

Directors Notes

Mike Leigh's *Abigail's Party* was filmed for BBC television in 1977.



The play is a satire of middle-class pretensions, set in a London suburb. Laurence, an estate agent, and his wife, Beverly, invite the neighbours over to a party welcoming newcomers to the neighbourhood. First on the scene are the stolid but unremarkable ex-footballer Tony and his cloying and mousy, wife, Angela. They are soon followed by Susan, a divorcee, who has been asked by her 15-year-old daughter, Abigail to clear out of the house while she hosts a loud party for her friends. Susan hopes that she can simultaneously keep an eye on Abigail's party while finding quiet refuge from it at Beverly's.



As the night unfolds, and the comedy gets darker, the 'niceties' of British society become key to driving this play forward.

As a company, preparing for the performance, we became increasingly aware that Abigail's party, a party that slowly encroaches on Beverly's sad soiree, is in reality the death knell for the end of one generation, and the sound of a fledgling start of a new one.

We have had a great time bringing this production to you and we hope you have a memorable time.

Gerry Lucas
Director



Mike Leigh ~ Playwright

Mike Leigh (OBE) (born February 20, 1943) is an award winning British film and theatre director. He was brought up in a Jewish immigrant family (whose surname was originally Lieberman, but was anglicised before Leigh's birth).

His father was a doctor in an overwhelmingly working-class area of Salford (near Manchester). Initially trained as an actor at RADA, Leigh went on to start his directing skills at East 15 Acting School where he met the actress Alison Steadman. He has made a number of films, usually choosing 'down to earth' subjects and subject matter.

Leigh has a knack for working with fresh new talent, including (at the time) Tim Roth, Gary Oldman and David Thewlis. Despite his quite varied use of actors he has built up an exceptionally strong repertory associated with him, including Timothy Spall, Lesley Manville, and, most fruitfully, Jim Broadbent. He also

worked with the late Katrin Cartlidge.

His stage work is generally more caustic, strident, and in some ways aggressively unsubtle in the service of a larger point about the banality of society, at least as defined by the behaviour of the 'ordinary' people in his plays. *Goose-Pimples* and *Abigail's Party* are quite similar in this regard, both focusing on the vulgar middle class in a convivial party setting that spirals out of control. To observe the occasional obviousness is not to deny that they are meticulously

Naked

Johnny flees Manchester for London, to avoid a beating from the family of a girl he has raped. He finds The Capital just as desperate and alienating as his native Manchester.

(The film has been) praised as an outstanding work of modern realism, with highly convincing performances all round. The central character is, in many ways, deeply unpleasant, misogynistic and violent. He is also very witty, and his appraisals of the dire situations he sees are extremely honest.

constructed and often funny.



Earlier plays such as *Nuts in May* and *Abigail's Party* tended more towards bleakly yet humorously satirising middle-class manners and attitudes, while later films such as *Naked* and *Vera Drake* are somewhat starker, more brutal, and concentrate more on the working-class.

A commitment to realism and humanism is, however, evident throughout. His stage plays include: *It's A Great Big Shame*, *Greek Tragedy*, and *Ecstasy*. The evident anger inherent in Leigh's material, in some ways typical of the Thatcher years, fittingly seemed to soften after her departure from the political scene. *Life is Sweet* may be the turning point in this regard: the family at the film's centre may be banal as anyone in *Abigail's Party*, but Leigh is disinclined to judge them, and treats them with considerable tenderness.

Even a movie as solid with fury as *Naked* is quite different in tone from, say, *Goose-Pimples*. Johnny (played by David Thewlis) in *Naked* may be shocking and inappropriate, but he's not merely cruel and stupid — far from it. For all the pain Johnny is able to fling at people, even he is ultimately a sympathetic creature contending not with the dilemma of which flashy sports car to drive, but with the very nature of his existence.

Topsy-Turvy is another film that it is difficult to imagine Leigh producing in the Thatcher years.

In 2005, Leigh returned to directing for the stage after many years absence with his new play, *Two Thousand Years* at the Royal National Theatre in London. The play deals with the divisions within a left-wing secular Jewish family when one of the younger members finds religion. It is the first time Leigh has drawn on his Jewish background for inspiration.

Leigh uses lengthy improvisations developed over a period of weeks to build characters and storylines for his films. He starts with some sketch ideas of how he thinks things might develop, but does not reveal all his intentions with the cast who discover their fate and act out their responses as their destinies are gradually revealed.

