

THE PROGRESSIVE INTERVIEW

by Vince Beiser

Kimberly Peirce

Whatever you may think of her films, you can't accuse Kimberly Peirce of going after the easy paychecks. Fresh out of Columbia University's film school, she burst on the cinematic scene with 1999's *Boys Don't Cry*, the based-on-truth story about a young woman in small-town Nebraska who passes as a man until her buddies find her out and proceed to rape and murder her. That movie won Hilary Swank an Oscar and made her a star. Peirce, however, largely dropped out of sight for the next nine years. She finally resurfaced last March with a new movie on a topic that's almost as sure a crowd-pleaser as transgenderism: the human fallout

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of the war in Iraq.

Stop-Loss tells the story of Brandon King, a true-believing American soldier played by Ryan Phillippe, who barely survives a tour in Iraq. Returning to a hero's welcome in his Brazos, Texas, hometown, Brandon wants to leave the war behind him—but can't. His Army buddies' lives come unraveled under the strain of the trauma they've brought home with them. And within days, Brandon is ordered back to Iraq, his enlistment involuntarily extended under a provision known as "stop-loss." It's a nasty trick that has so far been pulled on tens of thousands of real-life soldiers. Forced to choose between following orders and following his conscience, Brandon goes on the run, searching for a way out.

The film didn't pull much at the box office, but Peirce is carrying its message forward. *Stop-Loss* came out on DVD July 8, and she is keeping up a conversation with its viewers—many of them military people—at www.stoplossmovie.com/SoundOff/.

Peirce, forty, carries herself with a seriousness that seems in keeping with someone so drawn to such grim material. She's small, with angularly attractive features, protuberant brown eyes, and a leanly muscled body, coming off a bit like a battle-hardened elf. She showed up for lunch at an oceanfront restaurant near her Malibu home, wearing a narrow-lapeled tuxedo jacket over a purple motorcycle T-shirt, to talk about *Stop-Loss*, Iraq, and why she felt she had to make the movie.

Q • *Stop-Loss* came out nine years after *Boys Don't Cry*. What have you been up to?

Kimberly Peirce: I was in grad school when I made *Boys Don't Cry*. It started out as my graduate thesis and was supposed to be a twenty-minute film, and before I knew it, I turned it into a feature. So I emerged from graduate school with this idea that I'm going to go to the next completely personal, meaningful film, making what I believed in and doing it right, but that is not what the system was built to do. The system was built to celebrate me and give me money and opportunity, which is wonderful, but that system doesn't necessarily make those types of movies.

Q: I want to ask about your brother, who served in Iraq. He signed up because of 9/11?

Peirce: It was kind of complicated. He wasn't necessarily going for 9/11. He is part of the video game generation, and he's athletic. I asked him, "Why are you signing up?" He said, "Don't try to talk me out of it." I said, "I'm not trying to talk you out of it."

Our mother didn't want him to go. I shushed her. When I talked to my brother, it was, "The weaponry is amazing. I'm going to get to fire the best guns and do this and do that." There was an excitement about the level of training, the uniforms, the technology, America's dominance of force.

A lot of my friends were like, "Your brother is doing what? He's joining the military? Can't you stop him?" And I was like, "You can't really stop an eighteen-year-old man who signs up to fight."

That's when I realized that the marches—I had gone to marches in New York just to be part of it all—were not really effective. There was a march before the Afghanistan War and the worldwide march before Iraq. Everybody was angry, and everybody wanted to stop it from happening. And then we bombed. I remember thinking: "This is no longer a completely powerful way to make change." Not that I'm turning against protesting. I think collective action is great. But this is the first time I had this insight: "Wow, the government could really use this to tell everybody that there is free speech, and do nothing." That really concerned me.

So, the only thing I could do if the march wasn't working, and if telling him, "Don't go," wasn't working, was to say, OK, I'm just going to tell a story.

Q: How did you start on the film?

Peirce: We went around the country, me and my research partner—a young guy right out of Harvard—and we both picked up video cameras and traveled around interviewing soldiers. That was the most satisfying and empowering thing to do. You listen to people's stories: soldiers telling you why they signed up. They signed up after 9/11 to protect their home and country. The ones who ended up in Iraq weren't really sure that this was a way of protecting America. But they were "good soldiers." They had volunteered. You went over to Iraq thinking you'd fight in a desert, but you are fighting in urban combat. What's unique about urban combat is that isn't really a nation-state, there aren't really uniforms, there is not an army advancing toward you, you are living within a population. And then you're fighting—as we say in the movie—in the bedroom and the hallways of people's homes. This makes it incredibly difficult to protect the guy to your left and the guy to your right and to not kill innocent people.

You have people who sign up for all the right reasons. They can't protect one another, they can't protect themselves, and they are killing innocent people. They are wracked with guilt. They are not feeling very effective. So a lot of them do not want to go back. That was a real eye-opener for me. I couldn't

have invented those feelings. Those came from interviewing the soldiers.

