



Oct 15, 2010: Screenwriter Pamela Gray (left) at the London Premiere of **Conviction** with Betty Anne Waters. The character of Betty Anne Waters is played in the film by actress Hillary Swank.

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## Jan Chats with Pamela Gray

**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:** OK, Pamela, you know I've already spoken with director Tony Goldwyn face-to-face, and since then I've also read some early reviews of **Conviction** from the Toronto International Film Festival, so I'm just gonna lay it right out: I think sometimes men get so involved in the "what" of something that they don't see the "how."

In **Conviction**, the "what" is obvious: It's a true story based on one of the Innocence Project cases, so we know going in that DNA evidence will eventually prove that Kenny isn't guilty, and he will eventually be released. If we know all this going in, then **Conviction** can't be about the "what." So isn't the dynamic of your film explaining the "how" rather than just the "what"?

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

**Pamela:** Yes, I think that, and I know this will sound like a generalization, but I think what you're describing is the difference between black and white thinking and understanding the shades of gray.

When I sit in these theaters and look around and see men crying, I can't understand how someone cannot be moved by this film. I don't know how you can't be affected by imagining what it would be like to lose half your life in prison when you're innocent. And I don't know how you can see this film and not be affected by this brother/sister bond. And just from the plot level, even if you know the ending, how you get from the beginning to the end—it's remarkable.

**Jan:** Well, me, I love the way it was done, Pamela. This woman, Betty Anne, she went on a 20-year journey, building a remarkable support team along the way—drawing more and more people to her side as she went. That's the story.

**Pamela:** That **is** the story.

Step back and look at it as a character portrait: if you imagine for a minute that Betty Anne Waters wasn't a real person, this is the story of a woman who never ever gives up, to the point where she appears to be in denial about the obstacles.

For me that moment in the story where Betty Anne says: "It's just a setback. The evidence hasn't been destroyed," this is the moment where you think: "Okay, is she crazy?" And I think that scene really shows that, on the faces of her friends. Every performance in this movie is remarkable.

**Jan:** I think so too, Pamela, I really do. For someone like me, someone attentive to female performances for a good ten years now (multiplex films, Indie films, etc, etc), the female talent on display in **Conviction** is extraordinary. Not just in the lead roles—Hillary Swank as "Betty Anne," Minnie Driver as "Abra Rice," and Melissa Leo as "Nancy Taylor"—they're all wonderful, but the actresses in the supporting roles really provide depth too.

Clea DuVall (from **Thirteen Conversations About One Thing**) has a relatively minor part as Kenny's girlfriend "Brenda Marsh," but she's still terrific. And casting Ari Graynor as their daughter "Mandy Marsh," what a find! Graynor was cute in **Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist**, and she was touching in **Holy Rollers**, but in this movie, in **Conviction**'s final scenes, Graynor's performance is pure revelation.

**Pamela:** I completely agree with you. Every time I watch **Conviction**, I can't take my eyes off her. Like what she can do with her face and her emotional reactions that aren't spoken—it's a tremendous performance.

**Jan:** Yes, it's brilliant. A lot of people will be seeing Graynor for the first time in **Conviction**, but even for me, even having seen key earlier performances, "Mandy" came out of nowhere for me. I sat in the theatre and thought: "Oh my God, she's terrific!"

And then, of course, when I looked her up in IMDb, I learned that she's our schvester too!

**Pamela:** I was just going to ask you that. I assumed Ari was Jewish, but she's the only cast member I never met. I wasn't on the set for her scenes, and she wasn't at the **Conviction** premier.

**Jan:** Yeah, her first listing in IMDb is "Ariel Geltman Graynor," so, ya know: Huttner, Gray, schvesters are taking over the world ☺

But seriously, this great wealth of female talent on screen gives **Conviction** true depth and resonance, which is a credit to your story and to Tony as director for sure.

**Pamela:** Thank you, Jan. Casting, yes, Tony is a genius at it. And as an actor/director who's also an actor, he works so well with actors. They love working with him.

I've seen him in action and I was privileged during this production to be in rehearsal. We didn't really have much rehearsal time for **A Walk on the Moon**, and just to watch the actors and their process in **Conviction**... They would ask me questions and whether I had the answers or not, it led to rewriting during production, which was the most exhilarating part of the writing process because you've got the collaborative energy and you're seeing it immediately comes to life. You write something and then the character is standing right there!

So just what a gift to have these performances, these actors, and there was also this universal level of commitment in this production. I would speak to someone in the sound department who would say: "I wanted to be on this movie because the Betty Anne story is so remarkable and heroic."

