

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Tanya Wexler and 'Hysteria'

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, May 30th, 2012

Hysteria is a romantic comedy set in Victorian England about the birth of the vibrator and the choice that Mortimer Granville (Hugh Dancy) faces between a life of comfort and complacency versus one of meaning and conviction. Mortimer Granville is enlisted by Dr. Dalrymple (Jonathan Pryce) to assist in Dalrymple's wildly successful medical practice. Mortimer becomes quickly expert at administering the treatment of the day for "hysterical" women, i.e. medical massage of the female organs "to the point of paroxysm" ... until he suffers a stress injury that puts his innovativeness to the test. Ultimately, Mortimer must choose between marriage to the conventional younger Dalrymple daughter Emily (Felicity Jones) or to heed the call inspired by elder daughter, firebrand and social reformer Charlotte (Maggie Gyllenhaal). Director Tanya Wexler's third feature, debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2011 and recently screened as part of the San Francisco International Film Festival. Wexler spoke with Sophia Stein about Hysteria, its reception, directing, and her future trajectory.



Sophia Stein: *Hysteria* feels like a modern day fairy tale that daughters everywhere should see. Was that your intention?

Tanya Wexler: I was thinking, the concept made me laugh!

We had a bunch of small kids at home — at one point we had four kids ages six and under, so we were out of our minds, right? — I was kind of in the mom cave. I was developing some things at a snail's pace — And you can't do that with independent film! You have to be passionate about it, because it won't get made if you're not the driver. But I had a bit of financial space to take some time off, so I took it.

And then my friend Tracey Becker (*Finding Neverland*) came along and said, "I have your next movie." We were mom friends together, and I said, "I'll do it, what is it?" And she said, "a romantic comedy about the invention of the vibrator in Victorian England."

I was like "I'm in, sign me up." Somehow *Hysteria* was a strange Venn diagram of everything. I was a psychology major for my BA. I had done a lot of improv comedy growing up in Chicago, so it had that kind of comedy chic thing that I loved. And I was strangely a huge British film fan. So the idiom was very familiar, especially the costume dramas and the Merchant Ivory's. So when Tracey suggested it, I laughed, but I knew the movie in my head, the feeling and the tone.

The tone was the thing that scared everyone. The financiers would ask, "How are you going to get that right? It's not this broad comedy, or bawdy sex comedy, and it's not a serious drama?" And I would respond: "If Merchant Ivory, and Jane Austin, and Richard Curtis had a baby, *Hysteria* is that baby." (I was thinking a lot in terms of babies!) I wanted the wit and the classic romantic

feminist nature of a Jane Austin piece; and the period detail and cinema language of a Merchant Ivory film; and the contemporary romantic comedy banter of Richard Curtis who does such a good spin on those 30's screwball comedies. But it was really important to me that *Hysteria* was a romantic comedy first and foremost. Because everyone else will talk about the sexual politics and the gender politics (and I am happy to talk about that). But movies for me (perhaps on account of the ADHD), you have to figure out what you're trying to do first! — *Hysteria* is a romantic comedy. The thing is, it was a really good idea — the best high-concept, high-brow idea, or low-brow but in a classy way.

We knew that it was a movie about “the hysteria” and not about “the vibrator,” really. The fact that women were being treated for this fake or ridiculous diagnosis by being masturbated in the doctors offices. On the one hand, a man walks in the park barely able to hold the hand of the person he is courting because it would be too sexually overwhelming, and then you cut to “weh-weh” “weh-weh,” polishing furniture, I would tell the actors — the guys are in total denial?! And to me, that is the joke!

SS: It was a period in history when women could go to their doctors and be serviced for a fee. Legalized prostitution in Victorian England?

TW: Except the dudes were the prostitutes, right? Yeah, it was funny because there was no concept of female pleasure. “Women don't ejaculate to orgasm!,” that kind of thinking, which is strange for me to even contemplate?! At one point, Jonathan Pryce's character, Dr. Dalrymple says, “Aside from ejaculation from the male member, there is no female sexual equivalent.” That is precisely the kind of thinking which I sometimes think still exists. I don't think that either side of the equation thought it was sex; they just thought that it was the best massage ever.

SS: How is the film being received by women versus men?

