

*Transamerica*

Dir: Duncan Tucker

English; 2005

[Vasudha Katju]

*Transamerica* is a film about a transwoman, Bree, who is seeking to undergo a sex-change operation. A week before her surgery, she learns that she has a son, Toby, who has been arrested and is being held by the police in New York; across the country from her own home in Los Angeles. Though Bree initially tries to ignore and downplay this information, she is forced to acknowledge it by her therapist, who refuses to grant permission for the surgery until Bree takes responsibility for her son. The film then explores both Bree and Toby's characters as they travel from New York (where Bree bails him out, pretending to be a church volunteer) to Los Angeles. The film gives us a glimpse of various aspects of Bree's life as she attempts, prior to her surgery, to dress and pass as a woman. She wears heavy makeup and feminine clothes, like skirts and wedge heels. She practices vocal exercises to be able to speak in a higher pitch. She adjusts her genitals such that their shape is not visible through her clothes. It also explores her social circle: she has few friends and initially tells a doctor that her parents are dead, although we later learn that they are alive, though estranged from her.

The film also delves into Toby's past. After his mother committed suicide, he was raised by an abusive stepfather, and soon ran away from home. He lives in New York, making money through sex work, and has plans to go to California to work in the porn industry. Though initially suspicious of Bree's interest in him, he warms to her over the course of their journey; though the affection he feels is strained on many occasions, when Bree's various lies and omissions are revealed.

We also see how both Toby and Bree support themselves. Toby solicits sex work and tries to sell drugs. Bree works in a restaurant kitchen and is also a telemarketer. We get the sense of discomfort Bree feels at being out in public, open to scrutiny (one little girl asks her "Are you a girl or a boy?"). It is an interesting perspective as it shows us how even economic options and choices might be circumscribed by the sense of discomfort arising from ogling and fears for one's safety. After her surgery, towards the end of the film, she returns to college to complete her degree, and plans to become a teacher.

Throughout the film, we are given occasions to question what is "normal." We see the precarious and risky way in which Toby earns money, by soliciting male clients (though we also see that he expects Bree to approach him for sexual favours in exchange for her help); we see him being attracted to transwomen. Yet his behavior is not pathologized. Bree steals hormone replacement pills from her mother; later she tells her that "hormones are hormones," it's just that theirs' both "happen to come in purple pills." It leads us to ask, what is so "natural" about something one can take in pill form? A straight cis man whom Bree and Toby meet on their journey, and who is attracted to Bree, tells her that he is blind in one eye and has shrapnel in his leg; he's

also been to jail several times. Thus we see how we all have anxieties and fears when it comes to romantic and sexual relationships, including fears of rejection.

The film does have some weak points: a stereotypically characterized “controlling mother,” and a few plot points that are not developed. However overall it is an interesting and enjoyable film, with a sympathetically-handled subject.