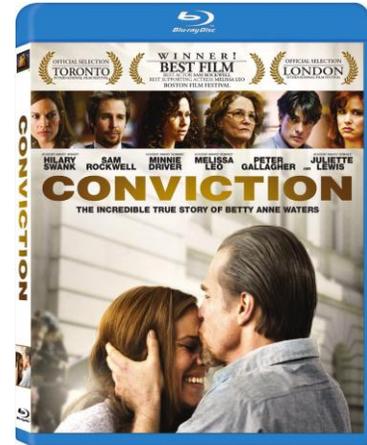


Fashion Plates?

Media Messages at the Movies



By Stephanie Taylor
SPECIAL FOR FILMS FOR TWO®

TWO EXAMPLES FROM THE LEGAL PROFESSION

Erin Brockovich (1999) and *Conviction* (2010) are both based on true stories about women working their way up in the legal profession. Both women are dedicated to their causes, and both ultimately succeed, but surface similarities end there.

Let's look first at *Erin Brockovich*. In this 1999 film, "Erin" (Julia Roberts) routinely wears skin-tight clothing with spike heels and tons of makeup. At the beginning of the movie, Erin goes to a job interview in a short spaghetti-strapped sun dress with maximum hair and mascara. She's interviewed by a man; she doesn't get the job. Then Erin's car is hit, and she asks lawyer "Ed Masry" (Albert Finney) to represent her. Ed loses her case, but he's impressed with her persistence, so he hires Erin as a junior law clerk.

Now that she finally has a job at Ed's law firm, Erin's outfits become Ed's problem. He tells her she should change her wardrobe because she makes the other women in his firm uncomfortable, but she continues to dress provocatively.

Erin has no degrees beyond her high school diploma, but she has a knack for legal research. Eventually, she stumbles on trouble. She learns through her interviews that residents of Hinkley, California are having major health issues. They believe this is caused by toxins in their water supply. Erin does hours of research, and she develops a deep passion for the Hinkley case.

One day she goes to the water board to get some documents. She wears a low-cut tank top, and leans way over to show her cleavage to the male clerk. But Ed needs more evidence, so he asks her to go back. Still, he's skeptical. "What makes you think you can just walk in there and find what we need?" he asks. Erin's reply? "They're called boobs, Ed!"

What's the message here? When a woman needs something in the workplace, nothing succeeds like a low-cut tank top? The film implies that Erin professional success depends more on her body than her brain; in Erin's case "dressing for success" clearly means dressing like a sex kitten.

In the 2010 film *Conviction*, on the other hand, the lead character is a woman trying to prove that her brother has been wrongfully imprisoned for a murder he didn't commit. But first "Betty Anne" (Hilary Swank) must get her GED, then her BA, then her JD; finally, after 18 years of effort, she passes the Massachusetts Bar Exam, and this enables her to act as her brother's attorney.

All this hard work takes real smarts, but Betty Anne's sense of style is frumpy. She dresses in pants and loose long-sleeved tops; she never shows any skin or wears any visible makeup. One day, after she's passed the Bar Exam, Betty Anne's friend, "Abra Rice" (Minnie Driver) says: "How long will it take you to make yourself look like a lawyer?"

Soon Betty Anne is dressing in a more professional way. She goes hunting for evidence in black slacks and a gray blazer. Her blazer is buttoned over a black top and falls just above the hips. Compare this to Erin, who wears her blazer open over a low-cut blouse, with a short, fitted, pink skirt that even has two slits!

Erin doesn't think twice before giving people a piece of her mind (using lots of slang and curse words), but even when Betty Anne and Abra fight, Betty Anne still watches her tongue, and afterwards she apologizes. Could it be that people's dress somehow affects their personality? I don't know if anyone has ever done any research on this, but if they haven't then I think they should.

Still, even though they have very different styles, these two women have the most important things in common: they're both strong-willed and passionate, and no matter what wardrobe choices they make, both Erin and Betty Anne achieve their goals before the credits roll.

But after we've cheered for these inspiring on-screen accomplishments and put these DVDs back on the shelf, maybe we should also ask how these two films fared in the real world?

Erin Brockovich received five Oscar nominations and Julia Roberts was named Best Actress; *Conviction* got... nothing. Ironically both films were directed by men (Steven Soderbergh directed *Erin Brockovich* and Tony Goldwyn directed *Conviction*), and women wrote both screenplays (Susannah Grant and Pamela Gray respectively), but while Soderbergh and Grant both got Oscar nominations; Goldwyn and Gray got... nothing. *Erin Brockovich* grossed \$126M at the box office; *Conviction* grossed \$6.8 at the box office. So even in movieland, it's clear that "hot" women have the edge.

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