

Transamerica

USA 2005

103 mins

Crew and Cast

Director	Duncan Tucker
Screenplay	Duncan Tucker
Cinematography	Stephen Kazmierski
Sabrina 'Bree'	Felicity Huffman
Toby	Kevin Zegers
Elizabeth	Fionnula Flanagan
Margaret	Elizabeth Peña
Calvin	Graham Greenere

Synopsis

A transsexual preparing for surgery discovers she has a son who is now in jail. Masquerading as a missionary, she bails him out and the two of them embark on a journey across America.

Felicity Huffman - Interview

On Her Character's Sexuality

"It's a huge question. ... This part of Bree, she's very shut down, very closed in, very frightened. Actually her sexuality is dormant. I know it's a gender issue but sexually, it's dormant. I know she has that sweet flirtation with Graham Greene who plays Calvin, sort of like a high school girl who goes, 'Oh my God, I think he likes me!'

How I approached her sexuality was where she's coming from emotionally and that was that people don't see who she really is. She feels, 'Everyone doesn't see me, doesn't appreciate me. My family doesn't know me for who I am and I can't manifest who I am in the world.' She felt self loathing. We've all been there.

We've all woken up and said I just can't believe that I'm waking up in myself again. And she lives there. That's where I took the sexuality."

On How Playing This Confusing Gender Affected Her Personally:

"It actually did in an odd way because I'm not one of those actors just because I'm able to do it, I lost myself in the part and didn't know who I was. I mean, I wish I could. Towards the end of filming, I walked into the ladies room in full regalia and I'm not kidding, I walked in and went, 'Wow, I'm not supposed to be here,' and I walked out. Then I said, 'Oh no, I am,' and walked back in again. [Laughing] It took me twice before I said, 'Okay, I'm actually a woman,' and walked into the ladies room. That was sort of frightening [laughing]."



Philip Norman wrote in the Observer on 26 March 2006 (edited) ...

In my distant schooldays we were amused by a joke about itinerant lingerie salesmen said to be 'travelling in ladies' underwear'. Two such men turn up discussing their wares on a train in Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps*.

There is in the cinema a tradition of people doing this and of course wearing women's outerwear as well: Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon disguised as female musicians making their way from Chicago to Florida in *Some Like It Hot*, Terence Stamp and fellow drag artists driving through the outback to Alice Springs in *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and, slightly more seriously, Cillian Murphy as the Irish transvestite travelling around England and Ireland in *Breakfast on Pluto*. So Duncan Tucker's *Transamerica* is far from unique, though it is I think only the second occasion in which a woman has received an Oscar nomination for playing a man (the earlier one being Linda Hunt in *The Year of Living Dangerously* As its punning title suggests, *Trans-america* is a road movie in which the 37-year old transsexual Bree (Felicity Huffman) crosses the continent from New York to California accompanied by 17-year-old rent boy Toby (Kevin Zegers), who's unaware that Bree (aka Sabrina) is really his father, Stanley. The 'gender dysphoric' Stanley/Bree lives in Los Angeles and combines working in a Mexican restaurant with conducting phone sales from home. He has been undergoing hormone treatment for a while and is within a week of so-called sexual reassignment surgery. But mistakenly he reveals to his therapist at a centre for psychological welfare that he's had a phone call from out of the blue. The caller is the son he never knew (a by-blow from a college affair) who's seeking bail in New York. Somewhat capriciously, this therapist insists that before the operation can take place Bree must put things right with his son. This leads to their journey together, which turns out to be funny and touching, but never mawkish or sentimental.

Bree pretends to be a representative of a Christian missionary organisation and his initial intention is to take the surly, manipulative Toby to the home of his mother and stepfather in Kentucky. But it turns out that the mother committed suicide and that Toby ran away because he was sexually abused by the violent stepfather. So they keep driving west, with Bree, who is still in the process of determining what is to be his new identity, increasingly taking on the role as a prim and proper mother. Bree's therapist suggests a stopover at a gender pride committee in Dallas, which proves both ill-advised and amusing. It brings Bree into the sort of cheery support group he doesn't want and threatens to reveal his secret.

Like all good road movies, *Transamerica* is both a journey in space and time and a journey of the mind and spirit. Bree is simultaneously voyaging into his past and forging his future identity while recapitulating the westward course of the national experience. The film does this in a quiet, modest way and Bree's personal awareness of this process is revealed through his didactic, motherly nature as he instructs the unreceptive Toby about history and geography. The supporting performances are all good, but it is Felicity Huffman who dominates the movie. It is a courageous piece of work, full of anxiety, pain and doubt, but also pluck and personal discovery, and all tempered by a self-mocking humour.