



Transamerica. A Journey Worth Taking?

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The Phoenix Film Festival recently hosted a screening of *Transamerica* followed by a Q&A with the award winning and Golden Globe Nominee, Felicity Huffman and Phoenix native Writer and Director, Duncan Tucker. As I picked up my will-call tickets, I introduced myself to the executive director and co-founder of the Phoenix Film Festival, and mentioned that I was writing an article about using the film as an educational resource for LGBT student services on college and university campuses. He asked me what the “T” stood for, and then chuckled when I told him “T” is for “Transgender,” reminding me of the invisibility of transgender people in mainstream American culture and the need for more (and more accurate) depictions of transgender communities in the media. I had high hopes for the film’s capacity to be used as an educational programming tool for *GLBT Campus Matters*.

As I stood in line with several anxious extras that appear in the movie, I took note of the audience: primarily made up of white, seemingly wealthy, senior citizens, with the local transgender community’s usual suspects sprinkled here and there (a row of powerful transwomen, an SRS plastic surgeon staff member, and a favorite electrolysis doctor). I also noticed a lesbian couple sitting to my partner’s left, and two popular local cross-dressers on my right. Let the journey begin.

And a journey it was. *Transamerica* (distributed by Weinstein Company) (103 minutes) (<http://www.transamerica-movie.com/>) is a story about Bree (Felicity Huffman), a born-again Christian and a pre-operative (living stealth), male-to-female transsexual, holding down two jobs (telemarketer and waitress), saving money for sex reassignment surgery. She receives a call from NYC incarceration alerting her that she has a son, Toby (Kevin Zegers), who was the product of a somewhat clumsy “lesbian like” sexual encounter 17 years earlier, before she began her transition. Together the two embark on a journey weaving through beautiful landscapes of Middle America and human complexity. The 2001 screenplay originated from a 1993 conversation between Tucker and his roommate in Hollywood who came out to him as having been raised male. The film was shot primarily in Phoenix in the summer of 2004. When searching for funding to make the movie, Tucker was pushed to hire a big name actor to play Bree to appease the public’s interest in seeing a man (like Daniel Day Lewis) in a dress. As he stated in the Q&A following the screening, Tucker did not know of a transwoman with “the chops to carry a movie,” turning to Felicity Huffman, a friend from theater. Huffman accepted the part and spoke about employing three voice coaches to significantly lower her for the six-week shoot, resulting, she said, in a multi-dimensional character with integrity and dignity.

So, after viewing the movie, what do I think about using it as a resource to educate others about the LGBT community? I consulted with my partner, a faculty member, as well as close friend and colleague doing direct LGBT support services at another large state university to develop and expand on my own thoughts. First, and foremost, it needs to be said that a transsexual leading character in a public media form is long overdue. *Boys Don’t Cry*, *Hedwig*, *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and *Paris is Burning*, can only be shown on a college campus so many times before the screening audience begin to be movie fans, or choir members as I like to refer to them. *Transamerica* is a powerful movie for transsexual-identified people, specifically the transwoman communities as it provides a three dimensional character whom individuals can relate to through their lived experiences. The

humorous "trans" related details like hair removal, height, "living stealth", and hormones were visibly comforting to the transwomen that attended the screening. Bree is a regular person and not portrayed as a Chelsea Pier sex worker or something of the like as transsexual women are often portrayed on television and in other media, cast as extras or secondary characters. She is not political and the movie is politic free providing an almost timeless journey that is not taking a stance on gay marriage, the religious right, but addressing concepts of family and relationships. There are many attempts over the course of the film to normalize Bree's experience. For example, there is a flow of dialog that reveals that hormones are hormones, referring to their use for those transitioning, as well as for menopausal purposes (they both come in the form of a purple pill). However, these are just small pieces of a much larger movie.

Transamerica can serve to increase visibility of transsexual people and issues to the *Desperate Housewives* loyalists who probably have not thought much about gender. It is one way to begin conversations around the complexities of social constructions of gender without using Judith Butler, stick figures, or diagrams. If you have no other "trans" related resources to access, this movie is better than nothing. However, if you have access to other resources, keep reading and make an educated decision based on your objectives and target audiences. At all of the institutions I have worked at, I would gladly show this film and would follow the screening with a discussion deconstructing the images, story, and impact of both on the greater transgender and gender variant community.

