Interviews: Juliette Lewis, Director Tony Goldwyn Create 'Conviction'

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CHICAGO – "Conviction" tells the true story of siblings Betty Anne (Hilary Swank) and Kenny (Sam Rockwell) Walters, and the quest of Betty Anne to free her brother from a prison sentence for murder. Oscar nominee Juliette Lewis lends her talent as key prosecution witness Roseanna Perry, and the film is directed by Tony Goldwyn.

Featured star Lewis and Director Goldwyn were in Chicago recently to promote the film. HollywoodChicago.com sat down for interviews with both of them, talking about the general themes of Conviction and their expansive careers.

Juliette Lewis, Roseanna Perry in "Conviction"

Juliette Lewis is a familiar presence in the Hollywood canon of the last twenty years. Beginning her career as a teenager in the 1980s, she had a transcendent breakthrough as Danielle Bowden in Martin Scorsese's remake of "Cape Fear" (1991). From that point to the end of the decade, Lewis worked with directors as diverse as Woody Allen ("Husbands and Wives"), Lasse Hallstrom ("What's Eating Gilbert Grape?") and Oliver Stone (unforgettable as Mallory in "Natural Born Killers").

Recently, Lewis has also become a working rock musician, first with her band Juliette and the Licks, and then as a solo artist. She has released four albums.

Juliette Lewis in Chicago, September 20th, 2010
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: You've always been a character actor, even when you were younger. What attracts you to playing different types of character humanity, and what attracted you to the challenge of playing the character you play in Conviction?

Juliette Lewis: As I get older, as I process things differently, I'm very much my father's daughter, and he's a character actor [Geoffrey Lewis]. I think what he passed down to me was the belief that I could play it all. I could be a princess or a bag lady or a wacky cousin or best friend. It lives in my blood, I love diversity. I didn't get into film to play one type or be limited by desirability.
I started a completely different career about six years ago, with my band. And I meant it. I set out on a journey similar to my film life, but to make records and tour the world. And it started happening, as an independent musician I was making a living. That's been my bread and butter, and I didn't make movies during that time.

In the last year, there has been a reemergence in film for me and this role has been has been the most intense, complex thing I've done in the last ten years, dramatically speaking. And even though it's small, it's about serving the story, and as a character it gave me the opportunity to completely lose myself. I wanted you to see this person, and not see me at all in it. That complexity of energy was really exciting to me, to make it real.

HC: What motivates your character in Conviction, in your estimation and after having played her, and why do you think she was so manipulated by the situation? What do you admire about her?

JL: She's the kind of person that lived so many lies and had destructive behavior, that she justified by lies upon lies. You mix that with drugs and alcohol, that can destroy your benevolent energy. It's like a spiritual thing – how do you know when you see a person walking down the street, that you intuitively know to move to the other side of the walk? That person's energy is rattled, damaged and unpredictable. I wanted to give off that in the character.

Her motivation, as an ex-girlfriend of Kenny, in the beginning is a big f**k you. She felt that he was mean, or hit here in the face, so f**k you I'm telling that lie. It's that flippant, but the reality is she put a man away for 18 years for that kind of vengeful motivation.

What do I admire about her? I admire the human spirit's ability to live under all kinds of circumstances. She has done all kinds of damage, but she is still there. What a person can take on, and still exist, is phenomenal.

HC: What do you think a film like Conviction says about America, and its willingness as a justice system to lock certain people up and throw away the key?

JL: It's the good and bad with our justice system. I think people know that, this film is a particular story. It's also a story about the individuals within the system. Although that system was able to get a conviction on circumstantial evidence, the film does show the opposite invincibility of love and connection. Which is what makes life worth living. Betty and her brother, through thick and thin, were always each other's best friend.

This a rare bird of a film, it's what you live for when you're making movies. To do something relevant and have a story so unique and powerful to tell on screen, especially with the climate of the film business today, is just great.

HC: In a series of acting assignments within four years, you were in films directed by Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, Lasse Hallstrom and Oliver Stone. Now that the amazing tornado of that experience is separated by a few years, what director do you remember the most?

JL: You have to also mention Garry Marshall ["The Other Sister"] and Mira Nair ["Hysterical Blindness"]. And Kathryn Bigelow ["Strange Days"], how exciting that she won the Oscar. That was radical stuff.

To answer your question, I'm not an academically trained actor. I consider all my directors to be teachers. Scorsese was the seminal director for me in my career, he validated my instincts. I was doing sitcoms in the late 1980s, and right before I did Cape Fear, one sitcom hired an acting coach for me. It was to get me to conform, as I see it now, to bad sitcom overacting. Because I was very natural and intuitive.

