



MIKE LEIGH

All or Nothing

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

The opening shot of *All or Nothing* might in its concentrated dourness seem a peculiar cause for celebration. The camera is stationed at one end of a cramped corridor. At the other a young woman is industriously absorbed in the task of mopping the floor. It doesn't appear to be getting any cleaner. Mournful strings make their presence felt on the soundtrack. An elderly woman appears in the background, taking fearful steps along the slippery floor, and for a few tortuous seconds you hold your breath and wonder if Leigh is about to puncture the solemnity with a jolt of tasteless slapstick. He isn't, as it happens – the woman simply rejects the cleaner's passing pleasantry with a vinegary sneer and hobbles off camera. But it's an easy mistake to make. The film wrings much of its weirdly charged power from forcing glum situations to their dreadful conclusions, until the audience feels compelled, just as it might at a Fassbinder film, to ask: what else can possibly go wrong?

In its stubbornness, its austerity and its almost self-parodic bleakness, that first shot in *All or Nothing* promises a lot, and before it's over it may have occurred to you that the film's title has the ring of a dare about it. That's appropriate: there are shots here, even entire scenes, when you pull back from the screen as if from a furnace, usually because the camera itself has forsworn any such retreat. Perhaps that's why I felt an impulse that was alien, at least to my experience of watching Mike Leigh movies – about halfway through that opening shot I had the urge to cheer. Those films described as crowd-pleasing – a term so ubiquitous it has lost whatever dubious currency it had – typically seek to unite the audience in laughter or goodwill. But *All or Nothing*, like several other new British films, should please a different kind of crowd – anyone, in fact, who has become weary of home-grown movies that have about them the neediness of the collecting tin.

All or Nothing is a sinewy, punishing picture that retains an air of triumphant encore. Not so much set on a South London housing estate as stranded there, it distils and intensifies elements from his earlier work. The claustrophobic central location, from which the Stygian voyages of walking-dead cabbie Phil Bassett (Timothy Spall) provide a reprieve that is exclusively theoretical, recalls the concrete maze in *Meantime* (1983); indeed, if the young reprobates of *All or Nothing* are its most unconvincing creations, it may be because Leigh, in the earlier film, already provided one of the most eloquent visual metaphors for dead-end delinquency. Once you've seen Gary Oldman rolling around in an iron dustbin, furiously thrashing the inside of his makeshift hamster's wheel, the sight of a bored teenager mutilating himself, as one character does here, is bound to seem redundant.

But in all other respects, *All or Nothing* wisely exploits its echoes of former work; it wouldn't be stretching a point to see the film as Leigh's *Blue Velvet*, a potholing expedition into territory previously examined only from the air. The movie is like a more sour remake of *Life Is Sweet*, departing from a scenario of greater domestic trauma but arriving at the same quietly euphoric denouement. In that 1990 comedy the bulimic daughter of a head chef

gorged herself nightly, and allowed herself to be smeared with chocolate spread in afternoon sex sessions. The new picture repeats the food metaphor and loads it on to our laps; not since *La Grande Bouffe* can popcorn have been so unwise a viewing accompaniment.

Apparently unwilling to acknowledge a deeper bond, the characters communicate primarily through food. The dinner table is the only thing that brings together Phil, his pinch-faced wife Penny (Lesley Manville) and their overweight teenage offspring, the docile Rachel (Alison Garland) and the raging Rory (James Corden) – at least until a near-tragedy transforms a hospital bed into a new meeting place. At the table they silently delve into dinner while the mirthless laugh track on an out-of-shot television seems to mock them. Special reverence is reserved for a multipack of long-lasting burger buns given to Phil in lieu of a fare; in the kitchen of this household nearing the breadline, the mystical offering assumes the aura of a religious relic or a handful of magic beans.

Next door, chirpy single mum Maureen (Ruth Sheen) deploys persistent offers of chips to provoke tidbits of conversation from her surly teenage daughter, who is as thin as a French fry. Meanwhile alcoholic neighbour Carol (played by Marion Bailey, the Essex housewife who turned to the bottle in *Meantime*) neglects her duties, and the absence of food on the table gradually becomes a symptom of deeper malaise; the last time we glimpse her, she's slipping into a mutually boozy unconsciousness with her bitter husband Ron (Paul Jesson). The symmetry so beloved of Leigh thus manifests itself not only in the siblings' matching names (Rory and Rachel, recalling the twins Nicola and Natalie in *Life Is Sweet*) but in the various stages of domestic health: Maureen has fought for her happiness, and is still visibly fighting; Phil and Penny are able to replenish their loveless marriage, but only just; for Carol and Ron life has steadily dribbled away.

The film's general bleakness, not dispelled until the last moment, seems both organic, in a way the apocalyptic posturing of *Naked* (1993) patently wasn't, and also justified by Leigh's quest for hope. Phil hasn't only passed on corpulence to Rory ('He's a big lad,' he smiles, almost proudly, when a foreign passenger bluntly asks if the boy is 'fat like you?'). He has also bequeathed him complacency; this father may spend his days driving strangers around London's tangle of streets, but there's no sense he's garnering any more experience than his son, who can barely bring himself to budge off the sofa. In another reference to an earlier film Leigh assembles a montage of Phil's fares that recalls a similar sequence in *Secrets & Lies* (1995) when the subjects of a photographer (Spall again) were collected in a series of brief sketches. The crucial difference this time is that Spall has his back to his clients, and seems scarcely to notice them. That leathery, whiskery face just stares through the windscreen, his droopy eyes neither wanting nor expecting anything other than his grim lot.

