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Oscar's hottest couple

Nominees Hilary Swank and Chloë Sevigny take the edgy *Boys Don't Cry* to the heart of Hollywood by revealing the film's soul: an old-fashioned love story

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STANDING BY HER MAN

Chloë Sevigny provided the loving gaze that made it OK for audiences to love Brandon too. Little did she know that Oscar would be watching

Chloë Sevigny was in Berlin when she and Hilary Swank received Oscar nominations for *Boys Don't Cry*. "My room looks like a funeral parlor right now, I have to tell you. Flowers galore," she laughs, speaking to *The Advocate* during a quick break between screenings at the Berlin Film Festival. "I have so many bottles of champagne, I want to have a champagne party when I get home."

A nomination—especially for a film as groundbreaking and bold as *Boys Don't Cry*—certainly wasn't a given as far as Sevigny was concerned. "I was just so shocked the Academy acknowl-►

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edged it," she admits. Though she and Swank were the only two to get a nod for the film, Sevigny counts their nominations as recognition for director-cowriter Kimberly Peirce: "Us getting nominated is Kimberly getting nominated because she's speaking through us."

Like everyone else connected with *Boys Don't Cry*, Sevigny has seen how powerfully and personally people respond to the movie. "So many people, it's unbelievable," she says when asked if people come up to her to talk about it. "Especially in Hollywood—I think

lives. 'I've experienced that with *Kids*, too," she says. "The first time anybody ever approached me was a young gay boy who'd been infected with HIV, and he was crying and hugging me on the street. I was so overwhelmed by that."

Since then she's delivered strong performances in *Trees Lounge*, *The Last Days of Disco*, and *A Map of the World*, among other films. And from the very start of her career she's been following the attempts to tell Brandon Teena's story. "I knew if anybody ever made it into a movie, it would be

Brandon was the first person to encourage her to get out of town and say positive things about her."

Now everyone is saying positive things about Sevigny. Doing nonstop press for the European premiere of *American Psycho*, in which she costars, the 24-year-old actress hasn't even had a chance to celebrate, much less contemplate the sudden leap forward her career has taken. "No, it hasn't really sunk in yet at all," Sevigny says of her Best Supporting Actress nomination. I don't think it will until I get to the red carpet on the evening of."

Actually, the reality may sink in a lot sooner. Getting a nomination means enduring a constant barrage of press interviews, glad-handing, and pressure—just the sort of thing the New York-based Sevigny (who lives in Connecticut, just outside the city) has always avoided.

"It's a little intense," she says, adding in a whisper, "I have to be positive in the press about it or else Kimberly will get mad at me." She laughs, quickly making it clear she's happy about the hoopla around a movie and a character she loves.

Still, it is intense. "They want you to do this whole campaigning thing," Sevigny says, "going on talk shows and morning shows. I don't like to see actors I admire on talk shows. It sort of ruins the mystique for me. Sean Penn talking about Bukowski on *Charlie Rose* makes me kind of 'Uh-h-h...' Everybody says you have to take advantage of this opportunity; it's the opportunity of a lifetime. So I'm going to have to swallow my pride a little."

Having starred as a traditionally feminine woman in *Boys Don't Cry*, Sevigny crosses to the other side of the queer spectrum this month in a segment of HBO's *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, a trilogy of shorts about lesbian lives. In a white T-shirt with short hair slicked back, Sevigny romances Michelle Williams of *Dawson's Creek*. Always critical of her own work and leery of seeing the finished project, Sevigny laughingly agonizes over her lesbian fans' reactions. "Oh, God," she says. "I try to play a butch. I'm so scared they're all going to turn on me and hate me for a bad representation." She needn't worry. Just as she did with Lana, Sevigny gets the shyness—and the sexuality—just right. —Michael Giltz

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"Her love for him was so strong. It was unconditional, once she got over her denial. I think it was the first time she was in love, and it didn't matter to her whether he was a boy or girl."