Initial preparation is in private with the director and then the actors are introduced to each other in the order that their characters would have met in their lives. Intimate moments are explored that will not even be referred to in the final film to build insight and understanding of history, character and inner motivation. The critical scenes in the eventual story are performed and recorded in full-costumed, real-time improvisations where the actors encounter for the first time

Topsy Turvey

Not really a musical or a straight biographical piece, this film has only really been described as a drama that takes place during the original 1884 composition and staging of what would become one of their most famous works, *The Mikado*. At the time, however, Gilbert and Sullivan were anything but a sure thing, following a slump that nearly broke up the duo. The movie depicts how they turned things around with *The Mikado*.



new characters, events or information which may dramatically affect their characters' lives.

Final filming is more traditional as definite sense of story, action and dialogue is then in place. The director reminds the cast of material from the improvisations that he hopes to capture on film.

Vera Drake

Vera Drake is a selfless woman who is completely devoted to, and loved by, her working class family. She spends her days doting on them and caring for her sick neighbour and elderly mother. However, she also secretly visits women and helps them induce miscarriages for unwanted pregnancies. While the practice itself was illegal in 1950s England, Vera sees herself as simply helping women in need, and always does so with a smile and kind words of encouragement. When the authorities finally find her out, Vera's world and family life rapidly unravel.

Mike Leigh

List of plays

The Box Play (1965)

My Parents Have Gone to Carlisle (1966)

The Last Crusade of Five Little Nuns (1966)

Individual Fruit Pies (1968)

Glum Victoria and the Lad with Specs (1969)

Bleak Moments (1970)

A Rancid Pong (1971)

Wholesome Glory (1973)

The Jaws of Death (1973)

Dick Whittington and his Cat (1973)

Babies Grow Old (1974)

The Silent Majority (1974)

Abigail's Party (1977)

Too Much of a Good Thing (1979; BBC radio)

Ecstasy (1979)

Goose-Pimples (1981)

Smelling a Rat (1988)

Greek Tragedy (1989)

It's a Great Big Shame! (1993)

Two Thousand Years (2005)

About the original production

Mike Leigh is well known for using lengthy improvisations developed over a period of weeks to build characters and storylines. The entire script of *Abigail's Party* resulted from improvisations. He initially worked with each of the actors to develop a character that had a complete character history.

Alison Steadman, based the character of Beverly on a combination of a lady she had known in Essex, and a woman she had once watched demonstrating make-up at a department store, who publically humiliated a passing shopper by telling everyone she had applied her lipstick badly! Once each actor had fully developed their character (from birth), they were brought together and Leigh watched how they interacted. This ensured that the realism that Leigh, the consummate master of social discomfort, strived for with his collaborative style, was achieved to great comic effect. Although he started with some sketch ideas of how things might develop, the actors' improvisation provided the



events of the play. In the final scene, Angela gets cramp in her legs. This resulted from the original actress been struck with cramp in a rehearsal: Leigh insisted she carry on with the scene and her cramp became part of the action. There is a large part of the characters that we never see in the final script, which makes them at times seem pre-occupied and contributes to the overall tension of the play.

Contemporary relevance?

Abigail's Party was first performed in 1977 and became an instant classic. The

Abigail's Party

First performed at the Hampstead Theatre, London on 18 April, 1977 with the following cast:

Beverly ~ Alison Steadman
Laurence ~ Tim Stern
Angela ~ Janine Duvitski
Tony ~ John Salthouse
Susan ~ Thelma Whiteley

continuing popularity of *Abigail's Party* over the last 29 years has shown the play's characters and their quirks to be embarrassingly but gloriously timeless. It could even be argued that the characters and their seventies viewpoints have become more painfully funny, as we can now distance ourselves from the social politics of the time.

In *Abigail's Party*, we are transported to a time when stuffed olives, cheese and pineapple sticks and peanuts were sophisticated snacks!

It is a world that is obsessed with class and taste, where Beverly believes owning silver plate candelabra proves she has made it! The theme of 'keeping up with

the Jones' is apparent throughout the play. The characters reveal what the middle classes thought they should have in the seventies. Laurence owns the complete works of Shakespeare even though; "it's not something you can actually read", and Beverly owns a rotisserie but she's "not much of a cook" and; "hasn't actually used it yet"!



What stands out now, is how times have changed from the social world that Mike Leigh has captured. Despite the fact 1975 was declared 'International Women's Year' and that women's liberation was a burning issue, there were still pockets of society where male chauvinism existed. Angela accepts that she shouldn't learn to drive because her husband Tony "won't let me" because "he doesn't think I'd be any good."

Beverly believes she needs Laurence because "he's very good with money" and if she wants "a new dress, make-up, have my hair done, whatever it is, the money is there."

Even though we can laugh at the characters who are deeply rooted in their 1977 setting, it is hard to get away from the relevance of the play today. The characters are driven by petty ambition and a desire to conform. Can we really say that times have changed? Do we not live in a materialistic society? Although Beverly epitomises the seventies hostess, she probably reminds us all of someone that we have come across!

