

**Jan Chats  
with  
Director  
Tanya Wexler**

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**Chicago Press Day  
for  
*Hysteria***



*Tanya Wexler's new film **Hysteria** is a marvel of "loose/tight" properties. On the one hand, it's tremendously funny. On the other hand, I was always laughing through my tears. Set in London circa 1880, **Hysteria** is loosely based on the career of Joseph Mortimer Granville, the English physician who patented the first electromechanical vibrator. Here is the set-up: an idealistic innocent is at the crossroads and sooner or later, he will have to choose. But don't be fooled by the gift-wrapped ending. Women's suffrage? Settlement Houses? These elements aren't "fluff," they're essential to **Hysteria's** success.*

*On May 11, I had the opportunity to discuss "loose/tight" properties with Tanya Wexler & as funny as her film is, Tanya is even more fun face-to-face. But we started first with Settlement Houses...*

**Jan:** Tanya, you have made the best film I have seen so far this year. I've seen it twice and it's a perfect five. And you're a Chicago girl, so I'm betting I don't have to tell you who Jane Addams was...

**Tanya:** No, Hull-House! I'm telling you: Charlotte Dalrymple!

**Jan:** Okay, so we're in sync. Now let's talk about the opening scene. *Hysteria* is being marketed as "a lighthearted romantic comedy," but you make it very clear in your opening scene that the woman with the festering leg is going to die. You show the caskets. You make it very clear that this woman is going to die.

**Tanya:** Right.

**Jan:** So then at the end, in the big courtroom scene, Charlotte is facing a similar death sentence?

**Tanya:** Right, the threats are real, certainly.

**Jan:** So at the same time we're laughing, you've embedded scenes in *Hysteria* that couldn't be more serious. What a remarkable feat!

**Tanya:** Right, well, my life is drama and comedy and seriousness and sadness and some of the funniest moments come out of the deepest pain. This idea that what your choices are homework or fluff, it bugs me. My life is not one genre.

I think one of the best "romantic comedies" of all time is *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, and it ain't just called *Four Weddings* for a reason. I think the serious stuff gives us perspective.



I made a feminist romantic comedy about a guy, "Mortimer Granville" (Hugh Dancy), a guy who has to kind of wake up to the truth, and a woman, "Charlotte Dalrymple" (Maggie Gyllenhaal) is the truth-teller.

There's that moment where he can't be in denial anymore, right, and the movie's really about denial, right, about cultural denial.

This guy, he knows the truth of medicine, as you say, he knows the truth about the festering leg. But to tell the truth isn't working for him. He keeps getting fired and all that, so he sells out. He embraces convention. The world is kind of set up for him to embrace convention. He's a handsome young doctor. He's great...

But it isn't in him. And he sees this kindred spirit and she's... Because she's a woman, because she can't shut her mouth, she can't try to "pass."

In "Charlotte Dalrymple" we created a character who I would have wanted to be had I lived back then. I don't know if I would've been brave enough because the amount of things she was willing to risk... But I always felt like that girl who couldn't help but raise her hand in class even though I knew the guys would make fun of me. But you still... You just are who you are.

**Jan:** Don't I know it!

**Tanya:** Right, you are who you are. And actually, as hard as it is or as painful as it can be, once you just give into that and relax and embrace it, you're happier. You know what I mean?

**Jan:** Yes!

**Tanya:** And I feel like I learn that, over and over again, when I fight for who I am.

And Charlotte, she has her struggles with it, but I also think she has this huge heart. People ask me: "What's your favorite scene?" I think it's at the back of the courtroom. Yes, Mortimer comes in as a "white knight" to save Charlotte, but why? Not because she couldn't save herself, but because she wouldn't be allowed to save herself.

They told her to shut up. They told her to shut up. She's not allowed to speak, and what does Mortimer come in and use? Charlotte words!

**Jan:** Exactly!

**Tanya:** So Mortimer basically bust the door open for Charlotte. He uses her words to get her off, not his own, and he has to wake up and realize that there aren't other choices.

And so my favorite bit is at the back of the courtroom when Charlotte says: "Mortimer Granville, you are a good doctor, and you have created an invention that harms no one and makes everyone who comes into contact with it feel better. There are very few doctors in history who could lay claim to such a thing."

And what I love about it are the following couple of things:

Charlotte could've said: "See, I told you were a fraud." But she is loving and generous and it isn't about that for her. The message is an empowerment message, right?

**Jan:** Tremendously so, yes, I certainly thought so.

**Tanya:** You are in charge of your own happiness.

There are so many serious issues in the world and problems in the world, and let's let the serious things be serious, but please, let's let the fun things be fun because if we spend all our energy making the fun things be serious, we won't have any energy left to solve the real problems.

So I think *Hysteria* grapples with serious stuff, but in a way that has us laugh at ourselves and our own absurdity as human beings.

**Jan:** I try to explain to people that as a woman critic, when I say about a movie

**"I laughed, I cried, I had a great time!"**

that means it has my highest endorsement. It means the film took me through a complete cycle of emotions, and at the end, I felt complete.

As you say, *Hysteria* is happy and giggly one moment, and it's tragic the next, and the female sensibility embraces all of those variations.

**Tanya:** Absolutely. There you go.

**Jan:** When we started publicizing “Jane Addams Day” here in Chicago (that was six years ago), we tried to find a movie about Jane Addams or at least a movie about that period... something about a Settlement House... Impossible! We couldn't find anything!

Was it hard to convince people to make Charlotte such a serious character or did everyone go with it right from the beginning?



Felicity Jones as "Emily"

Maggie Gyllenhaal as "Charlotte"

**Tanya:** Actually the biggest challenge for us was trying to figure out how to make the plot work. In a classic screwball comedy, the filmmakers would have made Charlotte's sister “Emily Dalrymple” (Felicity Jones) a shrew—mean or conniving or whatever. But we didn't want to do that to one of our women characters—there has got to be another way.

So we just wanted to make Emily and Mortimer perfect for each other from the outside. Emily isn't a shrew and she's not dumb... But she may be a bit ignorant so it's been easier for her to fit convention... Just a little bit ignorant and a little bit loopy. That [balance] was the hardest thing.

Also, look, it's not like 1980, it's 1880. So always “threading that needle” of what we want as women today and what was really manageable to pull off in something set in 1880—that was a little bit tricky.

In every romantic comedy it's not “the if,” it's “the how;” how does Mortimer come to understand that he loves Charlotte? I think that's the most fun and most engaging question.

What I love about movies is that we go into a dark room with a bunch of strangers, kind of turn off a certain part of our brain for a while and have an experience, an emotional experience. Then we come out and we engage and it moves us; it makes us think. Cinema is not an intellectual experience while it's happening, but it's transformative while it's happening, and then afterwards because of those feelings and that transformation, then you engage. And so...

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To read my review of *Hysteria* online, visit:

<http://www.WomenArts.org/reviews/Hysteria.htm>

To download my review as a pdf (with additional comments), visit:

<http://www.TheHotPinkPen.com/?p=2908>