



MIKE LEIGH'S CHOICES

The Tree of Wooden Clogs

Peasant life in rural Lombardy in 1898. The eternal struggle of living and surviving from day to day, from season to season. Spiritual, infuriating, tender, moving and profound. The ultimate location film, and no professional actors involved. Olmi writes, directs, photographs and edits his epic masterpiece. Remarkable. How does he do it?

Mike Leigh

A contemporary review

Since Ermanno Olmi is still not very widely known, almost every article written about him repeats the data considered basic: for example, his peasant roots, the fact that his father was an anti-Fascist railway worker (sacked by the Fascists) and that young Ermanno and his mother worked for years at the Edison Company in Milan.

Olmi's deeply lived Catholicism, in contrast to the more or less lapsed Catholicism (qua cultural heritage – still more or less operative) of certain other renowned Italian directors, is equally often cited. Such considerations need explaining and nuancing, to be sure; but they do help in understanding, for example, why when Olmi embarks on a historical movie he ends up making *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, whereas a Bertolucci, say, creates a *1900*.

Olmi's method of making films testifies to a series of consistent and deliberate aesthetic choices. Even a cursory analysis of his films reveals how far they correspond to a classic understanding of neo-realism as practised in its early great period. The cheap production methods, location shooting and use of non-professional players are of course part of it. But there is a more fundamental and essential notion that points the link: Olmi's remarkable respect for the time/space continuum.

In *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, the film reality has the look and feeling of 'real reality'. Olmi's camera captures the landscape, objects and people as they are, sacrificing fancy camera angles, focal distortion and false spatial relationships. He is quite aware of this, and his care for the 'objective representation' of reality extends to his use of light and colour. 'In *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* I used two kinds of lighting: sunlight, or rather the light of the seasons, and light coming from candles and petrol lamps... I avoided all pictorial references, and I depended entirely on natural light, reinforcing it only when it was impossible to do otherwise. And this, so as not to fall back on the conventional palette of colour films on the 19th century. I gave added colour to nothing, I avoided tinted backgrounds, I didn't whiten the walls. One 'sees' the colours because they actually belong to the objects, the costumes, the people... The fact is that the tricks we have become used to in representational works have made us forget their direct connection with real events and things. The cinema, like so many other cultural manifestations of the present day, has become a sort of temple within which we sing hymns to life, but from which life has been excluded, relegated out of doors.'

Olmi goes on to contrast his own work with that of one of the masters he respects, Luchino Visconti. He feels that even in his neo-realist classic *La Terra Trema*, Visconti first composed his tableaux, as it were, according to his own cultured, aristocratic canons, and then brought his peasants into the pre-existing fabrication. 'I have another culture,' Olmi adds, 'I belong to another world. I have not invited the peasants to court... I have simply come back to my own people, I have brought them to the screen, just as I have brought myself to the screen... by describing a peasant culture which is, finally, my own.'

As with space, so with time. *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* is totally denuded of time distorting dramatic effects, chopped up montages and contrived suspense. One episode seems merely to follow another with apparent effortless, as if at random, and within each episode the event takes its time, almost literally. Inevitably time is altered by functional editing, and is of necessity telescoped. But in Olmi's film the effect of real time is sustained: one has the feeling of watching something unfold 'naturally', without being hustled, packaged, teased, overwhelmed, or manipulated this way or that. This very quality of seeming effortless is a testimonial of sorts to Olmi's maturing film mastery. *I fidanzati*, for example, seemed somewhat contrived in its novel-like playing with time and levels of reality; and *A Man Named John* was defeated by, among other things, its own unabsorbed complexity. But Olmi's new film seems to be simplicity itself, telling a story that has scarcely any plot, meandering about as in 'real life'.