TW: Women expect to like it, and they do. I do have a lot of women coming up to me and thanking me for this movie. A lot of what we [women] get fed is stuff that is supposed to be entertaining, but is very fluffy. I am being marketed to, but there is no place for me as a consumer in most [movies made for women]. I'm like, “Eh” — it's cute, or it's funny, or it's dumb. Or it's very serious and sometimes great — and sometimes homework! That was the thing: I was a mom with four kids, and I made a movie that I wanted to go see. Because it wasn't there; I had to go make it! I wanted to be entertained and spoken to. I can do uncomfortable about the vibrator on the internet any day, if you know what I mean? I just felt like it is more subversive to make a movie about the vibrator that you can bring your mom to.

Mid-way through the cut, we did a test screening in Britain and the thing that we found was that it scored crazy high across the board: all genders, all ages, but men scored it a touch higher. I think in large part, it is their expectations. Men don't think it's going to be for them. They're going along to see the film because their partner or girlfriend said, “Oh, come on.” If you go in expecting to like something, you're happy. But if you go in expecting, this isn't for me, and you laugh your ass off, you're like, “I loved that!”

SS: In the 70's and 80's women seemed proud to call themselves feminists. In the 90's, there was a kind of a backlash, where many young women resisted the label and identification? Did you experience that sort of backlash?

TW: I'm forty-one. At Yale, it seemed to me (and this is purely anecdotal) that people did not want to need to call themselves feminists on some sort of level. They wanted the worst to be over. And to me, feminism boiled down to its absolute most valuable thing is: equal opportunity. For a long time, I think, feminism got equated with “the same.” Everything the same; 50:50. But women had to do work and home; they didn't really get 50:50. I am married to a woman. And you realize that division of labor is an incredibly useful thing. And we can't all be generals, but our opportunities are equal.



SS: How do you feel about opportunities for you as a woman in Hollywood –

TW: In the face of only five percent of the Top 250 Movies being directed by women? I said to my manager, the new stats came out — and it's always five percent of the Top 250 Movies in all the DGA and academy statistics – and he said, “Great, that's our hook.” I do feel like there is a recognition that it doesn't make any sense.

I had no agent going into Toronto, and I came out with William Morris. I was scared of a big agency, but I came out with a big, powerful, 800-pound gorilla. And my agent, she is this firebrand, 30-something. She has Diablo Cody and all these hot young women who are tearing it up.

I met with another agent who said, “We'll coach you ...” and all this shit. And I just said, “This is it. I'm forty-one, it doesn't get better, it gets crazier.” And my agent was, “You're great. I'm going to put you in the room with everyone in Hollywood, and we're just going to knock down doors.” I've met three studio heads, and I've pitched on big movies. My agent said, “I don't see the problem here. We need you. We have Tina Fey and Reese Witherspoon, and all these clients, and they want to keep meeting women directors. You've made a movie, that while it's an independent and not a Hollywood movie, it shows that you can make a big Hollywood movie if you want to. And if you don't want to, you don't have to!”

SS: What are you going to talk about next?

TW: I think I'm always drawn to identity. After being in a relationship for almost twenty-one years, I think a lot about, “Who are you?,” “Who am I?,” and “What's us?” and “What's not us?” My brain is just trying to sort all that out.

There is a really awesome biopic that I am newly attached to that I can't talk about yet, but is a big deal with big actors, and hopefully in the next week or two there will make an announcement. Also, I have a surreal dramedy — if Charlie Kaufman and James L. Brooks had a movie baby — a story about a guy who tries to win himself back from a different version of himself. There is a conventional twist to it, but it has this surreal port.

SS: How do you manage family versus career?

TW: I think that a lot of women have felt the way I've felt, which is that at times that I'm doing neither well. I have an amazing partner, who is more of the “stay-at-home mom/primary caregiver.” Particularly when shooting and pre-production ramped up, she just did everything. It can be really taxing on a relationship to be making a movie and to be unavailable. I had made two movies before. They were really small movies, and in a way that's hard because so much is on you. I had more support this time.

SS: With outstanding performances across the board — from Maggie Gyllenhaal, Hugh Dancy, Rupert Everett, Jonathan Pryce, and Felicity Jones — how did you cast *Hysteria*?