Q: Why not make a documentary?

Peirce: It was tempting. I had the idea of giving cameras to soldiers because I was collecting all these homemade videos that they were making.

Q: You got turned on to that by your brother?

Peirce: Yes, we're home for Thanksgiving. He had just gone over there, was there for two or three months. We are at my mother's house. I'm in the bedroom, and I hear, "Let the bodies hit the floor, let the bodies hit the floor." I wake up and go out there. He's staring at the television, huge images. Kind of crappily shot, edited, put to music, and he's obsessed with it. I realized that he had never really come home on that break. I would say to him, "Why do you keep watching that stuff? Why don't you hang out with me and Mom and relax?" He was like, "Because I don't want to enjoy coming home too much. I won't be able to go back."

Seeing these images was like being inside the nervous system of these young men: what they were experiencing as they were shooting it, the fantasy of themselves as they put it together. That blew my mind. As a filmmaker, I was like, "Oh my God. If I need to do anything based on the soldiers, I need to do it with this much authenticity." I could not stop watching them. They contained so much truth because they were just these guys making like their high-school videos. Only they were in Iraq.

But I wasn't going to be able to go to Iraq and film them in action. I was actually going to be able to do a better job filming them in action by making a fiction than a documentary. Because I love a drama and particularly working with actors, I can usually get more from them.

And I didn't want to make a documentary on the prevalence of stop-loss because stop-loss itself isn't my core interest. Stop-loss is a catalyst. My core interest is the human beings who are going over there, starting with my brother, who is an innocent, who are forever changed, who have now committed atrocities, who are angry, who are guilty, who are emotionally impaired, and who we now have to take care of and who have to take care of themselves. That's always interesting to me: how they are changed, these human beings. That's why I like to interview them, the soldiers. They have so much pent-up emotion. You kill people, it affects you. I'm convinced of it. The moment you cross over the line and murder another human being, you are never the same and

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you can never go back. That's more interesting to me than any statistic about stop-loss.

Q: What kind of responses have you been getting from military folks and military families?

Peirce: The response has been great. So many soldiers and families writing in and saying, "Oh, my God, I was in Iraq. How did you get it so accurate?" Or, "This is what we're living through." It's harder for Hollywood to make a movie that is working on that level because you have to come in with such a big concept all the time. You have to make the movies smaller to make them really accurate.

Q: What do you want people to take away from your movie?

Peirce: I'd like them to be incredibly moved. I don't make movies so people will come out of the theater and say, "Let's stop the Iraq War." It'd be great if that could happen, but that's not the thing. It's to move them to think, "Wow, I didn't realize that this was what it was like for a young man to go over there and put his life on the line."

It's not a protest film. A director has to tell you good stories. One of the problems with some of these Iraq War films is that they are anti-war films. I'm an adult. I have my own opinions. I don't need them to proselytize to me and protest to me. I need them to tell me a story. The more honest a story it is, the more I'm going to come to the right conclusion.

Q: There were a lot of similar themes between *Stop-Loss* and *Boys Don't Cry*. They both are set in small towns, among hard-drinking working class Americans. What draws you to that milieu?

Peirce: The first thing is that it is very personal. We're from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, which is real working class.

Q: Your parents were very young when they had you.

Peirce: Very young. Fifteen-sixteen. As one of my father's friends told me, "You're taught to drink, to drive, and to fuck." That's how you're taught to be a man in Harrisburg. I got out because I educated myself, went to the University of Chicago, went to Columbia. But Harrisburg is where I came from.

Q: Both your movies also include a lot of violence. But it is ugly violence. There's nothing glamorous or heroic about it.

Peirce: In *Boys*, if you go down to the core—how could these people do this to Brandon, how could one human being do this to another emotionally and physically?—it is inherently an interesting question. In the service of that, I get to play out all the violence—the stripping, the rape, the murder. The same thing with *Stop-Loss*. OK, these are innocent boys. They have all the right values. They want to protect their families, their home, and their country. They believe that you go to war to protect your country. Well, what does it really mean to go to war to protect your country? What happens when that idea becomes

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real? They're face to face with a child. Are they going to kill a child? They're face to face with a man. Are they going to kill a man? Their friend's leg has been ripped off. What are they going to do? It tests everything that we're about.

The violence dramatically is such a powerful tool. But I never want to exploit the audience, and I don't want to be pornographic. I don't want my audience to get violated, and I also don't want people walking out and saying, "Yeah, let's pick up guns and kill people."

If you keep it really human, you implicate the audience in it, and you also don't encourage violence. You make the audience question it.

Q: Do you feel compelled as a queer woman to make movies about issues of sexuality?

Peirce: I don't make movies about issues. This is my same litmus test for all the movies I love: Is it a great character on a great emotional quest with a great emotional need? Do they overcome great emotional obstacles? Is it a fantastic story? I didn't set out to be a political activist. I'm just a human being who's moved by certain things, and if certain things break my heart, I set out to fix them. ♦