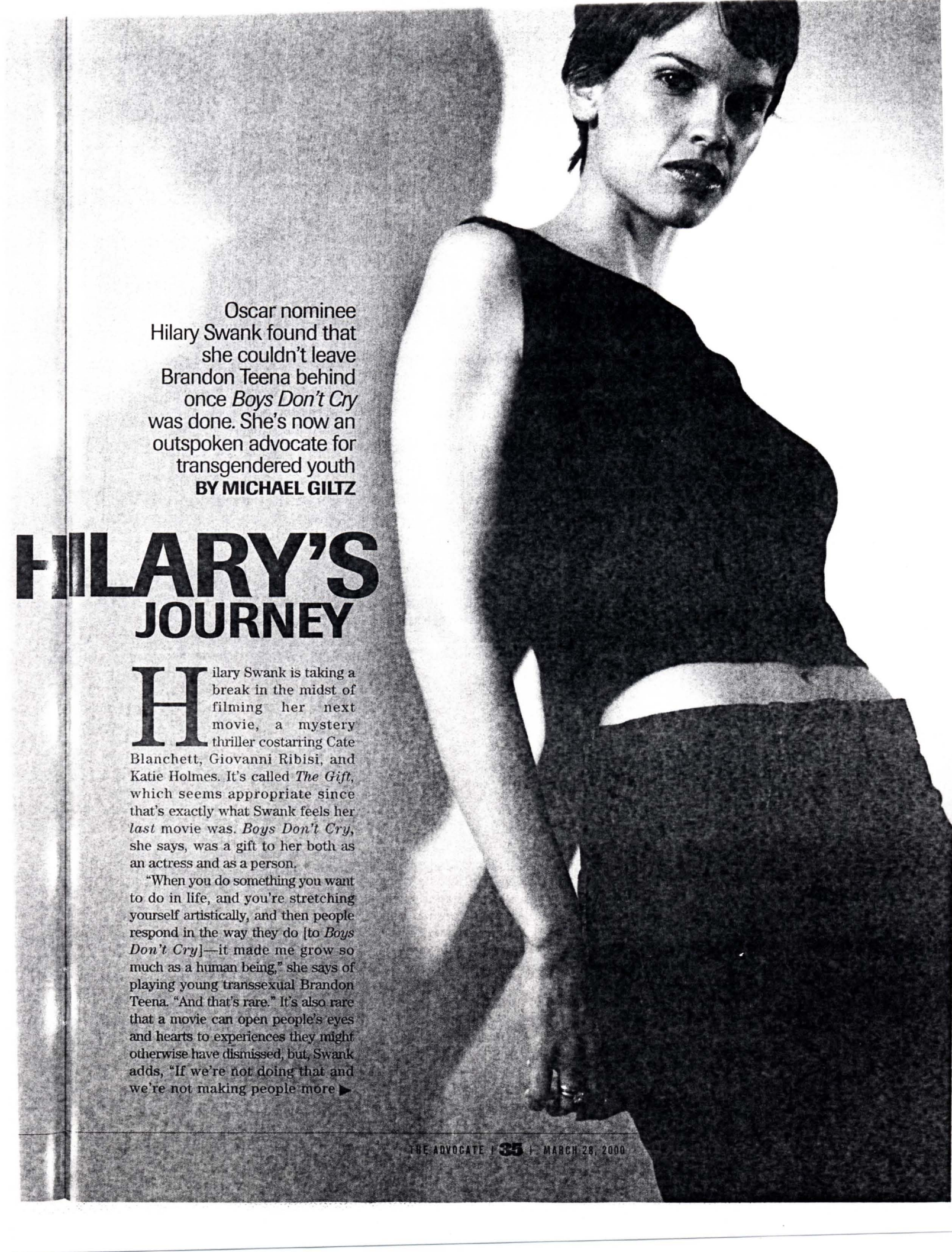
people are more apt to approach actors there. And here in Germany too because the movie was just released here. Everywhere I turn, people come up and say what a beautiful story they thought it was and how happy they are it was made."

It's also a sweet reward for Sevigny, who has emphatically not been chasing success in the Hollywood mode. She chose to make her film debut in 1995's tough, controversial *Kids*. Playing an HIV-positive teen searching for the boy who infected her, she established herself right away as an actor with a talent for conveying hard realities. And long before *Boys Don't Cry*, she learned how deeply film performances can affect real

something very special," she says.

During the years it took Peirce to bring *Boys Don't Cry* to the screen, the emergence of the documentary feature *The Brandon Teena Story* [see page 49]—and of competing narrative projects, including a high-profile version that was to star Drew Barrymore—might have shaken Sevigny's faith that *Boys* would succeed. But she stood by the project the same way she feels Lana stood by Brandon.

"Her love for him was so strong," says Sevigny. "It was unconditional, once she got over her denial. I think it was the first time she was in love, and it didn't matter to her whether he was a boy or girl. He was just so inspiring to her."



Oscar nominee
Hilary Swank found that
she couldn't leave
Brandon Teena behind
once *Boys Don't Cry*
was done. She's now an
outspoken advocate for
transgendered youth
BY MICHAEL GILTZ

HILARY'S JOURNEY

Hilary Swank is taking a break in the midst of filming her next movie, a mystery thriller costarring Cate Blanchett, Giovanni Ribisi, and Katie Holmes. It's called *The Gift*, which seems appropriate since that's exactly what Swank feels her last movie was. *Boys Don't Cry*, she says, was a gift to her both as an actress and as a person.

