

## profile

# Probing a killer's mind

For Peter Sarsgaard, playing a murderer meant searching for the humanity within **By Michael Giltz**

**P**eter Sarsgaard figures it's easy to understand why John Letter, the convicted killer he plays in *Boys Don't Cry*, would befriend Brandon Teena, the new kid in Falls City. "John's day-to-day existence was so mundane and difficult," says Sarsgaard. "He had trouble holding down jobs and went out every night getting drunk. I think it got boring. Then this person comes to town who's charismatic and who transformed their lives in a way that felt positive at first. I think it was intimidating for him and very exciting."

The 28-year-old Sarsgaard didn't attempt to meet the real John Letter, who is now in prison for Brandon's murder. But because he was cast early in *Boys Don't Cry*, Sarsgaard had time to study trial transcripts and taped interviews to get inside the mind of someone who could explode in such a violent way.

"I tried to make John's actions as understandable and human as possible, even though they won't be identifiable to most people, hopefully," explains Sarsgaard. "He feels betrayed, but it's also a chance to put this person down." Revealing his own empathy for Letter—who had already served jail time when he met Brandon—Sarsgaard slips into character as he speaks. "By that point Brandon was becoming too powerful in our small group and was starting



Sarsgaard (left) with Hilary Swank and Brendan Sexton III



to intimidate me. He's taking away Lana [Chloë Sevigny], the only person who wrote to me while I was in prison, the only person who maybe loves me. It was an opportunity, an excuse."

As it happens, the Los Angeles-based actor—whose resume includes the films *Another Day in Paradise*, *Desert Blue*, and *The Man in the Iron Mask*—started his career in a role steeped in the psychology of violence. In 1995's *Dead Man Walking*, Sarsgaard played the victim in a scene in which Sean Penn and others handcuff him, rape his girlfriend, and then kill them both.

"It was very intense," Sarsgaard says. "It was such a weird location. We were out in the middle of nowhere in a bayou at 3 o'clock in the morning. I was terrified. Plus I had the added terror of being in my first film and my first scenes."

Consequently, Sarsgaard knew what his fellow actors needed from him in shooting the brutal rape in *Boys Don't Cry*. "We talked about it come," he says. "You want to make it professional but—not comfortable, maybe? I've been on the other side of a rape scene, and in some ways there's less to worry about because you're the one

being manipulated. The only person you have to worry about is yourself. But when you're [the attacker] you have to have a little voice in your head that's making sure you're taking care of the other [actor] as well. If they maybe feel comfortable enough, that voice can get smaller and smaller."

For Sarsgaard, the violence of the actual rape scene (which would later lead to an initial NC-17 rating) was mirrored by the psychological violence of the scene in which John and Tom pull down Brandon's pants in order to reveal his true sex. "The rape scene was difficult, but, actually, the de-panting scene was even more difficult," he admits. "It was so physical. In the bathroom scene I'm grabbing clothing and ripping it down. I was happy to be finished with that one." ■

*Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post and Entertainment Weekly.*