

PREVIEW

Leigh way

Life is sweet for Mike Leigh's actors – if they do what they're told

Interviewing Mike Leigh is a little like being tutored by a weary and curmudgeonly professor. Not only does the British dramatist and director look like an ageing academic – he wears studiously unfashionable clothes, a Karl Marx beard and a permanent frown – but he has the disdain and critical impatience of someone who has heard it all before.

Sitting in an office at his film distributors, he seems relaxed and at ease with himself, but you sense that anger lies just beneath the hangdog surface. He dismisses criticism of his work with cries of “crap” and “total nonsense”. He constantly questions questions, challenges their assumptions, edits them, says whether or not he thinks them interesting. And when he eventually answers, his sentences are elaborate constructs, shored up by caveats and qualifications. Most of all, Mike Leigh remains very much in control.

Although he is most renowned as a theatrical improviser and deviser, the same desire for control can be found in Leigh's work. The 50-year-old director has

always worked collaboratively with actors, building up a piece in rehearsal from improvisations, but as he is at pains to stress: “This can lead to the totally false preconception that my work is done by committee. That is not the case at all.”

In fact, Leigh's methodology, honed over 25 years, is subject to as many misconceptions as are his plays and films – not least that it is random and undisciplined. It is true that at the start of a project Leigh has no idea what it will be about, but he carefully chooses actors – most regularly and successfully his wife Alison Steadman – who are happy to work in such a vacuum and who trust his judgement. Character, relationships, action, plot and dialogue then evolve naturalistically through exacting rehearsals, by

Leigh taking detailed notes, and by actors going away to research and develop their parts. After many weeks there is, in effect, a text – but never a written script.

“Sometimes what you get on screen is a straight structuring of what went on in the improvisation,” explains Leigh. “But 99 per cent of the time what we end up with is a scene which is very different because there has been a great deal of reorganisation, distillation, precision and heightening – a great deal of input from me.”

It is this process of creating what Leigh calls “heightened realism” that has led to such satires as *Abigail's Party* and *Nuts in May*, and which this autumn realises two new projects: a theatre piece (about which, even a month before opening, all that was known was that it involved a mixed-race



manifesto

cast and live music); and his latest film *Naked*, for which Leigh won the Best Director prize at this year's Cannes Film Festival.

Naked is perhaps the finest example, on film at least, of the power of his approach. Leigh has always elicited extraordinary performances from his actors, but David Thewlis' portrayal of the desperate anti-hero Johnny (for which he too won an award at Cannes – Best Actor) is as complex and fully realised a character as Leigh has created.

Compared to his last two features, *High Hopes* and *Life is Sweet*, both of which explored Leigh's familiar preoccupation with family relationships and suburban conventions, it is also a more personal journey, an allegorical descent into the underworld of decay and homelessness. And it is by some distance his most harrowing film, being by turns sexually violent and physically brutal. Yet *Naked* is funny, alive with dialogue, and perversely engaging. It is this tragi-comic aspect of his work that Leigh is keen to communicate.

"*Naked*, at a fundamental level, is about the conflict between materialism and spiritual values, about the condition of a lot of people and young kids today, and about men and women and sexual matters," he says.

"But of course, above all else, I am in the business of low burlesque popular entertainment. Making you laugh and making you cry are terribly important."

Because for all the discussion that surrounds Leigh's work, and despite the dismissal of it, in some quarters, as overly didactic and prone to caricature (Leigh's portrayal of yuppies is ridiculously no-dimensional), his plays and films are always infused with a humour and humanism that can transcend his obsessions with class and social decay.

"If there is any achievement in the film," he says finally, "it's that we've actually managed to open something up that is like life – untidy, ambivalent and multi-faceted." Hour up, tutorial over, Mike Leigh walks me to the office door and greets his next pupil. **PHILIP WATSON**

Mike Leigh's new play is at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London E15 (081-534 0310) from September 22 to November 20. *Naked* is in cinemas from October 29 and will be reviewed next month.