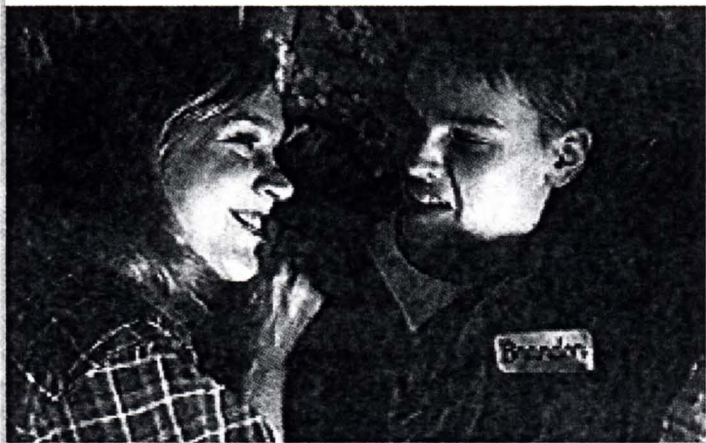
"When you do something you want to do in life, and you're stretching yourself artistically, and then people respond in the way they do [to *Boys Don't Cry*], it made me grow so much as a human being," she says of playing young transsexual Brandon Teena. "And that's rare." It's also rare that a movie can open people's eyes and hearts to experiences they might otherwise have dismissed, but, Swank adds, "If we're not doing that and we're not making people more ►

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aware, then we're probably not doing something right."

Swank's career has been set on fire by *Boys Don't Cry*. The blaze of critical acclaim began in the fall, continued through a near-sweep of year-end critics' prizes, and culminated in a Golden Globe win; now she's the front-runner for the Best Actress Academy Award. But it's the attention Swank has received from ordinary people that means the most to her.



"This movie spoke to [transgendered youth] in a way that a movie hadn't yet. They finally found someone they could relate to, and that feels so good. To think we as a society treat them differently or not as equals is one of the most terrible things about the human experience."

"When people stop me, they touch me on the shoulder, they come up really close to me and look into my eyes very intimately, and they feel like they know me," says the 25-year-old, sitting in her New York City apartment snuggling with her pet bunny, cat, and dog as her parrot looks on. "They want to go into a deeper place and say, 'This movie moved me because of this or that' or 'I have someone in my family who has the same situation' or 'You know what, I'm not gay and I'm not transgendered, but I can totally relate to Brandon.' So I stand there and I have a conversation with someone I don't know for half an hour because we both shared the same experience."

Swank also found a way to share experiences with young people facing some of what Brandon went through. When a representative of New York's Hetrick-Martin Institute called and explained the organization's programs—such as the Harvey Milk School for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students, and outreach to other service organizations to educate them about GLBT youth—Swank quickly agreed to pay her own way to New York and emcee the institute's annual awards dinner.

Naturally, she couldn't head to Los Angeles the next day without meeting the youths. "They loved her," says Verna Eggleston, the executive director of Hetrick-Martin, which is celebrating its 20th year. Eggleston vividly remembers Swank's being moved by the story of one student having a gender-identity crisis: Biologically a girl, she was dressed and treated as a boy by parents for reasons she never understood. In the boys' locker room, other students even grabbed her and held a knife to her, demanding to see her genitals—the same way Brandon was attacked. Swank was so touched by talking to all the youths that she changed her flight to stay longer.

"This movie spoke to them in a way that a movie hadn't yet. They finally found someone they could relate to, and that feels so good," Swank says. "To think we as a society..." She struggles to convey how strongly she feels. "To treat [such young people] differently or not as equals is one of the most terrible things about the human experience."

Wanting to do more, Swank returned to Hetrick-Martin, this time with MTV in tow, to let the rest of the country in on the work that the institute does. "They are so fantastic, such amazing kids," she says. "Just to see them and meet them and to see them growing and finding themselves. It's hard enough to go through life as a straight kid. I remember being a teenager, and they were *such* hard years. To think of all the torment I got for not wearing the right pants or whatever. Then to imagine what they go through—it's so unfair."

It's all been an important lesson in human differences, Swank notes. "If we were all the same, dressing the same, looking the same, thinking the same, the same religion, the same race—I know exactly what would happen: It would be so boring, so dull, it would be so *bland* we'd just *pray* for diversity." ■

Giltz also contributes to Entertainment Weekly.



For more about New York's Hetrick-Martin Institute, Hilary Swank, and *Boys Don't Cry*, go to www.foxadvocate.com

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