



MIKE LEIGH

# High Hopes

*High Hopes*, Mike Leigh's first theatrically released feature since *Bleak Moments* in 1971, is even less plotted than is usual for this director. Set mostly around the King's Cross area of London, it examines the interconnected lives of seven characters: Cyril, a despatch rider, and his live-in companion Shirley; his widowed mother, Mrs Bender; his sister Valerie and her crassly entrepreneurial husband Martin; and his mother's next-door neighbours – frankly upper-crust rather than 'upwardly mobile' as the press book describes them – Rupert and Laetitia. And almost the only generator of narrative suspense is the long pivotal scene in which, having forgotten her keys, Mrs Bender finds herself locked out of her house.

What is the difference between Leigh's demystificatory essays *in* working-class culture and, say, Auberon Waugh's demystificatory essays *about* working-class culture? This is what I propose. Where Leigh says to his, after all, predominantly middle-class audience: 'You think of yourselves as liberal but isn't it true, underneath, that you fear and despise the working classes?', what Waugh says is: 'You think of yourselves as liberal but isn't it true, underneath, that you fear and despise the working classes?'

On paper, as you will have noticed, there is no difference whatsoever, which is why Leigh has been censured, often by those who would seem to be his natural allies and champions, for a gratuitous and near-sadistic lack of generosity towards his working-class protagonists. The difference, in fact, is one of interpretation and insinuation. For Waugh it is the underlying anxieties, not the virtuously liberal ideals, that are the impulses to be trusted, nurtured and indulged without shame. For Leigh, by contrast, it is necessary, if one is ever to exorcise it, that one confront head on one's deep-seated apprehension of sociocultural Otherness, and what his films do is force that confrontation upon us. And unlike the outwardly similar work of Alan Bennett (whose humour derives from the replacement of Wildean paradoxes by the platitudes of the educationally underprivileged), he does not trade in either parody or nostalgia.

If I have dwelt on this aspect of *High Hopes*, it is because, as always with Leigh, he just cannot get the other classes right. With their braying hahas, their crates of champers and the infantilism of their neo-, crypto- and pseudo-Brideshead sexuality, Rupert and Laetitia would appear to belong not merely to another class but to another genre. Even their names strike one as silly and overdetermined, anyone's off-the-top-of-the-head notion of how the other half tends to be christened; and when Laetitia makes passing mention of a certain Araminta de Winter (unless I misheard), there is a distinct and incongruous whiff of both Dumas *père* and *fils*. I must confess though, that these solecisms did not bother me a whit. From Alan Bridges to Piers Haggard, and from Charles Sturridge to the man who directs the Hovis ads, the British cinema is positively crawling with filmmakers who have 'got' the ruling classes down to the last gaiter button, as they used to say, and I find it endearing and wholly to Leigh's credit that he has pitched his tent far from that particular mainstream.

Unfamiliarity with the idiom, moreover, does not prevent him from neatly impaling his upper-class characters on a host of revealing behavioural or verbal notations – such as Laetitia’s expression of exquisitely pained forbearance when she realises that she will have to harbour the slightly ratty Mrs Bender under her gentrified roof until a set of spare keys can be fetched, her bracing ‘Chop chop!’ as the old woman totters up the steps and her airily callous, ‘I’ll show you where it is in a minute,’ when she asks, with some urgency, to go to the toilet. (‘Oh, you mean the lavatory.’) But it has always been Leigh’s peculiar genius to demonstrate that there is indeed a reality behind the baffling improbability of other people’s lives, to bring even monstrous Otherness into intense and startling focus, to draw the tritest of human gestures out by the roots and shake them in our faces.

In *Grown-Ups*, for instance, he took an infuriatingly shrill and scatty young woman, the sort who is forever ‘popping in for a cuppa’, and by exposing the loneliness behind the stereotype showed us *where she was coming from*. In *Meantime* he made sense out of a skinhead. And a single shot in *High Hopes* – of old Mrs Bender on her front doorstep clutching her chest and gasping for breath – conjured up (for me, at least) a lifetime of glimpsing such people in the street and wondering guiltily whether one ought to help or leave them be, whether they are having a heart attack or are just out of breath, and so on.

But the film has to be, and is, more than simply a cluster of beadily observed vignettes of Thatcher’s Britain: there is, at its centre, the story of Cyril and Shirley, one of the most poignantly loving couples (along with, in my lonely opinion, Sammy and Rosie) that our national cinema has produced.

