

# Transamerica (2005)

Rated R. Our ratings: V-1 ; L-4 ; S-6/N-5 . Running time: 1:43

*And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*

*Ephesians 6:4*

*You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.*

*Psalms 51:6*

Director/writer Duncan Tucker

Transamerica takes us on quite a journey of discovery in his film that provides a new twist to the old road movie genre. The ride is a bit bumpy for those of us who know little about transgender, but if one hangs on, the trip turns out to be well worth the effort, our central characters encountering many moments of grace along the way. We certainly discover why the Academy of Motion Pictures felt compelled to nominate Felicity Huffman for "Best Actress," even though they probably knew she would not really have a chance in such a role.

Bree (Huffman) is the name that Stanley has chosen for herself, s/he fervently believing that he is a woman born into a man's body. After a great amount of counseling with a psychiatrist and her therapist/friend Margaret (Elizabeth Pena), Bree feels that she is ready for a sex-change operation

that will fulfill her deep desires. All she needs is for their signatures on the letter seeking the operation. Then a telephone call from across the continent changes everything. Bree's operation is a week away, she needing the final consent of Margaret for it. However, the telephone call came from a youth in a New York City jail claiming to be Stanley's son Toby (Kevin Zegers). Bree denies knowing a Stanley. Margaret tells Bree that she must deal with this before she will sign the consent form of the operation. And so, under intense pressure, Bree flies to New York to visit the youth.

Looking like a rather prissy church lady, Bree bails Toby out of jail, and learns that he has been a street hustler doing drugs and selling himself to men ever since his mother died and he left his Kentucky home. Bree asks him if he can go back to his stepfather, but the boy adamantly says "No." At first Toby thinks Bree is from a church rescue group, so she replies that she is from the Church of the Potential Father." When he shows Bree an old picture of his mother and his father, Bree/Stanley is moved, but does not reveal that s/he is the person in the picture. The boy's ambition is to go to California and become a star in the porn-film industry. Bree changes her plans to fly back to California, instead offering him a ride in an old jalopy he cons her into buying.

Their trip trans-America is an eventful one, first when Bree takes advantage of Toby's being asleep and detours to his hometown, where she learns to her distress why Toby had refused to consider seeing his stepfather again. During the rest of the trip they meet an assortment of kind folk, such as a group of transsexuals in Dallas meeting for the first time in a support group that resembles a Tupperware party. Bree had been in correspondence with the hostess, but is upset and standoffish from the group because of Toby. He, however, thinks the group is "cool," but Bree still does not let on that she is transsexual, asking her hostess not to tell him. Others whom they encounter are not so kind, such as the

hitchhiker who—well, see the picture—although we must mention her parents Elizabeth (Fionnula Flanagan) and Murray (Burt Young), whom Bree had claimed earlier to be dead. When circumstances force them to stop at her old home in Arizona, the tension mounts, the parents having written their son off as dead because of what they regarded as his unsavory lusts (“If only you had gone to church more with us when you were young!”). Bree also has a younger her sister Sydney (Carrie Preston), with whom she had not been on good terms.

Duncan Tucker’s film might not be a great one, but it does conduct those of us who know little about transgender into a world that has more than its share of frustration and rejection. Felicity Huffman does a fine job of convincing us that she is a man learning by imitation to act like a woman so that when she eventually is able to obtain an operation, she will be one. Her concealing her identity from son Toby, hopefully for most viewers, will constitute the moral crux of the story, rather than her desire (need?) to become a woman.

The song by Dolly Parton that plays under the end credits is alone worth seeing this film for. (Not listening to much radio, I was unaware of the song until the vivacious singer performed it at the Oscars—I was so impressed by Ms. Parton’s performance that I thought she was robbed of the Award for Best Song.) With its lyrical, gospel-like tone and words, the song beautifully sums up Bree’s journey in which she is “Travelin’ Through” Had not friends urged me to see the film, this is a journey I might have missed. I found both the outer and the inner journey one filled with grace and humor, so that I emerged from the theater grateful for the ride.

## **For Reflection/Discussion**

1) Did the film teach you more about the situation of transsexuals than you knew before? What do you about this: uncomfortable; beginning to understand? How does your understanding of Christ relate to this?

2). Why do you think Bree leads Toby on about her church connection? What do you think of the name of the church she comes up with, " Church of the Potential Father"?

3) Bree wants the operation, but how does her failure to tell Toby the truth about herself show that she has not come to terms with her nature, that she does not "desire truth in the inward being"?

4) How have Bree's parents regarded her? How is this always a problem for children? Have you ever felt like Bree when she told Toby, "I wish that just once they'd look at me and see me"?

5) What is it that Calvin Two Goats (Graham Greene) sees in Bree? The real person that Bree wants, or his own idea of ideal of a woman? If Bree should go back to him, what do you think he would say or do if Bree told him the truth about herself?

6) Compare this film to Brokeback Mountain. How has each of the main characters grown up with a sense of self-loathing? Another film worth seeing if you like this one—Flawless, in which a drag queen played by Philip Seymour Hoffman enters into an unlikely friendship with a macho retired cop played by Robert de Niro.

7) Dolly Parton's lyrics to the song that concludes the film can be accessed at the Transamerica Soundtrack site: <http://www.stlyrics.com/t/transamerica.htm> On another site she reports that she wrote the gospel-like song for a transsexual who works for her. Thus this is not a song that was just tacked onto the film, but one that reflects a real person much like Bree, who, in the words of the song, " I'm out here on my journey, trying to make the most of it/I'm a puzzle, I must figure out where all my pieces fit." "God made me for a reason and nothing is in vain Redemption comes in many shapes with many kinds of pain Oh sweet Jesus if you're listening, keep me

ever close to you As I'm stumblin', tumblin', wonderin', as  
I'm travelin' thru\*

© 2006 Dolly Parton/ 8) Another song from the film that is  
worth thinking about is the Old Crow Medicine Show's "We're  
All in This Together" with its Chorus:

We're all in this thing together Walkin' the line between  
faith and fear This life don't last forever When you cry I  
taste the salt in your tears Transamerica Rated R. Our  
ratings: