



MIKE LEIGH

# Happy Go Lucky

+ Q&A with Mike Leigh and Alexis Zegerman

Let me tell you something about teaching,' snaps bitter, lost Scott (Eddie Marsan) to bubbly, glass-half-full Poppy (Sally Hawkins) in Mike Leigh's new film *Happy-Go-Lucky*. Both are teachers of a sort: 30-year-old Poppy works at a local primary school while Scott is a driving instructor. But that's where the similarities between these two Londoners end: their attitudes to life are worlds apart and they would be unlikely to meet if the confinement of a driving lesson had not thrust them together in a hermetic dramatic space comparable to the living rooms of Leigh films from *Bleak Moments* (1971) through *Life Is Sweet* (1990) to *Secrets & Lies* (1996). Put simply, Poppy sees the best in people, while Scott sees the worst.

The word is that *Happy-Go-Lucky* is a departure for Leigh, a comedy that's unashamedly optimistic. But that analysis only works on a superficial level and for those with short memories. Leigh himself, speaking to me about the film, is already tired of some of the more lazy reactions. 'It's said to be 'extraordinary from this miserabilist', he quotes, paraphrasing some of the reviews written when *Happy-Go-Lucky* played at this year's Berlin, where Sally Hawkins won the Silver Bear for acting. 'To be honest, it's so ludicrous that I'm beyond being cross about it.'

It's true that *Happy-Go-Lucky* offers a very different tone to Leigh's two most recent films: *All or Nothing* (2002), with its inherent sadness among the inhabitants of a crumbling London council estate, and *Vera Drake* (2004), with its impression of an uptight 1950s London and the weight of a story hinged on unwanted pregnancy and illegal abortion. Yet one need only travel as far back as *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), Leigh's film about Gilbert and Sullivan and the dramatic process, to be reminded that for this director laughs do not emerge only from tragedy. More interesting, then, is to place the humour Leigh mines in *Happy-Go-Lucky* in relation to that of his previous films. Compared with the often hysterical tone of his last explicit comedy *Life Is Sweet*, *Happy-Go-Lucky* displays a more sophisticated and relaxed approach, with the serious and the funny more comfortable bedfellows. The gags are subtler and more often situational than based on peculiarities of character: compare the humour of the osteopathy scene or the flamenco lessons in *Happy-Go-Lucky* with the laughs sought in *Life Is Sweet* at the expense of the ridiculous Aubrey (Timothy Spall) with his warped Americanisms, sunglasses and baseball caps. Poppy is more fun than she is funny; she allows us to laugh but also to think. But there are plenty of other affinities between *Happy-Go-Lucky* and Leigh's earlier work. There's the ongoing concern with learning, whether formal or self-motivated, and with the attitudes of those involved professionally with the

education or protection of others. There's the interest in the suburbs. There's the investigation of characters whose lives are invaded by other people. There's the fascination with youth, and particularly with the borders between youth and responsibility. Even the awkward dynamic between Poppy and Scott recalls similarly incompatible relationships, from party-pooper Peter (Eric Allan) in *Bleak Moments* bringing silence to the front-room gathering of Sylvia (Anne Raitt), to Edna Doré's hunched and miserable Mrs Bender in *High Hopes* (1988) being forced to sit in the gentrified kitchen of her vile upper-class neighbours after locking herself out. Such invasions are the stuff of Leigh's continuing exploration of the various pushes and pulls at the ground level of British society.

What's unusual about *Happy-Go-Lucky* in Leigh's oeuvre is that it shows a dominating interest in a single character, the force of whose personality drives the film. The obvious comparison is with *Naked* (1993). If Leigh sees *Happy-Go-Lucky* as 'the reverse side of the same coin as *Naked*', then the clearest reversal is of tone: the recent film gives a platform to Poppy's optimism rather than to the pessimism and nihilism incarnated in Johnny. In *Naked*, Johnny asks Katrin Cartlidge's Sophie, 'Do you ever think you might have had the happiest moment in your entire life and all you've got to look forward to is sickness and purgatory?' Whereas Poppy's joyful idealism is captured in a heartfelt comment to her pupils: 'It'd be amazing to fly, wouldn't it?' The differences are further emphasised by *Naked*'s dark palette and surfeit of night-time scenes as opposed to the visual ebullience of *Happy-Go-Lucky*, its vivid colours seemingly drawn from Poppy's bright, loud dress sense.

That *Happy-Go-Lucky* offers a central portrait within an ensemble cast is partly down to Leigh's desire to work closely with Hawkins to build a story around her character. 'It was about creating a character who would tap into her energy, humour and profundity,' Leigh says, though he stresses that, 'it's still as much an ensemble piece as any of my films.' Adds Leigh: 'The only thing that makes this film unique is that, apart from two tiny scenes, there's no parallel action. The entire action focuses on what's happening to Poppy, whereas even in *Naked* there's a lot going on with other characters.'

