



**MIKE LEIGH**

# **Life Is Sweet**

## **+ Q&A with Mike Leigh**

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

*Life is Sweet* takes food and family as its central themes. Released in 1991, like other films of that year, including *The Commitments* and *London Kills Me*, it focuses on young people and follows characters making the best of difficult situations.

In keeping with Leigh's customary technique of rehearsal and improvisation with his cast, the actors were introduced to their characters' real life counterparts – a married couple in Enfield, a female plumber, twins and Arsenal supporters. In the film, facets of the characters are gradually exposed through a number of different situations and arguments. Leigh has explained that he 'wants to see people in films as they actually are,' and it is in this capturing of small detail that the film excels, offering a celebration of the ordinary and everyday.

No single character from the central family dominates the film – even in group scenes, the shooting and editing force the viewer to consider different points of view. The characters are portrayed from different perspectives – we see them as individuals, children and parents, girlfriend and boyfriend, husband and wife and adult friends both at work and at leisure. It is through these interactions that their identities are formed and, in a move away from Leigh's previous work, these different perspectives don't contribute to a simple conclusion. Similarly the open ending doesn't impose a definitive reading of events.

The film also depicts the claustrophobia of domestic life, with much of the action played out in the family home – indeed, Nicola (Jane Horrocks) never leaves the house – while the hot weather contributes to this stifled feeling. Several camera shots looking out through windows increase this sense of enclosure.

Food forms a central part of the film, from the parallel – yet poles apart – chefs of Andy (Jim Broadbent) and Aubrey (Timothy Spall) to the focus point provided by family meals, while through Nicola, the film provides a rare on-screen depiction of bulimia.

**Lucy Skipper, BFI Screenonline, [screenonline.org.uk](http://screenonline.org.uk)**

### **A contemporary review**

Wendy and Andy seem at first a tiresome couple. They echo each other's nervous laughter; her cheeriness is matched by his compliance; he idles, she indulges him. Conversation is often a badminton rally of clichés. They are ordinary; nothing particular has happened to them – or perhaps ever will. They married when she was 16 because they had to. He is trapped in a job he hates. Yet in the end they are both singular and memorable. Their lives have a touch of heroism. Wendy and Andy cease to be caricatures thanks chiefly to two short off-setting scenes. On Monday morning, after a weekend of loafing,

Andy strides through his kitchen with the air of the complete professional. He cracks a real barbed joke. Despite his feelings, he does his job properly. Work is serious; he comes abruptly, almost shockingly to life.

The second scene is the climactic confrontation. Mother and daughter open their hearts and Wendy for the first time tells Nicola that self-starvation came close to killing her when she was in hospital as a teenager. In a few sentences we know all about Wendy and Andy and their children. Wendy has made the best of things; there have been sacrifices she has never mentioned; the caravan may be a heap, but it nevertheless represents something; she and Andy don't hate Nicola, they love her. In a sense, what Wendy has to say is no more than what one would expect her to say, and is as much a cliché as her infuriating use of the word 'little' (as in 'Have a little cup of tea'), but it is delivered with such distilled concentration that it's impossible to ignore. Alison Steadman, the director Mike Leigh's most practised actress, is well attuned to such scenes; but Jane Horrocks, as the farouche Nicola, rises to the moment with equal intensity.

A Mike Leigh forte is the sudden stab of emotion, the blurted statement of confessional truth. Here, for example, Aubrey's blunt plea to Wendy on the bistro's disastrous opening night: he can barely stand up and seems on the point of being violently ill, but still his cry from the heart rings pathetically true. In *Life Is Sweet*, however, the moments of silence have equal force: Natalie sitting in bed, leafing through a brochure, imagining the United States, which she is saving up to visit. New York, Chicago, New Orleans – she only wants to see the interesting places; Wendy can't understand why she doesn't want to visit Disneyland. There is a determination about Natalie, beautifully played by Claire Skinner, which makes her both memorable and admirable. In the final scene, before the camera pulls back and up into the sky, Natalie sits with her sister in the door of their father's garden shed and in an unaffected, understated exchange – she, too, has done some pretty nasty things, putting her hand down lavatories – begins the healing task of reconciliation.