Olmi's cinema, from the very beginning, has been of the kind that avoids the dramatic highlights. To put it another way: in *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* 'nothing happens' nothing, that is, except birth, struggle, joy, love, hate, marriage, sacrifice, death and the like. Olmi does not structure his film along our movie expectations, but although he forsakes the whole bag of tricks that make up the rhetoric of the well-made plot, things do happen, a story does evolve, as we are made to share in a certain world, a certain moment in history. There is a farm in the Bergamo region at the turn of the century, with the fields, the yard, the animals, the peasants' quarters, the landowner's house. Within this little world are four or five families of peasants, the priest, the village idiot, the overseer, the landowner, itinerants and traders, the village nearby and, briefly, Milan. The film moves to the rhythms of sun and rain, work and rest, day and night, and the seasons. From this organic unity, individuals emerge, characters grow, events take shape.

There are no 'big' moments. Olmi is far more interested, for example, in an old man and his little granddaughter growing their tomatoes, or in a widow coping with her sick cow, than he is in climactic battles and confrontations. In this sense he captures the moments 'in between', in a de-dramatised structure that is none the less the fruit of a most complex set of interweaving 'little plots'.

World box-office reaction is predictable. What with the years of conditioning that have produced the mass audience with its insatiable desire for well-made action plots, Olmi's kind of cinema is hard put to survive. And yet, the end result for those willing to experience his films is of a far superior order. This cinema is immersed in life. One feels he has been touched by reality.

Marc Gervais, *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1978

THE TREE OF WOODEN CLOGS**(L'ALBERO DEGLI ZOCCOLI)**

Directed by: Ermanno Olmi

Production Company: RAI, Ital-Noleggio Cinematografico,

G.P.C. Gruppo Produzione Cinema - Milano

RAI Producer: Giulio Mandelli

Production Inspector: Domenico Di Parigi

Production Manager: Attilio Torricelli

Production Co-ordinator: Alessandro Calosci

Administrator/Book-keeper: Archimede Orlando

Production Secretary: Enrico Leoni

Script Supervisor: Fiorella Lugli

Written by: Ermanno Olmi

Photography: Ermanno Olmi

Operator: Carlo Petriccioli

Assistant Operator: Ercole Visconti

Key Grips: Giovanni Spinelli, Antonio Calzavara

Editor: Ermanno Olmi

Assistant Editor: Emma Rigoni

Art Director: Enrico Tovagliari

Assistant Art Director: Rossella Guarna

Set Decorator: Franco Gambarana

Costumes: Francesca Zucchelli

Seamstress: Valeria Mariani

Costumes Provided by: Costumi d'Arte

Make-up: Giuliana De Carli

Music: J.S. Bach

Performed on Organ by: Fernando Germani

Sound Recording: Amedeo Casati

Sound Effects: Italo Cameracanna, Aldo Ciorba

Cast

Luigi Ornaghi (*Batisti*)

Francesca Moriggi (*Batistina, his wife*)

Omar Brignoli (*Minek*)

Antonio Ferrari (*Tuni*)

Teresa Brescianini (*Widow Runk*)

Giuseppe Brignoli (*Grandpa Anselmo*)

Carlo Rota (*Peppino*)

Pasqualina Brolis (*Teresina*)

Massimo Fratus (*Pierino*)

Francesca Villa (*Annetta*)

Maria Grazia Caroli (*Bettina*)

Battista Trevaini (*Finard*)

Giuseppina Sangaletti (*Finarda, his wife*)

Lorenzo Pedroni (*Grandpa Finard*)

Felice Cervi (*Usti*)

Pierangelo Bertoli (*Secondo*)

Brunella Migliaccio (*Olga*)

Giacomo Cavalleri (*Brena*)

Lorenza Frigeni (*Brena's wife*)

Lucia Pezzoli (*Maddalena*)

Franco Pilenga (*Stefano*)

Guglielmo Padoni (*Stefano's father*)

Laura Locatelli (*Stefano's mother*)

Carmelo Silva (*Don Carlo*)

Mario Brignoli (*the master*)

Emilio Pedroni (*bailiff*)

Vittorio Capelli (*Friki*)

