



MIKE LEIGH

Abigail's Party

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

Originating as a Hampstead Theatre production and first broadcast as part of *Play for Today*, *Abigail's Party* is Mike Leigh's best-known television work, and perhaps the most celebrated TV play of the 1970s, as important to *Play for Today* as Ken Loach's *Cathy Come Home* (1966) was to *The Wednesday Play*. Its enduring popularity has seen it staged in countless theatrical productions around the world, including a 2003 revival in London's West End.

The action, presenting an appalling evening of domestic entertaining in suburbia, takes place entirely in a confined living room in the home of Beverly (Alison Steadman) and Laurence (Tim Stern). The party which provides the play's title remains off-screen, initially misleading the audience into thinking that the real action is happening elsewhere.

Abigail's Party is morbidly compelling. None of the characters seems to like each other; the relationships between the couples appear to be based on mutual irritation and all seem self-preoccupied. Nor are any of them particularly likeable, which allows a comic mood to prevail even when events darken – Laurence's death, for example, is more farcical than it is tragic.

The play is dominated by Alison Steadman's mesmerising performance as the overbearing hostess Beverly, one of television's most memorable characterisations. Beverly's sing-song delivery of clichéd phrases fails to disguise a truly monstrous individual – she taunts her husband, flirts with Tony (John Salthouse) and manipulates her other guests for her own gain; her forced attempts at hospitality are to be endured rather than enjoyed. Yet Beverly's awfulness is captivating; she is an archetype of the aspiring middle-class matriarch. Defined by a set of attitudes which don't fit together, she hides her lack of identity behind received ideas of taste. Her motivation remains unclear; she easily controls the others but they seem to give her little in return, except to fuel her misplaced sense of power and mastery.

While the play's dialogue, as Alan Bennett has noted, is 'instantly real', the performances are determinedly not naturalistic. The play is self-consciously theatrical; from the confined set to the marked sense of audience – the guests both follow the action at Abigail's party and are onlookers to the spectacle provided by their hosts. Nevertheless, the characters, while exaggerated, are immediately recognisable, the social discomfort palpable. It is this instant and lasting sense of connection which ensures the play's continued impact.

Lucy Skipper, BFI Screenonline, screenonline.org.uk

Going too far in the sense of placing driven, not to say downright lunatic characters in stressful situations and sitting back to observe the outcome is one aspect of Leigh's singular talent. Another is his melancholy delight in characters who are themselves, by normal light, really far too much of a good thing. In this respect, Beverly, the monstrous hostess of *Abigail's Party*, is his masterpiece. Tripping about her lounge, compelling her guests to listen to her favourite Denis Roussos album, forcing unwanted gin-and-tonics on her polite, worried neighbour Sue – whose teenage daughter Abigail is throwing

an off-screen party – Beverly is a nightmare of insensitivity, the sort of person to whom it is impossible to say no, and even if it were, it would make no difference because she would pay no attention. Alison Steadman’s performance is a *tour de force* from her opening entrance and the first demonstration of Beverly’s extraordinary walk (the actress, the director’s wife, was pregnant at the time), to the closing moments with the furious rather than hysterical woman attempting to shake her husband back to life and in the process showering the corpse with cigarette ash.

John Pym, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1989

PLAY FOR TODAY: ABIGAIL’S PARTY

Director: Mike Leigh
Production Company: BBC
Producer: Margaret Matheson
Production Unit Manager: Maurice Abel
Production Assistant: Anne Locke
Devised by: Mike Leigh
Lighting: John Treays
Senior Cameraman: Dave Mutton
Vision Mixer: Graham Giles
Videotape Editor: Ron Bowman
Designed for Television by: Kenneth Sharp
Make-up: Toni Chapman
Sound: Derek Miller-Timmins

Cast

Alison Steadman (*Beverly*)
Tim Stern (*Laurence*)
Janine Duvitski (*Angela*)
John Salthouse (*Tony*)
Harriet Reynolds (*Susan*)

BBC1 tx 1.11.1977
UK 1977
100 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 Brid 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

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