**Jan:** Good segue, Pamela! So, about "the" Betty Anne story, aren't there really two stories going on in **Conviction**? One is the story of Betty Anne's determination to free her brother Kenny, of course. But isn't there also another story, a story in which Betty Anne comes to a new self-understanding and changes her concept of what's possible for her in her life?

**Pamela:** That's right. Jumping to this idea of how Betty Anne will get Kenny out of prison, I love when Hillary Swank (as Betty Anne) delivers that speech to Sam Rockwell (as Kenny) about her plan: it may not work, and she might be 80 years old, but she's going to do it anyway to save him!

I wrote that speech, and I love when Hillary delivers it. As a writer, what I always say about characters is this: when all is lost, you either take action or you give up, and the choice you make is a reflection of who you are as a character. Betty Anne took action at the moment when Kenny was giving up. That's a sign of how deeply they loved each other so that when Kenny was falling down into despair, Betty Anne made it her life's goal to bring him up and then to bring him out and get him out of prison.

**Jan:** Last subject: “Abra Rice.” Abra Rice is Betty Anne’s BFF (played on screen by Minnie Driver).

The night Tony and Betty Anne did their “Word of Mouth” screening here in Chicago, I knew I would be meeting with them the next day, so I decided not to reveal myself in the Q&A. By that point, of course, I knew there was a real person named Abra Rice, but wanted a spontaneous reaction from Betty Anne. So, in the Q&A, I had my husband ask: “Is Abra Rice is a real person?”

Picture Betty Anne, under the lights, being hit with a million questions, and she just looks straight at my husband and she says: “Abra Rice is my best friend.” She uses the present tense: “Abra Rice is my best friend.”

The bond between Betty Anne and Abra is a critical aspect of **Conviction**. Your screenplay depicts this relationship, and two wonderful actresses capture it in their performances, but based on the reviews I’ve read so far, I’m not sure some of my esteemed male colleagues see it...

**Pamela:** That's right. So I guess one of the things you're addressing is the fact that people aren't paying... a lot of people aren't paying attention to that other primary relationship in the film?

**Jan:** Right.

**Pamela:** I think they are because they love Minnie’s performance and the chemistry between Abra and Betty Anne, but they may not be able to contextualize that this is another very deep relationship [in Betty Anne’s life]. And perhaps the humor, especially Minnie's humor, might be more accessible than realizing how committed she was to helping Betty Anne.

**Jan:** So OK, we know the “real Abra Rice” is a public defender now, right? So what do you think, Pamela? What did these two women see in each other, way back when, that became such a sustaining force in “the Betty Anne story” as you depict it in **Conviction**?

**Pamela:** I think their initial bond was that they recognized each other the first day of law school. They joke in the movie that they were “the old ladies,” but it was also this sense of kindred spirit: they were independent women in this new environment and I think they initially bonded over that.

“The real Abra Rice” is now a public defender in New Haven, CT. When Abra says in the movie, “I became a lawyer to help people who were screwed by the system,” she doesn't know that she's talking to someone who is living and breathing the experience of having been screwed by the system.



Minnie Driver co-stars as Betty Anne's law school buddy & BFF "Abra Rice."

The real Abra Rice is now a public defender in New Haven, CT.

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They became BFFs before that phrase ("Best Friends Forever") was used. Abra, the real Abra, she teases Betty Anne constantly, and it's hilarious to be around them, but you know that they adore each other.

**Jan:** Someone might accuse of you of making all that up, but not me. When I saw **Conviction** the first time, before I knew anything about any of the facts that lay behind the screenplay, I knew in my gut that the onscreen relationship between Abra and Betty Ann was fundamentally true. It was too real not to be.

**Pamela:** When you write a screenplay, you have to fictionalize, you have to dramatize. I didn't have to make up these characters, but I still had to imagine what they said to each other. It's not a documentary. I wasn't there.

But as long as you follow the path of what their emotional connections are, you can get at the truth, and I also had the advantage of meeting the real people. It takes two minutes to understand who Abra Rice is.

**Jan:** So you can see in your mind's eye the scene where Abra has to convince Betty Anne to get out of bed?

**Pamela:** That's right.

**Jan:** There are moments when, even with the greatest determination, we all lose heart, but **Conviction** shows Betty Anne's network—being a mother, being a sister, being an aunt, being a friend—these relationships pulled Betty Anne through?

**Pamela:** Absolutely, absolutely. And I believe that's just one difference between movies where the woman is the heroine (versus a male hero): often the male hero is the solo person, moving through [the film] without that community. But I do think the heroine's journey is different in that way. I see that in a lot of movies that are female-driven: they've got community; they're not working in isolation.

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October 8<sup>th</sup> telephone conversation  
conducted, condensed, & edited by Jan Lisa Huttner.

**Personal Note: This post is dedicated with love to my own BFF Dorteia Juul.**