When screening *Transamerica*, I would recommend that the following items be taken into account, planned for proactively, and processing and support be made available to your audience. What Tucker described in a Q&A as an attempt to use lighthearted humor to appeal to his audiences could potentially be seen as carelessness and a lack of understanding of the weight (in terms of forming cultural opinions and judgments of transgender communities) this film could have for those with little to no understanding of transgender issues. *Transamerica* emphasizes the pathology of gender dysphoria/gender identity disorder, and reinforces a number of our favorite transgender stereotypes, including that all transgender community members are at some point suicidal, seek surgery, take hormones, and have distant relationships with family. Bree, as described by her mother, "cannot stick to a decision," explaining her unsuccessful suicide attempt, no degree status after ten years of collegiate study, and then questions her decision to go through "inny vs. outy" "bottom surgery" as a last step of her transition, raising issues of certainty or gender questioning as a legitimate process. Lastly, there is a thread of sexualization, fetish, and perversion, which needs to be considered. One scene includes a group of "trans" cameos that is hyper sexualized, which could on the one hand be read as fluid and free, but could also confirm perverse stereotypes for a conservative audience.

Additionally, the film has a very "Hollywood-esque" approach to Bree's access to surgery: Bree, who works as a telemarketer and a waitress, is able to take vacation time away from work and still have a sense of job security, access to insurance, prescription drugs, therapy, and surgery, as well as the wardrobe & cosmetics necessary to pass, seemingly magical. There is also an interesting use of racial and ethnic identity throughout the primarily white movie. Bree gets "read" by an eight year old African American girl, flirts with a Native American man, jilted by a peyote shaman, and is the eldest child of a Christian mother and Jewish father. Toby feels a strong connection to native cultures and after finding his mother dead in the garage with the car running finds himself under the care of an abusive alcoholic step father and an African American maternal (or Mummy) figure down the street. There is also a discussion about being from the wrong half of families, which is interestingly binary for two "mixed" identified characters (disappointed at being "part" Jewish not "part" "Native).

Moreover, Toby, is the most concerning character in the movie for me. Perhaps because I work with youth, I could not stop thinking about Toby's story. Tucker stated during the Q&A that the actor cast for Toby (Kevin Zegers) was "prettier" than the role had called for. Tucker continues to say that Zegers was made "less pretty" by having greasy hair and the rose removed from his cheeks. Tucker also stated that he re-wrote Toby's role to accommodate a "pretty boy" actor. Zegers is stunning in the movie, both visually and in performance. He

seems to encompass a lost waif look that is then hyper sexualized. The concern here is that as a survivor of sexual abuse, Toby seems to show affection through sexualized acts. He also worked as a sex worker in New York in addition to selling drugs to pay rent. He has aspirations of being a pornographic movie star. This character seems to confirm stereotypes of abused people turning to sexual encounters for affection or attention that then of course “become” gay and sexual deviants. This is disconcerting even though there is a lack of politics in the movie; the politics in the theater seats and in our country could use this movie against the community it is representing.

Transamerica has an “R” rating due to sexual content, nudity, language, and drug use. Depending on your campus culture, this may not be a concern, however, it should be noted if being considered for a public screening.

As I exited the theater, on my way to restroom I overheard a theater house patron ask, “Hey, what’s going on in there?” referring to the Q&A session following the screening. A young employee sweeping the floor replied, “I do not know, some transvestite thing.” I could not help but say, “Transsexual!” as I entered the binary gendered “women’s” bathroom before heading home. It is important to state that at least *Transamerica* exists. Some may question the white male privilege of Duncan Tucker’s ability to realistically portray a transwoman’s experience, but *Transamerica* is a resource for those that have nothing. For those that have access to others, choose wisely from your own privileged places. Be mindful that we all have a gender expression, sexual identity, and a back story. Each one of us comes from places and experiences that we purposely choose to or not to disclose. We have families, genetic or chosen, that support our individual journey. As the trailers state, “Life is a Journey. Bring an Open Mind.”