Francesca Bassurini (*Sister Maria*)

Lina Ricci (*sign woman*)

Italy 1978

186 mins

MIKE LEIGH**A COMPLETE FILM SEASON****Bleak Moments**

Mon 18 Oct 20:40; Thu 28 Oct 18:00

Nuts in May

Wed 20 Oct 18:00; Sun 31 Oct 11:20 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Alison Steadman, Roger Sloman, Anthony O'Donnell, Stephen Bill and Sheila Kelley)

The Kiss of Death + The Permissive Society

Sat 23 Oct 12:50

Hard Labour

Sat 23 Oct 15:10

Happy-Go-Lucky

Sun 24 Oct 14:50 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Sally Hawkins, Alexis Zegerman and Kate O'Flynn); Mon 15 Nov 20:40

Meantime

Sun 24 Oct 18:00 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Marion Bailey and Phil Daniels); Thu 11 Nov 20:45

Secrets & Lies

Mon 25 Oct 14:30; Sat 6 Nov 19:00 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh); Sat 27 Nov 15:00

Abigail's Party

Tue 26 Oct 20:50; Sun 14 Nov 12:00 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh)

High Hopes

Thu 28 Oct 14:30; Tue 2 Nov 18:45 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Ruth Sheen and Phil Davis); Thu 11 Nov 18:00; Sat 20 Nov 20:30

Life Is Sweet

Tue 28 Oct 17:50 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh); Thu 4 Nov 18:15; Tue 23 Nov 20:50

Grown-Ups + The Short and Curlies

Sat 30 Oct 17:15 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh); Tue 30 Nov 14:15

Home Sweet Home

Mon 1 Nov 17:50 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh); Sat 6 Nov 11:45

All or Nothing

Wed 3 Nov 20:30; Wed 10 Nov 20:30; Sun 21 Nov 17:10 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Lesley Manville and Marion Bailey)

Career Girls

Fri 5 Nov 20:50; Fri 12 Nov 18:15; Tue 23 Nov 18:00 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh)

Vera Drake

Fri 12 Nov 20:40; Fri 26 Nov 17:40 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Imelda Staunton and Phil Davis)

Topsy-Turvy

Sun 14 Nov 17:30 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh and Jim Broadbent); Sun 28 Nov 17:40

Another Year

Fri 19 Nov 17:30 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Ruth Sheen and Lesley Manville); Mon 29 Nov 20:30

Four Days in July

Sat 20 Nov 11:50 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh and Bríd Brennan); Wed 24 Nov 14:15

Peterloo

Sat 20 Nov 16:20 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh); Mon 29 Nov 17:40

Mr. Turner

Sun 21 Nov 13:10 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh, Marion Bailey and Dorothy Atkinson); Sat 27 Nov 17:30

Who's Who + A Sense of History + A Running Jump

Sat 30 Nov 14:00

MIKE LEIGH'S CHOICES**Tokyo Story (Tôkyô monogatari)**

Mon 18 Oct 20:20; Thu 21 Oct 14:30;

Sat 13 Nov 14:10; Tue 30 Nov 14:00

Jules et Jim

Tue 19 Oct 20:50; Wed 10 Nov 14:30

The Tree of Wooden Clogs (L'albero degli zoccoli)

Wed 20 Oct 14:00; Fri 29 Oct 13:30; Sun 7 Nov 13:50

I Am Cuba (Soy Cuba)

Wed 20 Oct 14:30; Sat 13 Nov 20:10

Radio Days

Sat 23 Oct 13:20; Tue 16 Nov 18:10

H3

Mon 25 Oct 18:00 (+ Q&A with director Les Blair); Wed 24 Nov 20:50

A Blonde in Love (AKA Loves of a Blonde) (Lásky jedné plavovlásky)

Mon 25 Oct 20:40; Fri 19 Nov 21:00

The Story of Gilbert and Sullivan

Sun 14 Nov 14:40; Sun 28 Nov 14:50

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