

Blu-ray Review: Tanya Wexler's 'Hysteria' Celebrates Female Sexuality

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CHICAGO – Tanya Wexler's "Hysteria" is a feel-good movie about the dawn of an invention that redefined the meaning of "feel-good." As America continues to harbor simultaneously puritanical and adolescent attitudes toward sex, films like "Hysteria" continue to be as vital as they are entertaining. In a way, the picture is as old-fashioned as any Hollywood crowd-pleaser, aside from its eyebrow-raising subject matter.

On the heels of his superb turn in "Martha Marcy May Marlene," Hugh Dancy is a joy to behold as Mortimer Granville, a forward-thinking London doctor whose belief in germs gets him fired from his latest hospital position. Wexler basks in the delicious ironies of her opening sequence, as Mortimer's disapproving boss remains oblivious to the horse dung that his shoe has literally dragged into his own sick room. It's that brand of societal short-sightedness that Wexler continues to tweak with mirthless abandon.



Blu-ray Rating: **4.5/5.0**

Enter Dr. Dalrymple (Jonathan Pryce), Mortimer's new employer, who specializes in treating the "overactive uterus" of his patients by utilizing a procedure not uncommon in 1880, which is when the film takes place. The term "hysteria" was used to define a variety of female behavior deemed troubling by men, especially sexual frustration. Since Wexler evokes the mood and visual flair of a Merchant Ivory period piece, the jaw-dropping lunacy of the film's fact-based plot becomes even funnier. It's the straight-faced seriousness with which Dr. Dalrymple applies his tension-releasing methods that makes his scenes so...well, hysterical. Before leaving Mortimer alone with his first patient, the doctor brings a whole new meaning to the line, "I'm leaving you in very good hands." As Mortimer's reputation grows in the eyes of his employer, he starts to view Dr. Dalrymple's daughter, Emily (the lovely Felicity Jones of "Like Crazy"), as his inevitable soul mate. Yet Mortimer's preordained fate is disrupted by the emergence of Emily's older sister, Charlotte (Maggie Gyllenhaal), a rebellious suffragette who exasperates all of the men in her life (including her father) with her wildly progressive ideas. Mortimer initially finds the door-slamming activist to be unnervingly abrasive, but Gyllenhaal glows so brilliantly in the role that she could easily melt the heart of any stuck-up skeptic.



Hysteria was released on Blu-ray and DVD on September 18, 2012.

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Fox Home Entertainment

I realize that I've danced around the particulars of the film's primary selling point, which all of the ads seem determined to give away. Yet since the big twist doesn't arrive until around the one-hour mark, it's best left to be discovered by first-time viewers. Of course, I already knew what the film was about before I saw it, and that knowledge didn't diminish my enjoyment one bit. This marks Wexler's first time in the director's chair in a decade, and I sincerely hope that it won't be her last visit. This is one of the year's most delightful cinematic treasures.

"Hysteria" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English and Hindi subtitles and includes some revealing featurettes. In a post-film Q&A, Wexler says that after having four children, she wasn't interested in tackling heavy material and was sold on "Hysteria" after hearing its premise. She makes no secret of the script's composites and fictionalized characters (sorry, Virginia, there is no Charlotte), while admitting that her own Chicago roots inspired her to model Charlotte's sister house after Hull House. Gyllenhaal says that she was thrilled to tackle a topic that Hollywood still considers taboo (namely, female sexuality). The disc also includes 43 minutes of Emiko Omori and Wendy Slick's 2007 feature-length documentary, "Passion & Power: The Technology of the Orgasm," which accompanies solid interviews with distracting framing effects. Wexler is a stitch on her exuberant commentary track, as she dissects her approach to filming Dr. Dalrymple's first "treatment" scene. Her production design team came up with the hilarious idea to conceal the patient's exposed area with a red curtain that exemplified the procedure's absurd theatricality. It was Dancy who suggested that a sandbag be used to give the doctors something to work with behind the curtain. Pryce was so intent on making the scene look realistic that he ended up rubbing the skin off one of his knuckles. Now that's a committed actor.

'Hysteria' is released by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment and stars Hugh Dancy, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Jonathan Pryce, Felicity Jones and Rupert Everett. It was written by Stephen Dyer and Jonah Lisa Dyer and directed by Tanya Wexler. It was released on September 18, 2012. It is rated R.

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