



MIKE LEIGH

Hard Labour + The Five Minute Films

In this, Mike Leigh's first television drama, Mrs Thornley quietly endures a life of unceasing domestic work: as a char for Mrs Stone and at home for her demanding husband, Jim. Throughout, Mrs Thornley is inarticulate and passive. Her characterisation attracted complaints from left-wing and feminist critics suggesting that, when he derived the character from his middle-class mother's cleaning lady, Leigh could not imagine a fulfilling life beyond such work. However, although she does not articulate her feelings, Leigh uses cutaway shots of her to comment on others' attitudes. Furthermore, her apparent passivity serves several dramatic purposes.

Leigh uses visual echoes and parallels to juxtapose Mrs Thornley's domestic and paid jobs, heightening the play's exploration of identity as shaped by work and maternal duty (hence the pun in the title) and gender roles across classes and generations. It also heightens Leigh's wider social point that people's private lives are so separate that they are often connected only by economic convenience. Leigh acknowledges his position by filming the middle-class Stone in a house two doors away from his old home. He cites *Hard Labour* as a very personal film which unusually for him touches, albeit marginally, upon his Jewish background.

The play's closing scenes imply submerged depths beneath Mrs Thornley's passivity and Jim's belligerence. Mrs Thornley rubs Jim's unsightly hairy shoulders, alleviating rheumatic pain but also satisfying his unarticulated need for intimacy and physicality. This leads Mrs Thornley haltingly to discuss her emotional restraint with a priest, who prescribes penance. There follows a lengthy closing shot of Mrs Thornley cleaning windows, implying that penitence motivates her work. This, alongside recurring Catholic imagery, implicates religious guilt in her confused identity and offers active interpretations of her stoical labour, although she does not experience the moments of realisation common to characters in Leigh's later work.

Reinforcing the play's political concern with isolation and working-class communities, Leigh heightens confinement and the repetition of mundane tasks through restrictive editing and compositions, including shots which isolate feet and hands at work. Although he retains characteristic features, such as his noted process with actors, he also employs improvised location footage inspired by producer Tony Garnett, a device which he would subsequently avoid. Though more sombre than Leigh's later work, *Hard Labour*'s visuals, which comment on the action and on modern life's ironies in an understated, witty way, address a common Leigh theme: limited social and emotional communication.

Dave Rolinson, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

Tony Garnett on ‘Hard Labour’

In the early 70s I was invited, by people I had never heard of, to a screening. The theatre was empty except for a few cast members. The film was slow and lugubrious. The filmmakers had been helped to finish it by Albert Finney, partly because both they and Albert came from Salford. They did not know how to get it shown or how to get another one started.

You get hunches about people, and something about these unlikely lads attracted me. I was also curious about their working methods. My BBC deal was for four films a year, spread between BBC1 and 2. I rejigged and gave them one each. Sometime later I was joined at the bar of the BBC Club by my boss, the Head of Plays, Gerald Savory.

‘Hello, haven’t seen you for a while. What are you up to?’

This from the man I formally reported to.

‘About to start a couple of films [*Hard Labour* and *Blooming Youth*].’

‘Ah, who wrote them?’

‘No one. The directors put a bunch of actors together, improvise for three or four months, and shoot the results. Hopefully.’

He looked puzzled.

‘Interesting. Who are the directors?’

‘You wouldn’t know them. They’re new.’

‘Ah’. Clutching at straws now. ‘The cast?’

‘All unknowns.’

True. Liz Smith, Bernard Hill, Alison Steadman and Ben Kingsley were all unknown then.

‘Well... jolly good luck.’

I then heard nothing from him until I showed the finished films.

This was management by benign neglect. Something we might recommend to McKinseys.

The directors were Mike Leigh and Les Blair. Only the BBC would take that chance. Without a reputation, who would risk funding a cast for months on the off chance there would be a film to shoot at the end? These directors, whose work subsequently enriched our culture, would have been abandoned, depressed and ignored. At the starting gate.

I often wonder if the BBC now is of a mind to do the same for the young, uncategorised talent. I suspect that at best, they would have their originality ironed out of them on *Eastenders*.

Tony Garnett, 2013

The Five Minute Films

The Five Minute Films have some lovely gems: female afternoon drinkers, a glum goalkeeper, Richard Griffiths as a window cleaner eyeing up a sausage roll...

PLAY FOR TODAY: HARD LABOUR

Director/Devised by: Mike Leigh
Production Company: BBC
Producer: Tony Garnett
Production Team: Roger Bamford, Roy Baker, Spike Hughes, Irene East
Film Cameraman: Tony Pierce-Roberts
Editor: Christopher Rowlands
Design: Paul Munting
Costumes: Sally Nieper
Sound: Dick Manton

Cast

Liz Smith (Mrs Thornley)
Clifford Kershaw (Jim Thornley)
Polly Hemingway (Ann Thornley)
Bernard Hill (Edward Thornley)
Alison Steadman (Veronica)
Vanessa Harris (Mrs Lily Stone)
Cyril Varley (Mr Stone)
Linda Beckett (Julie)
Ben Kingsley (Naseem)
Alan Erasmus (Barry)
Rowena Parr (June)
June Whitaker (Mrs Rigby)
Paula Tilbrook (Mrs Thornley’s friend)
Keith Washington (Mr Shaw)
Louis Raynes (tallyman)
Alan Gerrard (Harry, greengrocer)
Diana Flacks (Mrs Betty Rubens)
Patrick Durkin (Frank)
Ian East (Dick)
Dennis Barry (old man)
Sonny Farrar (publican)
Surya Kumari (Sikh lady)
Irene Gawne (sister)
Hal Jeayes (priest)

BBC1 tx 12.3.1973
UK 1973
70 mins

THE FIVE MINUTE FILMS

Director/Devised by: Mike Leigh
Production Company: BBC
Producer: Tony Garnett
Production Assistant: Bernadette Boyle
Director of Photography: Brian Tufano
Editor: Chris Lovett
Costumes: Robin Fraser-Paye, Judy Allen, Susan Wheal
Sound: Andrew Boulton

Cast

The Birth of the Goalie of the 2001 F.A. Cup Final
Richard Ireson (father)
Celia Quicke (mother)

Old Chums
Tim Stern (Brian)
Robert Putt (Terry)

A Light Snack
Margaret Heery (Mrs. White)
Richard Griffiths (the window cleaner)
Alan Gaunt (the talker)
David Casey (the listener)

Probation
Herbert Norville (Arbley)
Bill Colville (Sid)
Antony Carrick (Mr Davies)
Theresa Watson (secretary)
Lally Percy (Victoria)

Afternoon
Rachel Davies (the hostess)
Pauline Moran (the teacher)
Julia North (the newly-wed)

BBC2 tx September 1982:
5th: ‘The Birth of the Goalie of the
2001 F.A. Cup Final’
6th: ‘Old Chums’
7th: ‘Probation’
8th: ‘A Light Snack’
9th: ‘Afternoon’

UK 1975
5 x 5 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