Important information

The action takes place in Laurence and Beverly's house

Act 1

Early evening in spring

Act 2

Later that evening

Time: 1977

Abigail's Party runs for two hours including a 15 minute interval.

Abigail's Party

by Mike Leigh



Beverly
Sue Jackson

Angela
Jill Penfold

Laurence
Mike Baughan

Tony
Chris Connolly

Susan
Chrissy Griffiths



Production Team

Initial Realisation

Leasa Clarke

Director

Gerry Lucas

Designer

Daniel O'Neill



Lighting Design

Joe Dickens

Sound Design

Ken Clarke, Emma Marks

Costume Design

Toni Ford

Properties

Gillian Gibbs
Siobhan Torlop
Nick Thompson

Stage Managers

Rob Short, Ruth Williams

Production Assistants

Helen Dyke
Amy Leadbeter

Choreography

Jo Thackwray

Set Construction

Mal Culverwell,
Daniel O'Neill, Phil Parsons,
Dave Williamson

Set Painting

Daniel O'Neill

Set Dressing

Angela Daniels, Tony Daniels,
Janet Grant, Dawn Jackson,
Daniel O'Neill, Coralie Paxton,
Ian Thompson

With thanks to Ian Thompson for all his help and support

Production Photography **Paul Vokes**
Programme **Jane Frisby**

Cast and director biographies

Gerry Lucas (director)

Gerry has been a member of The Crescent for over sixteen years. Recent directorial credits include *Oh! What A Lovely War* by Joan Littlewood, *Pinocchio* by Albert Friedman, *Hedda Gabler* by Ibsen, *Shirley Valentine* by Willy Russell and *Jeffrey Bernard is Unwell* by Keith Waterhouse.

Acting credits include Mr Toad in *The Wind in the Willows*, Tony Hancock in *Hancock's Last Half Hour*, Akardy in *A Month in the Country*, Williamson in *Glen Garry Glenn Ross*, Pub Landlord in *Two* and Alan Turing in *Breaking The Code* and Mr Crummels in *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby (Parts 1 and 2)*.

Sue Jackson (Beverly)

Sue has trained as a part time student at Birmingham Theatre School, Birmingham School of Acting and Actorcise, BBC Birmingham. Her theatre credits at The Crescent include Paulina in *The*



Winters Tale, Julia in *The Duchess of Malfi* plus roles in *Othello*, and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Her television and film credits include *Cutting It* series 2 & 3 (BBC), *Casualty* series 18 & 19 (BBC), *Donovan* (BBC), *No Angels* series 1 (Channel 4) and *Alfie* (Paramount British Pictures Ltd).

Jill Penfold (Angela)

After qualifying with distinction from Birmingham Theatre School, Jill has enjoyed playing a variety of roles in her new career. Her casting has included playing Macbeth in a *Macbeth* National tour and Madre in *The Daughters of Venice*, where she won 'The Sir Barry Jackson award for Best Actor'. As well as *Abigail's Party*, Jill is currently touring as a Russian spy with Quantum Theatre for science. A versatile and confident actress, whose love for the stage grows with every production!

Chrissy Griffiths (Sue)

Chrissy trained at Mountview Theatre School, London, and has worked extensively as a stand-up comic in the UK and abroad. Musical credits include Miss Hannigan in *Annie*, and the classical role of Mistress Quickly in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Director credits include *A Slice of Saturday Night* and *A Chorus Line*. During the day, Chrissy works as a freelance voice specialist. Her debut at The Crescent was in *Oh! What A Lovely War*, and she is looking forward with great enthusiasm to taking part in the *Christmas Wassail*.

Mike Baughan (Laurence)

Mike joined The Crescent in 2004. His debut performance was as Lodovico in *Othello*. Since then his roles have included Camillo in *The Winters Tale*, Huld in *The Trial*, Brooker in *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby (Parts 1 and 2)*, Humphrey Biddulph in *God Only Knows* and Henry VIII in *A Man For All Seasons*.



Chris Connolly (Tony)

Chris studied Music and Movement at St Andrews R.C. Junior and Infants from 1964 - 1968 and his proudest moment was probably the occasion where his class teacher, Miss Guest, described his portrayal of a tree as "quite good." Undaunted by his failure to land the part of 3rd Angel in the Christmas Nativity, Chris has continued to pursue his dream of Hollywood stardom and has recently celebrated 25 years on the amateur stages of the Midlands. Recent credits include playing Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion*, Gary Essendine in *Present Laughter* and Dr Arthur Wicksteed in *Habeas Corpus*. He was recently seen playing a multitude of roles in The Crescent's production of *Oh! What A Lovely War* and in last year's epic production of *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby (Parts 1 and 2)*. Following *Abigail's Party*, he will shortly be seen in The Crescent's *Wassail* (tickets still available from the Box Office.....).