



Director Tony Goldwyn on the set of **Conviction** with actress Hillary Swank.

Jan Chats with Tony Goldwyn

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In the interview that follows, the first time I discuss each character I introduce the name in quotes to remind my readers that this discussion is primarily about “characters” rather than “real people.”*

*Although **Conviction** is clearly based on a true story involving real people, fitting their story into a cinematic narrative required judicious use of dramatic license (several instances of which are described below). As I've said many times in the past, I don't know any of the “real people” depicted in the films I review, so I cannot and will not judge them.*

*As a film critic, my job is to describe how art elucidates the human condition. I do **not** believe historical interpretation is the job of film critics; I believe historical interpretation is the job of historians.*

Jan: I can't pretend to be “neutral” here, Tony. Since I knew I was going to see a new film by the same team who did **A Walk on the Moon**, I walked into the screening room with very high expectations. So it's an honor to tell you now, face-to-face, how genuinely moved I was by **Conviction**.

I think I read a quote from you somewhere to the effect that, in both films, you and [screenwriter] Pamela Gray wanted to look at periods of great social upheaval, so each film is centered on one woman who is working her way through this time of transition. Can you talk about that a bit more?

Tony: I don't remember saying that about **Conviction**, but I definitely felt that way about **A Walk on the Moon**, so I'll take credit for it. Both stories are about a woman who has a certain view of herself and through the experience [in the film], she becomes someone else.

<http://www.films42.com/chats/GoldwynGray.asp>

For “Betty Anne” in **Conviction**, given the childhood that she had (I didn't want to be melodramatic about it, but, in fact, much more difficult than what we portray), all she wanted was normalcy. Betty Anne was in and out of foster care for several years. A very unstable parental situation, her mother was just not a mothering person.

So what Betty Anne wanted for herself was just simple normalcy: to be a mom and have a normal life. When she sees her baby, baby “Richard” [her first child], Betty Anne says: “I don't want to be like my mother.” But she's thrust into this situation when her brother “Kenny” is incarcerated. She just literally can't function with Kenny in jail—feels this compulsion to get him out or to fix it somehow.

And if you talk to [the real] Betty Anne, she says: “I never thought I could do it...” It was probably Kenny's confidence in her that inspired Betty Anne to keep going, but it was just—there was no choice. She just had to keep going, and through that, she discovered this lioness within herself.

Jan: And she also learned she was a really smart person.

Tony: I was just going to say: “and a brilliant person.” Betty Anne passed the Bar in two states on her first try, like that! (Tony snaps his fingers.)

I show her, for dramatic purposes, struggling through law school, but she didn't really struggle through law school. She struggled to manage it all, but she never had a hard time in school. But I needed to create struggles. That was dramatic license there.

Betty Anne discovered that there was this extraordinary and powerful force inside of her, which, to me, is such a fascinating aspect of life. The strangest circumstances, the most difficult or tragic or undesired circumstances produce unexpected and extraordinary byproducts.

Jan: I had the great good fortune to interview Barbara Kopple when she came to the Chicago International Film Festival to show her Dixie Chicks doc **Shut Up & Sing** a few years back, so I asked her: Is “courage” different in a male context versus a female context? And one of the things she said in reply was that people generally don't expect women to be courageous.

Tony: Not only do they not expect women to be courageous, they actively stifle them.

In this story (we don't show too much because I didn't want to lean too hard on it), but “Rick,” Betty Anne husband (played by Loren Dean), he not only doesn't understand what she's doing, he resents it.

I really tried hard not to vilify him, because I feel his point of view is valid. He's just a guy trying to have a normal life, and here's his wife, having this insane obsession.

I think if it were the shoe on the other foot, it would've been a very different story. If the husband was saying: “I'm going to get my brother out...” Now if he wasn't providing for

the family, there might be tensions at home, but not in a way that she seems literally insane. So I think that [Barbara Kopple's comment] is true.

Jan: Well the balance is really important, Tony. It's not like Rick shuts down all at once. You show him trying to live with Betty Anne's "insane obsession" for several years.

And you could have painted "Nancy Taylor," the arresting officer, as a villain too, but instead you give her a very poignant final scene. Your Nancy Taylor has worked really hard to rise above "women's work," but you show her pushed back into the "pink ghetto" at the end, making us feel that for her, being in a clerical position means living a life that's almost worse than death.

Tony: Nancy Taylor, yeah, we were just piling on Nancy Taylor. We already knew she was "the bad guy," but, again, I wanted to portray Nancy Taylor as having a reasonable point of view. So she says to Betty Anne: "I'm sorry you've wasted your life on this, but your brother killed that woman." And it worked just much better dramatically in that way.

Jan: So Nancy Taylor is all alone at the end, **Conviction's** "Iago," the tragic villain, but what sustains Betty Anne is her ability to make connections: her love for her children, her banter with her friend "Abra," her genuine respect for attorney "Barry Scheck," and, of course, her devotion to her brother Kenny (and through him, to his daughter "Mandy").



Melissa Leo exerts her authority as "Nancy Taylor" when she arrests "Kenny Waters" (played by Sam Rockwell).

Tony: Yeah, that's true; that is what sustains. You know Betty Anne's great survival skill—I realized getting to know her—her great survival skill is her understanding of what it means to love another person. That, to me, is her great heroism and the source of her courage and her strength. Betty Anne, because she just impulsively and instinctively loves the people in her life, she has this network of people that adore her.

The other night we were all in Toronto together, and Betty Anne's niece Mandy (the real Mandy) said: "I grew up my whole life not having anyone expect anything of me," (because she grew up with "Brenda" and thinking her father was a murderer).

"Suddenly someone expects something of my life." And Mandy is devoted to Betty Anne, and Betty Anne's like a mother to her now. And Abra, you see them together and they're just so deeply connected. It's an inspiring thing to see.

Jan: And because of your film, Tony, I was able to see it all too 😊



When “Kenny” (Sam Rockwell) is arrested for murder, “Betty Anne Waters” (Hillary Swank) must emerge from the background and transform herself into a lawyer, pleading Kenny’s case side-by-side with “Barry Scheck” (Peter Gallagher) co-founder & director of The Innocence Project.

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conducted, condensed, & edited by Jan Lisa Huttner.

**Personal Note: This post is dedicated with love to my husband/partner Richard.
Like Tony Goldwyn, my Richard is a real mensch 😊**