Both *Naked* and *Happy-Go-Lucky* are emphatically urban films as opposed to the suburban likes of *Bleak Moments*, *Grown-Ups* (1980), *Life Is Sweet* and *Secrets & Lies* or Leigh's 1977 play *Abigail's Party*. Yet Leigh doesn't resist a familiar journey to the suburbs when Poppy, Zoe and Poppy's youngest sister Suzy (Kate O'Flynn) drive to Southend-on-Sea to spend a day and night with Poppy's younger, married and pregnant sister Helen (Caroline Martin). It's the sort of expedition taken in *High Hopes* by Cyril (Phil Davis) and Shirley (Ruth Sheen) to visit his social-climbing sister Valerie (Heather Tobias), or in *Meantime* (1983) by unemployed Cohn (Tim Roth) to do jobs for his richer aunt Barbara (Marion Bailey) away from the squalor of the east London estate where he lives. Such trips to the edge of town are a source of unease for

Leigh that allows him to explore issues of unequal wealth and happiness, often within the same family and between siblings.

The conflict Leigh explores when Poppy visits Helen is less about class or wealth than about ideas of how to live life at a certain age. Here the perennial concept of 'the done thing' raises its ugly head. Helen thinks that Poppy is not living responsibly enough for her age, and says so. It's a measure of Poppy's character – strong, independent and resistant to crippling outside influences – that she stands up for herself: 'I love my life. Yeah, it can be hard at times, but that's part of it.'

But perhaps we shouldn't get too carried away by Poppy's effervescent nature and permanent smile. For there are suggestions that not everything is as rosy as the colourful jewellery she wears. Should we detect in Poppy anything of the brave-face-in-adversity displayed by other characters over the years, most notably Beverly in *Abigail's Party*? Significantly, once Poppy embarks on a romance in the later stages of the film she loses some of her excessive make-up and baubles, indicating that perhaps she now no longer feels the need to try so hard. And there's an important late-night scene with a troubled tramp where we may come closest to witnessing her essence. As the tramp stutters drunkenly at her, indicating his own trauma,

Poppy reacts with striking intuition, nodding and agreeing. 'You know?' he asks, stumbling to a halt. 'Yeah, I do,' says Poppy with an empathy that suggests real understanding. Does her refusal to share the details of this encounter with her friends hint that Poppy is hiding a buried unhappiness she doesn't fully comprehend? Certainly it's an episode that shines new light on her scenes of comic banter, as at the osteopath's surgery where she deflects her pain with a stream of gags.

Some of Leigh's films are explicitly of the moment: *Meantime* investigates early-1980s unemployment; the television play *Four Days in July* (1984) focuses on the Northern Irish religious divide; *High Hopes* riffs on the fading flame of socialism; *Life Is Sweet* draws attention to the absurdities of Thatcherite entrepreneurialism. But there are others where the sense of contemporaneity is more ingrained in the characters, their attitudes and their relations to the people around them. *Happy-Go-Lucky* belongs to this category: we have to step back from the story to consider what Poppy's character and behaviour say about the zeitgeist. She's a modern, urban woman, as comfortable with her friends as with her family, able to balance pleasure with work, and confident in being single while retaining romantic ideals. Leigh teases the political out of the personal. 'I don't think *Happy-Go-Lucky* is any less political than my other films,' he insists. 'It's as much about dealing with life and coping with issues as anything I've made.'

