone. Tom, according to his confession, was present but didn't participate in the killings per se. In a further deposition, he admitted to stabbing Brandon "to be sure she was dead." He also informed the police that they had tossed the murder weapons in a nearby river. John Lotter has never confessed and continues to deny any part in the murders.

During the spring of 1995 both men were tried separately and found guilty of first degree murder. Nissen plea bargained in exchange for testifying against Lotter in order to avoid the death penalty. In August Nissen was sentenced to three consecutive life sentences. In February of 1996 Lotter was sentenced to the death penalty. In May of 1997, Nissen's appeals were turned down by the Supreme Court. Lotter's appeals are waiting for final review by the Supreme Court.





**The Film.** THE BRANDON TEENA STORY is a documentary based on the Humboldt triple murder and why it took place, destroying the lives of at least five young people forever, three dead and one sentenced to life, one to the electric chair; not to mention the effect on the friends, family and lovers left behind trying to make sense of a seemingly senseless series of events culminating in cold-blooded murder. Their lives have been changed forever.

The catalyst for the murders was the sexual persona of Brandon, who triggered off the series of violent events when it was revealed in Falls City, a town he had just moved to, that he was actually female, passing as a male and dating local women. Much has been said about the “lies and deception” that created a wave of anger among Brandon’s new friends. Both John Lotter and Tom Nissen were “angry at the lies.” What were these lies and how could they evoke such a fury? In unravelling the history of the “lying,” we find common and tragic issues of youth on the brink of adulthood, their sexual identity threatened by the introduction of one who transgresses roles they wanted to believe are firmly entrenched and unshakable. Brandon was the “perfect guy,” yet she was a woman.

In the beginning John and Tom liked Brandon as a buddy but when they found out that “he” was really a “she” they were disgusted and disturbed. Tom told his wife Kandi “My hand brushed against his (Brandon’s) chest and I was grossed out.” At the same time Tom had to acknowledge that even though Brandon’s girlfriend Lana knew about Brandon being female, she still loved him. Even after all Brandon had done Brandon was still more popular and receiving more love than they could ever dream of in their whole lives. Both John and Tom at this time were struggling with their own male issues, involved in unhappy relationships, drinking heavily, bouncing from job to job, and both had already served time in the State Pen.

In fact, John still held a torch for Lana, whom he had dated years ago. He told his sister “I could never do better than Lana.” Lana was publicly very affectionate with Brandon in front of Tom and John. They couldn’t allow Brandon to be more of a man than they were, especially on their own turf. They had to brutally rape and beat Brandon to drive home the message of who was in charge and to make sure that Brandon would not from then on pass himself off as a guy.

The themes of homophobia and self-hatred are embedded in this story. As in most of this country, homosexuality is still taboo, a source of speculation and scandal. When Brandon tried to press rape charges against Lotter and Nissen, the local Sheriff ridiculed and taunted her to such an extent that he offended his Deputy, who was sitting in on the interview. By most accounts there are no homosexuals in Falls City. The only visible norm in Falls City is white and straight. We were told that “Well there is one guy, everyone calls him a faggot,





but that's just because they hate him." Lana, Brandon's last girlfriend, and her best friend Michelle (John Lotter's sister), the two women in town who knew Brandon best, have been shunned and called "dykes and lesbians" in public since the Brandon episode. Lana still lives in Falls City but Michelle moved out of town. None of Brandon's former girlfriends consider themselves gay or bisexual, just deceived.

Through the stories of the people involved in the events leading to Brandon's rape and the subsequent killing spree, the film shows how homophobia coupled with anger and hatred led to rape and murder. Somehow or other, all roads led to the farmhouse in Humboldt, everyone involved was touched by Brandon; even today, Lotter and Nissen insist that they did not hate Brandon. When Nissen was cross examined by Lotter's Defense Attorney Mike Fabian, and asked "...and didn't you hate Brandon and that is why you raped and beat her, and then made her get out of the car and punched her again," to which Nissen calmly replied, "No I did not hate Brandon. I didn't hate him." Yet further testimony by him reveals that he and Lotter had plotted and conferred for days, stalking Brandon, planning how to get him alone and brutally murder him, supposedly to prevent him from pressing rape charges, to "shut him up for good." Both Nissen and Lotter have been interviewed and tell their version of the story.

THE BRANDON TEENA STORY, examines the roots of violence and hatred as played out against young Brandon by what some may call his peers, two young men barely of legal drinking age who had spent most of their lives shuttled from foster homes to detention centers to mental health facilities, returning to Falls City in between. Dangerous as these young men proved to be, they didn't act in a vacuum, and not one person intervened to stop them in their increasingly violent acts, including the local law enforcement. These two men, their families, friends of Brandon and her family, local townspeople, law enforcement, jurors, social workers and a psychiatrist who worked with one of the murderers for seven years when he was a troubled child are all interviewed in the film.

THE BRANDON TEENA STORY is told by people who lived it, and knew Teena Brandon, aka Brandon, at different stages in his life, leading to the last few weeks precariously spent in southeast Nebraska—these are the crucial days when Brandon's unveiled identity triggered the spiral of mean spirited violence that ended in triple homicide. The story is visually played out against the panorama of rural Richardson County with all its beauty and harshness. The sound track is country music full of pain and grief and looking for love, a crucial emotional outlet for young people in this part of the heartland.

Where are the roots of hatred? Why was Brandon a ready target for violence in Falls City? Could the violence have been stopped and how? These are a few of the questions addressed in THE BRANDON TEENA STORY.



# Directors' Bios

THE BRANDON TEENA STORY is the first feature length documentary produced by Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir, independent filmmakers based in New York.

**Susan Muska** was born in the US on December 22, 1958. Susan is a freelance cameraperson and producer who specializes in social issue and public health documentaries and has had several short pieces broadcast. She graduated from Duke University in 1981 with a degree in Botany and Political Science. She went on to study eastern european economics and politics at the University of Copenhagen for one year in 1980/81, Fine Arts at Parsons School of Design, documentary film and video at the New School, and has a MA degree in French Studies and Anthropology from New York University. She is now working as an ethnographic filmmaker and communications research consultant for various international collaborative projects in Africa (Rwanda, Zambia).

**Greta Olafsdottir** was born in Iceland on June 10, 1957. Greta is a professional photographer who works in fashion and the fine arts, as well as being a documentary photographer. She graduated from The School of Visual Arts with a BFA degree in Photography in 1988. Her education also includes a year of French Studies at the University of Montpellier and a BA in Women's Studies from the New College of California. Her work has been published in several magazines and her photographs from The Brandon Teena Story have been featured in *The New Yorker* magazine. She is currently working on an exhibition from that body of work. Greta has lived and worked in New York since 1984.

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**Produced and Directed by**

Susan Muska and Gréta Ólafsdóttir

**Camera and Editing by**

Susan Muska and Gréta Ólafsdóttir

**Executive Producer**

Jane Dekrone

**Post-Production Sound**

Lora Hirschberg

**Music**

Lorrie Morgan

Dinah Washington

April Stevens

The Brown Brothers

## AWARDS

Teddy Award, Best Documentary Film

**Berlin Film Festival, 1998**

Siegessaule Readers Award (Audience Award)

**Berlin Film Festival, 1998**

The Independent Film Channel Documentary Vision Award

**New York International Documentary Film Festival, 1998**

Audience Award, Inside Out,

**Toronto Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, 1998**

Honorable Mention Documentary Competition

**Torino International Gay & Lesbian Film Festival, 1998**

Bronze Apple Award

**National Educational Media Network, 1998**

USA • 90 minute • Color • 16mm

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