Martin Scorsese, as a human being and director, is a spark plug of enthusiasm. It's contagious. You can tell he loves what he is doing and he's just electric as a visual master. That was really powerful for me to work with him.

HC: And how was working opposite Robert De Niro in that film?

JL: He is the be-all-and-end-all, and I got that from working with him. I didn't know what De Niro and Scorsese meant to American cinema at that time, which worked for me because then I wasn't trembling all the time.

HC: Natural Born Killers, directed by Oliver Stone, was an anarchistic, almost revolutionary film. Who got the most insane on that picture and what craziness resulted from that individual or situational madness?

JL: There are always legends, but at the end of the day it wasn't the 1970s, we were making a film with a studio to answer to. [laughs]

Oliver Stone really took the reins off, in that particular movie he wanted us to try and invent anything, it was sort of anything goes. I wrote scenes and ad-libbed. He did encourage chaos, but creative chaos. I made a lot of things up, and he was just went with it.

HC: What song of yours expresses to us or the audience your most naked inner soul? What were the circumstances of writing that song?

JL: It's 'Hard Loving Woman,' that is my blues song. I always wanted to write a blues song, but the thing about blues that there cannot be any artifice, you have to be in that moment, you have to feel it and it has to pour out of your soul. After two years, when my old band The Licks broke up, I was feeling very alone and disillusioned. I had just had a relationship break up as well, and I had the one line: I'm a hard loving woman, take it or leave it, that's what I am.

That sentence was my blues song and then I got together with my friend Chris Watson, he played me a riff, and I literally wrote the song in ten minutes. It is the point in all my shows that when I perform the song, it's electric, because it is so volatile and expressive.

HC: How has being a musician informed you as an actor and how did being an actor make it easier to be a rock performer? What comes more naturally to you?

JL: It is so amazing to be doing films again, because both professions inform each other so completely. Music is an emotional tone, so you can have a riff speak to you sounding sexy, angry or filled with longing. In my roles I tap into emotion and characters, and songs can bring up all of that. I access my imagination in a much deeper way through music, and conversely it has helped me develop characters or emotion.

Tony Goldwyn, Director of "Conviction"

If Tony Goldwyn's last name sounds familiar, go no further than the middle initial of the legendary movie studio MGM. Goldwyn's grandfather is the pioneer of film, Samuel Goldwyn, and his father is prestigious producer Samuel Goldwyn, Jr. Regardless of the pedigree, Tony Goldwyn has carved a niche as an actor on his own, and now as director of the film Conviction.

Best known for his role as Carl Bruner in the film "Ghost" (1990), Goldwyn has had steady acting work throughout his career, and is currently appearing on Broadway in the well received revival of "Promises, Promises." After his debut as a film director with 1999's "A Walk on the Moon," Goldwyn has directed several TV shows and films, including this year's Conviction.

Hilary Swank directed by Tony Goldwyn on the set of 'Conviction'
Photo credit: Ron Batzdorf for © Fox Searchlight Pictures

HollywoodChicago.com: You've been in show business as an actor since you were a teenager. How does that experience help you as a director working with other actors? Do you think you're more appreciative of performance than other directors you've encountered over the years?

Tony Goldwyn: Yes, next question. [laughs] Yeah, definitely. When I first started directing about ten years ago, I felt I really didn't have a clue on how to direct a movie. My approach was 'what kind of director would I want?' and so rarely had. And that has to do with the atmosphere a director creates on the set for actors, and the ability to communicate with them. Obviously I have a natural empathy, which helps a lot.

HC: You have to play with a timeline in this film that was delicate. What was the most challenging aspect of portraying the recent past without slipping up in production or art design?

TG: This was a delicate structure and I never wanted to announce the period. It was a challenge in the screenplay to go back and forth in time in a way that feels organic and yet tells the story clearly. And the way I approach period, any period, is through character specifics. In other words, in the 1960s, when the Walters were children, what clothes would those kids have worn really, not while announcing I'm showing the audience that it's 1966, or whatever, or further down the line to 1986.

When you approach character very specifically from what that person is doing at that moment in time, then some of their clothes are from 10 years before, some were bought last week and the hairstyles are usually a few years out of date. What I hate in movies is that when it is set in 1986, everything has to be from that year, so by working character specific there is a multi-layer texture that feels right.