**Dave Calhoun, *Sight & Sound*, May 2008**

HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

Directed by: Mike Leigh  
© Untitled 06 Distribution Limited, Channel Four, UK Film Council  
Production Companies: Thin Man Films, Ingenious Film Partners  
For: Film4  
Made with the support of: UK Film Council Premiere Fund  
Produced by: Ingenious Film Partners 2 LLP  
On behalf of: Untitled 06 Distribution Limited  
Distribution by: Summit Entertainment  
Executive Producers: James Clayton, David Garrett, Duncan Reid, Tessa Ross, Gail Egan  
Produced by: Simon Channing Williams  
Co-producer: Georgina Lowe  
Commercial Executive for IFP: Guillaume de Chalendar  
Production Executive For IFP: Nik Bower  
Distribution For IFP: Jane Moore  
Finance For IFP: Mark Fielding  
Operations: Peter Touche  
For Ingenious Media Services: Ellen Fraser  
Head of Business Affairs for Film Four: Paul Grindley  
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Head of Premiere Fund for UKFC: Sally Caplan  
Head of Business Affairs for UKFC: Will Evans  
Head of Production Finance for UKFC: Vince Holden  
Head of Production for UKFC: Fiona Morham  
Completion Bond: Graham Easton, Film Finances Ltd  
Production Supervisor: Danielle Brandon  
Production Accountant: Will Tyler  
Thin Man Films Accountant: Bek Leigh  
Production Co-ordinator: Sarah McBryde  
Location Manager: Jonah Coombes  
Assistant Location Managers: Josh Yudkin, Amy McCombe  
Location Assistant: Amie Tridgell  
Location Trainee: Hannah Lamb  
Post-production Supervisor: Polly Duval  
Producer’s Assistant: Edith Kähler  
Producer’s Secretary: Tessa Morgan  
1st Assistant Director: Josh Robertson  
2nd Assistant Directors: Chloe Chesterton, Abbie Browne  
3rd Assistant Directors: Melanie Heseltine, Serena Plunkett  
Script Supervisor: Heather Storr  
Casting: Nina Gold  
Casting Assistant: Robert Sterne  
Screenplay: Mike Leigh  
Director of Photography: Dick Pope  
Camera Operator: Dick Pope  
Focus Puller: Gordon Segrove  
Clapper Loader: John Evans  
Camera Trainee: Pearse Crowley  
Grip: Colin Strachan  
Gaffer: Matthew Moffatt  
Stills Photographer: Simon Mein  
Special Effects: Special Effects GB Ltd  
Editor: Jim Clark  
1st Assistant Editor: Gavin Buckley  
Production Designer: Mark Tildesley  
Supervising Art Director: Patrick Rolfe  
Art Director: Denis Schnegg  
Assistant Art Director: Katrina Dunn  
Standby Art Director: Arwel Evans  
Set Decorator: Michelle Day  
Art Department Assistant: Nadine Herrmann  
Production Buyer: Kathryn Pyle  
Property Master: Nick Thomas  
Construction Manager: Dan Crandon

Costume Designer: Jacqueline Durran  
Assistant Costume Designer: Holly Waddington  
Wardrobe Supervisor: David Crossman  
Wardrobe Mistress: Tamsin Wright  
Make-up/Hair Design: Christine Blundell  
Make-up Artist: Lesa Warrener  
Make-up Assistant: Chloë Meddings  
Title Design: Chris Allies  
Originated on: Fuji Film  
Rushes/Prints by: DeLuxe  
Music Composed by: Gary Yershon  
Orchestra Leader: Sonia Slany  
Violins: Rita Manning, Mark Berrow, Calina De La Mare, Liz Edwards, Julian Leaper  
Violas: Clare Finnimore, Bill Hawkes, George Robertson  
Bass: Mary Scully  
Flutes: Andy Findon, Nina Robertson  
Oboe: Richard Simpson  
Clarinet: Tim Lines  
Bassoon: Richard Skinner  
French Horn: Tim Jones  
Trumpet: Derek Watkinson  
Euphoniums: Patrick Herrild, Owen Slade  
Classical Guitar: John Parricelli  
Music Conducted by: Terry Davies  
Orchestra Contractor: Isobel Griffiths  
Music Editor: Andy Glen  
Music Recorded/Mixed at: Angel Studios, London  
Music Recording Engineer: Gary Thomas  
Choreographer/Flamenco Dance Consultant: Isabel Baquero  
Sound Recordist: Tim Fraser  
Re-recording Mixers: Robert Farr, Mark Paterson  
Supervising Sound Editor: Nigel Stone  
Dialogue Editor: Jason Canovas  
Recordist ADR: Anthony Bayman  
ADR Mixer: Andy Thompson  
Foley Editor: Steve Schwalbe  
Action Vehicles: Reel Vehicles  
Publicity: Jonathan Rutter, Premier PR

Cast

Sally Hawkins (Poppy)  
Eddie Marsan (Scott)  
Alexis Zegerman (Zoe)  
Sylvestra Le Touzel (Heather)  
Stanley Townsend (tramp)  
Kate O’Flynn (Suzy)  
Caroline Martin (Helen)  
Oliver Maltman (Jamie)  
Sarah Niles (Tash)  
Samuel Roukin (Tim)  
Karina Fernandez (flamenco teacher)  
Nonso Anozie (Ezra)  
Sinéad Matthews (Alice)  
Andrea Riseborough (Dawn)  
Elliot Cowan (bookshop assistant)  
Joseph Kloska (Suzy’s boyfriend)  
Anna Reynolds (receptionist)  
Trevor Cooper (patient)  
Philip Arditti, Viss Elliot, Rebekah Staton (flamenco students)  
Jack MacGeachin (Nick)  
Charlie Duffield (Charlie)  
Ayotunde Williams (Ayotunde)

UK/USA 2007©  
118 mins

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