Since the performances of Philip Davis and Ruth Sheen are beyond praise, there’s no point in praising them. Suffice to say that the characters are alive and true to a hallucinatory degree, an *effet du réel* rendered all the more powerful by the fact that they are, unashamedly, unambiguously, the representatives of good, of good-humoured civic responsibility, of that sense of societal solidarity that, as we know, does not exist for Mrs Thatcher. Their responses to the needs of others recall those of Londoners in the Blitz. And Cyril’s reply to the sneeringly put question of what exactly it is he stands for – ‘I want everyone to have enough to eat’ – is a noble reaffirmation of socialist priorities in an age of postmodernism, post-Fordism, neo-Marxism, all of them seductively revisionist strategies devised to make liberals forget that, no, not nearly everyone has enough to eat.

Cyril and Shirley both have and are the high hopes of Leigh’s title, which is absolutely not ironic; and theirs is a story of grace under pressure.

**Gilbert Adair, *Sight & Sound*, Winter 1988/89**

HIGH HOPES

Directed by: Mike Leigh  
©: Portman Productions Limited.  
In association with: British Screen  
Presented by: Film Four International  
Executive Producer: Tom Donald  
Produced by: Simon Channing-Williams, Victor Glynn  
Production Executive: John Paul Chapple  
Unit Manager: Sue Hayes  
Production Manager: Caroline Hill  
Production Co-ordinator: Britt Harrison  
Supervising Accountant: John Sivers  
Production Accountant: Pat Howell  
Accountant: Mike D’Silva  
Location Manager: Micky Moynihan  
Producer’s Secretary: Claudine Aidenbaum  
Production Runner: Graham Broadbent  
1st Assistant Director: Howard Arundel  
2nd Assistant Director: Marc Munden  
3rd Assistant Director: David Carrigan  
4th Assistant Director: Dom Shaw  
NFTS Student Director: Maddy Hall  
Script Supervisor: Heather Storr  
Casting Director: Sue Whatmough  
Written by: Mike Leigh  
Director of Photography: Roger Pratt  
Camera Operator: Roger Pratt  
Focus Puller: Simon Fulford  
Clapper Loader: Graham Martyr  
Camera (Jobfit Trainee): Lucy Bristow  
Gaffer: Ted Read  
Best Boy: Peter Lamb  
Electricians: Vernon Connolly, Barry Read  
Genny Operator: Bob Wilcox  
Grip: John Etherington  
Stills Photographers: David Appleby, Frank Connor  
Editor: Jon Gregory  
1st Assistant Editor: Andrew McClelland  
2nd Assistant Editor: Steve Evans

Production Designer: Diana Charnley  
Art Direction: Andrew Rothschild  
Production Buyer: Shirley Spriggs  
Property Master: Les Benson  
Construction Manager: Dave Pearce  
Costume Designer: Lindy Hemming  
Wardrobe Supervisor: Anthony Black  
Wardrobe Assistant: Debbie Scott  
Make-up Artist: Morag Ross  
Hairdresser: Miri Ben-Shlomo  
Titles: Chris Allies  
Opticals: Peerless Camera Company  
Music: Andrew Dickson  
Boom Operator: George Richards  
Sound (Jobfit Trainee): Peter Murphy  
Sound Mixer: Billy McCarthy  
Dubbing Mixer: Peter Maxwell  
Dubbing Editor: Peter Joly  
Assistant Dubbing Editor: Paul Newson  
Dog Supplied: Animals Okay

Cast

Philip Davis (Cyril Bender)  
Ruth Sheen (Shirley)  
Edna Doré (Mrs Bender)  
Philip Jackson (Martin Burke)  
Heather Tobias (Valerie Burke)  
Lesley Manville (Laetitia Boothe-Braine)  
David Bamber (Rupert Boothe-Braine)  
Jason Watkins (Wayne)  
Judith Scott (Suzi)  
Cheryl Prime (Martin’s girlfriend)  
Diane-Louise Jordan (chemist-shop assistant)  
Linda Beckett (receptionist)  
Ali (Baby, the dog)

UK 1988©  
112 mins

MIKE LEIGH A COMPLETE FILM SEASON

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

Bleak Moments

Thu 28 Oct 18:00

Nuts in May

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

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)

Secrets & Lies

Sat 6 Nov 19:00 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh); Sat 27 Nov 15:00

Meantime

Thu 11 Nov 20:45

Vera Drake

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

Abigail’s Party

Sun 14 Nov 12:00 (+ Q&A with Mike Leigh)

Topsy-Turvy

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

Happy-Go-Lucky

Mon 15 Nov 20:40

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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