But when, in that final scene, Phil at last shares with his family an anecdote about his work, and surrenders a cocked smile, you may want to leap out of the seat in which you have felt imprisoned for two hours, and cheer. In that moment the movie unexpectedly aligns itself with those Mike Leigh films where family unity is fiercely upheld (*High Hopes*, 1988; *Life Is Sweet*; *Secrets & Lies*) rather than forfeited for art (*Topsy-Turvy*, 1999) or honour (*Meantime*, *Naked*).

Ryan Gilbey, *Sight and Sound*, October 2002

ALL OR NOTHING

Director/Screenplay: Mike Leigh
©: Untitled 01 Limited
©/Presented by: Les Films Alain Sarde
Production Company: Thin Man Films
Executive Producer: Pierre Edelman
Producer: Alain Sarde
Produced by: Simon Channing Williams
Line Producer: Georgina Lowe
Production Co-ordinator: Danielle Brandon
Unit Manager: Steve Mason
Location Manager: Neil Lee
Post-production Supervisor: Deborah Reade
1st Assistant Director: Josh Robertson
2nd Assistant Directors: Dan John, Hannah Tittley
3rd Assistant Directors: Lucy Whitton, Jo Sheehan
Additional 3rd Assistant Director: Lyndsay Bullock
Script Supervisor: Heather Storr
Casting: Nina Gold
Director of Photography: Dick Pope
Camera Operator: Dick Pope
2nd Camera Operator: Lucy Bristow
Focus Puller: Lewis Buchan
2nd Focus Puller: Dan Shoring
Clapper Loader: Richard Ackland
Stills Photography: Simon Mein
Graphic Designer: Jo Littlejohn
Editor: Lesley Walker
Production Designer: Eve Stewart
Art Director: Tom Read
Costume Designer: Jacqueline Durran
Wardrobe Supervisor: Dan Grace
Wardrobe Mistress: Laura May
Make-up/Hair Designer: Christine Blundell
Make-up Artists: Kirstin Chalmers, Lesa Warrener
Title Design: Chris Allies
Colour Timer: Clive Noakes
Music: Andrew Dickson
Violin: Rosemary Warren-Green
Viola: Bill Hawkes
Double Bass: Mary Scully
Flute: Karen Jones;
Bass Flute: Helen Keen
Guitars: Martin Allcock, Mitch Dalton, Colin Green
Conductor: John Coleman
Music Supervisor: Step Parikian
Scoring Engineer: Jon Bailey
Sound Recordist: Malcolm Hirst
Re-recording Mixers: Adrian Rhodes, Matthew Gough
Supervising Sound Editor: Peter Joly
ADR Mixer: Peter Gleaves
Foley Walkers: Claire Mahoney, Jason Swanscott
Foley Mixer: Peter Gleaves
Foley Editor: Michael Redfern
Stunt Co-ordinator: Lee Sheward
Stunt Performers: Lucy Allen, Nrinder Dhudwar, Steve (Street) Griffin, Paul Heasman

Cast

Timothy Spall (*Phil Bassett*)
Lesley Manville (*Penny Bassett*)
Alison Garland (*Rachel Bassett*)
James Corden (*Rory Bassett*)
Ruth Sheen (*Maureen*)
Marion Bailey (*Carol*)
Paul Jesson (*Ron*)
Sam Kelly (*Sid*)
Kathryn Hunter (*Cécile*)
Sally Hawkins (*Samantha*)
Helen Coker (*Donna*)
Daniel Mays (*Jason*)
Ben Crompton (*Craig*)
Robert Wilfort (*Dr Griffiths*)
Gary McDonald (*Neville*)
Diveen Henry (*Dinah*)
Jean Ainslie (*old lady*)
Badi Uzzaman, Parvez Qadir (*passengers*)
Russell Mabey (*nutter*)
Thomas Brown-Lowe, Oliver Golding, Henri McCarthy, Ben Wattleby (*small boys*)
Leo Bill (*young man*)
Peter Stockbridge (*man with flowers*)
Brian Bovell (*garage owner*)
Timothy Bateson (*Harold*)
Michele Austin (*care worker*)
Alex Kelly (*neurotic woman*)
Alan Williams (*drunk*)
Peter Yardley (*MC*)
Dawn Davis (*singer*)
Emma Lowndes, Maxine Peake (*party-girls*)
Matt Bardock, Mark Benton (*men at bar*)
Dorothy Atkinson, Heather Craney, Martin Savage (*silent passengers*)
Joe Tucker (*fare dodger*)
Edna Doré (*Martha*)
Georgia Fitch (*Ange*)
Tracy O'Flaherty (*Michelle*)
Di Botcher (*supervisor*)
Valerie Hunkins (*nurse*)
Daniel Ryan (*crash driver*)

UK/France 2002©

128 mins

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Notes may be edited or abridged. Questions/comments? Email prognotes@bfi.org.uk

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