TW: I wrote a wish list and we got lots and lots of the people on it. It was unbelievable. It took a long time. I would say that I was directing, and they would have no idea who I was. I didn't have a reputation. I had two little films. I could prove I could direct, and move the camera, and work with great actors, but I didn't have a break-out film. So this was the hardest thing, even with my amazing producers, Judy Cairo (*Crazy Heart*) and Sarah Curtis (*Mansfield Park*). So it was seven years from the time I got the synopsis of the film to the point when it played at Toronto. It took almost two years to get the script pretty much perfect, which is what then brought those actors, who had no sense who I was, to have that conversation with my producers.

SS: Did you rehearse with your actors?

TW: Four days, didn't have time or money. I gave every member of the cast and crew a vibrator

when we started work. It was kind of jokey and got everybody laughing. But then it was, “This is it people. Let’s not be in denial too!” People laughed, and they got it.

I think it’s interesting being not only a woman director, but a gay woman director, because it is kind of transgressive again. The set is a very roll up your sleeves place; the work is very physical. We have these fun intellectual conversations, but people are schlepping stuff and moving stuff and nailing stuff and running around, so that for one minute someone can do something funny or poignant. Even when you have big brawny electricians, they want to see a little bit of magic happen. There is an easier way to be an electrician or a carpenter than til work crazy hours in the middle of nowhere [on a film set.]

So part of the thing is a guy’s culture and foul language — between the artists and the kind of hours, the humor is always, no matter what, very blue. And I think that when you get a woman director, the guys have this impression like they have to be on better behavior — which when you’re tired and working, you don’t always want to be on good behavior!, which is why you’re working in the movies and not in an office! And then I come up and they think, ‘it’s going to happen.’ And I handle the vibrator and curse a blue streak, and I’m like, “Oh, that girl is hot!” And they’re like, “What the heck?!” And it just keeps confounding them. So it works very well. Because instead of a dictatorial directorial style, I tend to have “a mom with a potty mouth” kind of a style.

SS: Dream projects?

TW: It’s funny. What came to mind is so surprising when you ask that. I want to make something epic.

With women directors, there are like three things you think of: romantic comedy, teen thing, or small meaningful character piece. “Oh, she’ll do another small character piece.” Well, you wonder why women don’t break out?! I want to tear it up make something really huge and unexpected. Something sci-fi or epic.

In the early 90’s when I graduated from college, I was like, here we go — Jodi Foster, Sigourney Weaver, *Thelma and Louise*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Alien*, the second *Terminator*, and always these strong women, and I thought we’re going to tear it up! And then it just evaporated. Where did they all go? And finally Rooney Maura and some others ... but they’re all twenty.

So what came into my head (and they’ll never make it, but I want to make it!) — is *Wonder Woman*. But I know that it is kind of dead at the studios. Big huge directors have tried. But I have an idea of how to do it. It’s a completely different take, that gets around the big problem.

SS: What is the big problem?

TW: The big problem is that *Wonder Woman* doesn’t have an origin story that you can tell me. You can tell me how Superman became Superman, how Batman became Batman, how Spiderman became Spiderman, but everyone is: “Wasn’t *Wonder Woman* some Greek goddess something-something?” But no one really knows. A lasso and bracelets. Where is our chic super hero? Where is she? I have an idea. I would kill [for the opportunity] — but I don’t think the studio will make it. They think, “women will go see *Spider Man* if only we put a romance in it.” “And women will go see *Wonder Woman*, but they think, “guys never will.”

SS: Geena Davis has a foundation with a mission to get more female protagonists in stories in film and television for young audiences. The research shows that little girls will go see movies with male protagonists, but little boys don’t grow up seeing films with female protagonists —

TW: *The Hunger Games* is changing that a bit.

SS: What did you think of *The Hunger Games*?

TW: I liked it. I have a real love of dystopian narratives. It was like if Margaret Atwood made a tentpole movie.

But I do think that it was weird that we had an R-rating. It’s fine — I don’t believe that a lot of 13-

year-olds are going to go see my movie, “Hysteria.” But given that we have no bad language, we have no nudity ... and yet a movie about 12-year-olds killing each other is rated PG-13?

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