

TRANSAMERICA

A United Artists / Sony Picture Classics 2005 release

A Transparent Films Production

Screenplay by Dan Futterman

Written and directed by Duncan Tucker

Film reviewed by Franco P. Visser



"This is the voice I want to use..." Bree Osbourne (played by Felicity Huffman) repeats over and over in the opening scene of a film about a pre-operative male-to-female transsexual 'going through the motions' in establishing her new sexual identity. This first-glance appearance soon changes drastically as the plot develops and new characters are introduced. Bree receives a phone call one day that makes her realise she 'fathered' a son – Toby Wilkens (played by Kevin Zegers). Toby was born from a college 'encounter' with a fellow student when Bree was still sexually acting as a male – Stanley Shupack. This revelation changes the direction of Bree's plans, and she is off to New York where, under the guise of a church care worker / missionary, she takes custody of Toby from juvenile detention after he was arrested working as a male prostitute. Bree does not tell her son that she is his biological father and sets out with him on a journey across America to Los Angeles, to his grandparents – Bree's own mother and father.

Very soon the viewer becomes aware of the 'sexual' content of the film. Dynamics of sex, sexuality, sexual abuse, sex-role and sexual expression all become very evident as Bree and Toby journey to Los Angeles. Not only does one see the characters' own struggles and dealings with these dynamics, but one is also confronted by the bias and anti-homosexual sentiments of the people and communities that Bree and Toby pass through or visit on their journey. From the outside Bree appears very feminine, but it is her extreme anxiety, insecurity and numerous fears that often 'gives her away' to others, causing her further pain and sorrow. A very specific fear of Bree that proves rather intriguing and full of psychological 'meaning' is her fear of snakes. In addition, Bree has an intense dislike of her still-present male genitalia – Freud would have had a field day!

Throughout the film, even before their journey begins, Bree receives guidance, counselling and support for her 'Gender Dysphoria' (better known as Gender Identity Disorder in Adults) from a therapist from the Centre of Psychological Well-being in her hometown. This proves to be extremely valuable as Bree is often on the verge of emotional breakdown and giving up the process of gender-reassignment surgery. Providing ongoing psychotherapy to such individuals proves very significant, as they often need to deal with a number of processes / stages before undergoing gender-reassignment surgery. Individuals who require the surgery often present with extreme emotional distress caused by rejection and their own complex intra-psychic processes. The initial presentation for help is often in the 'coming out' stage of their sexuality transformation. Suicidal ideation and self-mutilation are two significant risks associated with Gender Identity Disorder specifically; risks that need constant evaluation and monitoring by the therapist.

Bree surprises Toby by stopping over at his hometown of Callicoon, Kentucky. During a visit to his stepfather it transpires that Toby was sexually molested and abused by him from an early age. Slowly the pieces of Toby's life puzzle also start falling into place, especially in terms of his sexual identity and sexual behaviour. The pattern of being used and abused Toby continues into late adolescence, leading him to prostitute himself for the use and abuse by others. One cannot help but see the significance of events as they unfold in the film as being contributory to both Bree and Toby's current circumstances and lives, especially with regards to their sex-role and sexual functioning.

It is when they reach Bree's parents' home in Los Angeles that Toby learns the true identity of 'Bree the missionary' who accompanied him all the way. Toby now needs to deal with the fact that Bree is one of his biological parents, his father, and the fact that his father is soon to become a female. It is when Bree's parents are introduced during the film that one is provided with insight into the nurture versus nature debate that often surrounds the issue of sexuality. Bree's father, Murray (as played by Burt Young) is a relaxed, elderly gentleman, whereas Bree's mother, Elizabeth (played by Fionnula Flanagan) is an overpowering and dominant figure who refuses to accept Bree's new sexual identity. Bree asks her parents for the money to pay for her gender-reassignment surgery, which they eventually provide, but not without the severe condemnation of her mother.

While in Los Angeles Toby attempts to sexually seduce Bree in a misguided and inappropriate way of showing his feelings towards her. Sexualising every aspect of his life, and providing sex freely and in all contexts is, by Toby's own admission "what I do best". Toby aspires to become an actor, and he soon lands his first acting role', albeit not a conventional one. Bree receives her gender-reassignment surgery and this completes the most important process for her, although years of medical therapy, psychotherapy and adjustment still lie ahead in her new role as being female.

Transamerica is a complex, yet truly fascinating film with a lot of significant content that will leave the viewer thinking long after they have viewed the film. The notions of the individual as being part of a larger system, and that no individual can be examined in isolation, that is, outside of his / her system is clearly demonstrated in this film as each 'part' of Bree and Toby's system plays key roles in their own psychological dynamics and functioning. There are a few other interesting turns of events and experiences by Bree and Toby that were not discussed within this review, and these the writer will leave for the reader to discover. Even the title 'Transamerica' proves to hold more meaning than initially realised – a film definitely worth seeing.