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# The Story of O

E-mail

THURSDAY, 07 JUNE 2012 04:00 LISA JENSEN [FILM - REVIEWS AND TIMES](#)



## *Uneven, yet entertaining vibrator comedy 'Hysteria' hits the spot*

Fact and fiction make strange bedfellows in the Victorian-era costume comedy, *Hysteria*. Well, to be more truthful, they share barely a nodding acquaintance. But while the story and characters in this cheeky comedy about the invention of the first electronic vibrator are almost completely fabricated, director Tanya Wexler's occasionally uncertain, yet entertaining film deftly captures late 19th Century attitudes toward women and female sexuality.

Wexler and scriptwriters Stephen Dyer and Jonah Lisa Dyer cheerfully manipulate facts to make a better story. But absolute historical accuracy is hardly their goal. Instead, they create a fantasia on the idea of the vibrator, and its potential function as a revolutionary tool for women attempting to claim some shred of selfhood in an era entirely dominated by male authority. (In the film, the development of vibrator technology is linked to the budding suffragist movement.) Along the way, despite a few too many double-entendres and overly-pat feminist speeches, *Hysteria* provides a quaint and alarming glimpse into a historical moment of epic male/female misunderstanding.

Dr. Mortimer Granville (Hugh Dancy) is a forward-thinking young physician in 1880 London who believes that invisible germs cause disease, leeches are detrimental to health, and patent medicines are "poppycock!" These radical ideas have gotten him sacked from every hospital and dispensary in the city by the time he fetches up on the doorstep of Dr. Dalrymple (Jonathan Pryce), a physician in private practice whose patients are exclusively genteel, upper-middle-class ladies.

Confessing to varieties of nervous expectation, unnamed longing, and/or "distracting thoughts," these women are quickly diagnosed with "hysteria," due to what Dalrymple calls "an overactive uterus." The treatment requires the doctor to place a well-oiled digit into the patient's private parts (discreetly cloaked behind a red velvet drape), and massage until a physical "paroxysm" is achieved. Since medical science (and men in general) dismiss women as incapable of arousal or orgasm, the practice is not considered sexual. But the women know better; Dr. Dalrymple's waiting room is always so full that Granville, his new assistant, begins to develop debilitating hand cramps.

Dalrymple also steers Granville into an "understanding" with his dutiful, decorous younger daughter, Emily (Felicity Jones), with a view toward taking over the practice, one day. Dalrymple's elder, black-sheep daughter, Charlotte (Maggie Gyllenhaal), is a bicycle-riding, wisecracking Socialist who runs a settlement house for prostitutes and the poor. She befuddles Granville, until he discovers what a skillful and caring doctor she is in her own right (she too believes in germs). Her poor clients at the settlement house "only get food and laundry," she tells Granville. "But I get a useful life."

It's not difficult to see how the romantic story will play out. In the meantime, Rupert Everett pops up to offer droll comic support as Granville's wealthy friend and benefactor, Edmund St. John-Smythe, who dabbles in electronics and installs a newfangled telephone. Edmund sympathizes with Granville's quest to restore vitality to his overworked hand. ("I'm told the French have a lot of success using their tongues," he deadpans, making this unapologetic "sexual deviant" —ie: he's gay—the only male in the story who actually gets what's going on.) Edmund's experiment in building an electronic feather duster serves as the inspiration for Granville's first "electro-mechanical" vibrator.

Wexler's light touch is generally the film's saving grace, although some jokes work better than others. But her subtext is absolutely serious, the appalling cluelessness of males who think women less human than themselves (incapable of sexual pleasure), in an era when the accepted solution to "incurable" hysteria was enforced hysterectomy.

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In real life, a Dr. Mortimer Granville did invent the vibrator ca. 1880, but he was nearly 50 at the time, married, and he railed against its “improper” use by women. Everything else here (except those hand cramps) is entertaining fiction (including the strapless gown Charlotte wears to a ball, in which no lady, however liberated, would ever dare appear in Victorian society).

But the film is excruciatingly accurate depicting images of real-life vibrators, from fearsome to playful, during the closing credits—a history lesson well worth sticking around for.

## HYSTERIA

★★★ (out of four)

[Watch film trailer >>>](#)

With Hugh Dancy, Maggie Gyllenhaal, and Rupert Everett. Written by Stephen Dyer and Jonah Lisa Dyer. Directed by Tanya Wexler. A Sony Pictures Classics release. (R) 100 minutes.



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