The singularity of *Life Is Sweet*, however, is that it has no moral and is just as much about its incidentals – Mike Leigh listed more than a hundred of them in the catalogue of the 1990 London Film Festival – as its theme of the endurance of the ordinary family. It is fascinated, in a rather horrified way, with the gross, farcical Aubrey (Timothy Spall) and his theme bistro, with its stuffed cat's head on the wall and its bicycle and plastic onions in the window. Aubrey has no sooner skinned a boiled lamb's tongue than he is poking his own tongue into the ear of Paula, his mesmerised dogsbody, who then topples sideways on to his orthopaedic bed in curious slow motion. Then there is Patsy (Stephen Rea), slowly sliding off his barstool, ever the quiet, professional drunk whose dog-eared, dog-like charm is quite lost on everyone except Andy and, of course, the tolerant Wendy.

**John Pym, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, March 1991**

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## LIFE IS SWEET

*Directed by:* Mike Leigh  
*©:* Channel Four Television Company  
*Production Companies:* Thin Man Films, Film Four International  
*Presented by:* British Screen  
*Produced by:* Simon Channing-Williams  
*Production Supervisor:* Lorraine Goodman  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Deborah Harding  
*Production Accountants:* William Tyler, Juanita Parker  
*Location Manager:* Peter Tullo  
*Producer's Assistant:* Lynne Cruddas  
*Production Runners:* James Bloom, Nicholas Shaw  
*1st Assistant Director:* Gus Maclean  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Simon Moseley  
*3rd Assistant Directors:* David Gilchrist, Hedda Moore  
*Script Supervisors:* Heather Storr, Joan Atkinson  
*Casting Director:* Sue Whatmough  
*Written by:* Mike Leigh  
*Director of Photography:* Dick Pope  
*Lighting by:* Film Lighting Services  
*Camera Operator:* Dick Pope  
*Focus Puller:* Garry Turnbull  
*Clapper Loader:* Lucy Bristow  
*Gaffer:* John Parsons  
*Best Boy:* Martin Duncan  
*Electrician:* Dave Owen  
*Genny Operator:* Len O'Brian  
*Camera Grip:* Jay Williams  
*Additional Stills:* Jon Gardey  
*Stills Photography:* Simon Mein  
*Thin Man Logo Design:* Eve Stewart  
*Standby Rigger:* Bill Howe  
*Jobfit Trainee:* Fiona Walsh  
*Edited by:* Jon Gregory  
*First Assistant Editors:* Stephen Evans, Jackie Vance  
*Post-production:* De Lane Lea Sound Centre  
*Production Designer:* Alison Chitty  
*Art Director:* Sophie Becher  
*Art Department Assistant:* Deborah Wilson  
*Production Buyer:* Trisha Edwards  
*Property Master:* David Balfour  
*Standby Props:* Steve Wheeler  
*Dressing Props:* Piero Jamieson, Pat Harkins  
*Construction Manager:* Ken Marples

*Standby Painter:* Bob Starrett  
*Standby Carpenter:* Kevin Hoar  
*Costume Designer:* Lindy Hemming  
*Assistant Costume Designer:* Debbie Scott  
*Wardrobe Supervisor:* Anthony Black  
*Make-up/Hair:* Carolyne Walsh, Chris Blundell  
*Titles:* Chris Allies, Peerless Camera Company  
*Originated on:* Agfa Colour Film, Metrocolor (London)  
*Music by:* Rachel Portman, Julian Wastall  
*Song 'Happy Holidays' by:* Rachel Portman  
*Conductor:* David Snell  
*Music Recorded at:* CTS Studios (Wembley)  
*Sound Recordist:* Malcolm Hirst  
*Jobfit Trainee:* Jaya Bishop  
*Sound Engineer:* Dick Lewzey  
*Boom Operator:* Andrew Morris  
*Sound Re-recording:* Peter Maxwell  
*Dubbing Mixer:* Penny Woolley  
*Sound Editor:* Sue Baker  
*Dubbing Editor:* Peter Maxwell  
*Assistant Dubbing Editor:* Sue Baker  
*Foley Adviser:* Sandy Garfield  
*Foley Editor:* Julian Rodd  
*Stunt Arranger:* Peter Brayham  
*Publicity:* Carolyne Jardine Publicity  
*Camera Equipment:* Joe Dunton Cameras

## Cast

Alison Steadman (*Wendy*)  
Jim Broadbent (*Andy*)  
Timothy Spall (*Aubrey*)  
Claire Skinner (*Natalie*)  
Jane Horrocks (*Nicola*)  
David Thewlis (*Nicola's lover*)  
Moya Brady (*Paula*)  
Stephen Rea (*Patsy*)  
David Neilson (*Steve*)  
Harriet Thorpe (*customer*)  
Paul Trussel (*chef*)  
Jack Thorpe Baker (*Nigel*)

UK 1990©  
103 mins

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