HC: You were dealing with a true event in this film. What do you feel about the liberties that narrative scripts take with the term 'based on true events?' What are you and screenwriter Pamela Gray most proud of that you got right about this story, and what stretch did you do that perhaps is farthest from the actual events?

TG: You're always faced with a dual problem in doing a true story. Any true story that's not a documentary has to stand alone as a work of drama. In other words, it might as well not be true, if it's going to work as a piece of drama. That's how you make your choice, this is not a documentary, this is a feature film.

That said, I felt an obligation to be true to the spirit, emotion and theme of Betty Anne's story. When Betty Anne and her family say that when they look on the screen, the timeline may not be exact, but the feeling is exactly right. That is what I aspire to, and that's what I'm proud that I achieved.

HC: You have a number of Oscar nominated and winning actors under your guidance in this film. Is it easier to have veterans like this, and what nuances in the performances of your principle featured players really struck a chord with you while working with them?

TG: It's an honor to work with accomplished performers, and yes, it makes it a lot easier. Because they're are smart and thorough, they demand a lot of themselves and they really bring it. What I do as their director partner, that as long as we're on the same page we talk a lot about it, and also they're just very suggestible and they get it, so they can really fly with it.

An example of that was with Juliette Lewis. Juliette has two scenes in the film, but showed up prepared as if she were playing the lead. She wasn't with us for long, but poured herself into this character, obsessed with the clothes and teeth and the accent. She wanted to explore

every possible angle of this person's world, and as a result she gave a very vivid portrayal of a character that only has ten minutes of screen time. When she did the second sequence in the trailer scene, our jaws dropped when we were watching her, it was exciting.

HC: The incarceration rate in America still remains off the charts compared to the rest of the civilized world. What do you think our obsession is with punishment in American society, and what does your film comment on regarding this obsession?

TG: I feel like in America we really want cut-and-dried answers to difficult questions. We're an action-oriented and solution oriented society, we want to get it done. When we respond emotionally to something, we want closure. But life is generally gray, and not clear cut. I think about the politics of criminal justice, there is a lot of mileage to be had in saying 'we have a problem and we solved it and we got the bad guy.' Prosecutors are political creatures, I'm not making that a message in the film, but I think it is the consequence of what happened in the film.

HC: You were born four days after me in extraordinarily different circumstances. What is it about our time and generation that really forms your life experience? What is unusual, do you think, about our times as boys during the 1960s?

TG: We really underwent a huge transition in our society, and yet we were a little young to be fully aware of it. The whole transition of the 1960s and what that meant in defining our generation, it really effected me profoundly.

HC: What perspective did you get as a kid about your legendary grandfather Samuel Goldwyn when he was alive? And now that you've absorbed the family experience of being a Goldwyn even more, how does that relate back to your father, mother and grandmothers as part of that legend?

TG: My parents were very diligent about keeping us away from Hollywood. I didn't know any movie stars growing up, my father could have just been a lawyer or a businessman as far as I was concerned. I always knew what he did, but I was never on a film set, my parents didn't want us to be Hollywood brats.

I was close to my grandparents, but my grandfather was retired at that point. They were of old Hollywood, and kind of lived in that era. It was fabulous, but it wasn't my life. Their house was built in 1930 as a place to entertain, not so big by today's standards, but a grand house then. It was beautiful, and very much a home of a movie mogul. It was place to be in the 1930s and '40s.

I grew up normal, but in terms of what it meant to me through osmosis, I didn't really get any jobs because of it, for which I'm grateful. But what I absorbed through my upbringing is an understanding that by having a career in this business, it's about being a worker, it's about surviving and working your ass off to build a body of work. The delusion that so many people have coming into the business is that they have to be the 'star,' they have to grab the brass ring. You're in a hit, then you're not, and you have to fight long and hard to get into another hit. That was a valuable lesson and it defined my grandfather's career. He had as many failures as successes but he hung in there. He made his first film in 1912, and his last in 1959, so that's quite the career.

HC: Finally, which of the classic films that your bloodline has worked on means the most to you, speaks to you either as an actor, director or just a human being touched by a particular work?

TG: My favorite film of my grandfather's era is 'Dodsworth' [1936] and 'The Best Years of Our Lives' [1946]. And Dodsworth is written by my maternal grandfather, Sidney Howard, so that one had both sides of my family.

"Conviction" opens everywhere on October 15th. Featuring Hilary Swank, Sam Rockwell, Minnie Driver and Juliette Lewis. Screenplay by Pamela Gray, directed by Tony Goldwyn. Rated "R"

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