

## Idiosyncrasy and Spinning Yarns

An Interview with Mike Leigh by *Martin Murphy*

(Mike Leigh on the set of *Secret and Lies*; photo by Simon Mein)

*"It was 1965 and I'd already trained as an actor, been to art school, been to film school, and now I found myself in a situation with a brand new arts centre and a brief to do something 'experimental' with the youth in Birmingham."*



*What Mike Leigh did next*

*set him en route to a career as a story-teller and film-maker, the techniques he first tried out at a youth theatre eventually leading to an Oscar nomination. **Martin Murphy** talks youth theatre, storytelling and script panics with the director.*

"It's not."

"It is. The whole thing is changed."

"It's not. It's the Duty Free's changed. It's been like this ages." (pron: ay-jiss)

The trouble with interviewing Mike Leigh is that any human discourse, including a quarrelling couple at Gatwick Airport, begins to sound like something out of his plays or films. To say someone is like a Mike Leigh character is to conjure up instantly a menagerie of oddballs and neurotics where the words 'quiet' and 'desperation' are seldom far apart. It's a world that seems painfully, quintessentially English.

"I think that's bollocks. If that observation came from Indonesia then I'd say, 'Fair enough, that's a completely different culture' but we're talking about Ireland. The natural instinct to tell stories about real people in their idiosyncratic way is a very naturally Irish thing. And a lot of what I do comes from a heavy influence certainly of Beckett, certainly Flann O'Brien. So I don't think what you're saying holds water."

'Idiosyncratic'. That's a favourite Mike Leigh word, like 'real' and 'content', and one that could be applied equally to his characters and his career. We are sitting in the offices of his production company in Greek Street, Soho. The posters on the walls tell a story of international success - prizes at Cannes here, an Oscar nomination there - and all based on the same idiosyncratic techniques he pioneered with a youth theatre in Birmingham.

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Leigh's revolutionary idea was to use his youth theatre actors not just as performers but as story makers devising a text from scratch - something unheard of back then.

"I'd just seen the original production of the *Marat Sade*, and I had this buzzing idea that you should be able to do that sort of thing, but actually make a play. I was never at that time driven by a youth theatre zeal, as such. A lot of youth theatre, quite legitimately, is motivated by a moral good sense of the wholesome worthiness of

youth theatre. Which is fine. The question is always: 'what is the material? How is it being done and how good is it?' There is a risk, particularly in a youth theatre context, of talking about the work in a rather abstracted way as though all it's about is going in and engendering enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is a useless commodity unless it's about something."

For Leigh content is crucial, as much at the beginning of the process as at the end.

"If you say to the actor: 'Let's make the character...um...I don't know... he's a butcher,' OK fine, full stop, you haven't done anything because that's just saying 'he's a butcher'. But the minute you start to ask the question 'who is he?' and you draw on the sources and go into all the details, the actor's got something to get their teeth into; and then not only does it become solid and you see things that relate to other people but also stories start to present themselves."

The notion that stories weren't only external things that happened to already invented characters, but could be implicit in the decisions the actor had made was a revelation, not least to performers used only to interpreting other people's words. But it has remained central to Leigh's ideas about creativity.

"Acting is a practical three dimensional function. It's not a notional thing. How does a person feel? How do they walk? What comes out of this person's mouth? All of these are decisions on the part of the performer. But until the improvisations happen it's all just talk. The normal convention of improvisation can be 'OK, let's do an improvisation. I know, you'll be this, I'll be that. OK, improvise.' That's all fine but that is not what I do. And nor can it work because if you're asking people to be real and not just be themselves, reacting emotionally to somebody else smacking them or something, which is a complete waste of time as an improvisation, if you're trying to create a world that's rooted in reality then you can't ask actors to improvise together until they've got into some sort of practice, and have some real working sense of who they are."

'Practice' means solo improvisations, with actors going onto the streets in character for up to nine hours at a time, and then reporting back to Leigh on what they discovered. He describes these sessions as 'living through' rather than 'rehearsing', and the material gathered as a sort of homework that is sifted through for narrative possibilities. But is absolutely everything left to chance?

"Well obviously I'm feeding into the process decisions of a rudimentary dramatic nature. The question is 'do I decide or do I wait and see?' You look at *Secrets and Lies*; there's no way I could have waited to see because there's too many pre-ordained things in the premise (a young adopted woman looking for her natural mother). But one of the things that I famously do is that an actor does not know anything their character would not know. So Brenda Blethyn did not know that Marianne Jean-Baptiste was going to be her daughter. In fact she didn't know her adopted daughter was going to be black. And that was a huge piece of security. And then finally there's a point where you say 'OK, let's do that again, and if it's the same let it be the same, and if it's a bit different, don't worry.' And then you do it again and you say 'OK, let's fix that line' and then you're pinning it down and distilling it and then finally, and this is the best bit for me, it's like being pregnant, finally you really do it."

He is singularly unsympathetic to those who might be daunted at going into rehearsals without a script. "Nobody can create a piece of theatre unless they are able to function as a writer somewhere along the line. By which I mean 'Play-maker'. Anyone can do warm-ups and run workshops and do all that stuff and that's fine. But if you want to make a piece of work that's got a beginning, middle and end you've got to pull things together and make images that mean something and that is the job of a storyteller. If people in youth theatres are daunted by not having a script, that's not

exclusively the prerogative of people in youth theatres. Going in without a script is daunting. Take it from me, I'm the world's leading expert. I always panic. But I also know as an instinctive storyteller there's always something you can make up about anything."

The idea that an Irish director could be stuck for material to use he finds absurd. "I met characters in Ireland during *Four Days in July* (his '80s TV play about the marching season in Belfast) that were more remarkable than any characters I've met anywhere else. A woman on the Fermanagh border with 12 car batteries for electricity, and a man also on the Fermanagh border, we're talking about a hundred yards from the border, and I said, 'How do you feel about the Irish Republic?' 'What Republic? There's nothing there.' And he went to great lengths to describe the fact that there really was nothing there."

There's a buzz from his assistant to say that his next appointment is waiting but Leigh is happy to chat on. I suggest that his work to date is in some way an attempt to define what it is to be English. He is still not buying.

"I think what's more important is that I'm a product of the sixties and of growing up in the fifties. The general thing of breaking out of the constraints and starting to find ways of being more organic was very much in the zeitgeisty air of the sixties. Had I spent a split second in my work trying to define what was 'being English' I think I'd have fucked up quite honestly. I don't think it's about sitting around trying to do that any more than Chekhov sat around defining what it was to be Russian. The fact however is that if you look at Chekhov's plays you are undoubtedly looking at definitions of what it is to be Russian, and you could say the same about my work if you like."

Leigh hasn't worked on the stage for many years now and claims he never will, but still believes his methods are as applicable to a youth theatre context as they ever were. "All I've ever done is to function as an enabler for everybody to really start to express themselves and that's no different from what should happen in any youth theatre. That is to say 'You are interesting', which is a fundamental because, if that's not there, nothing is motivated, and then it certainly won't be interesting to the audience. But at the same time there has to be someone as an author, a directing author who is in control and makes idiosyncratic, personal, eccentric, subjective decisions of an artistic nature, which could not necessarily be justified to a committee. That's what it's about."

On the way out I'm introduced to the appointment that I've kept waiting, one of Leigh's most established collaborators clutching what looks like a script. Or is it his 'homework'? We say our goodbyes and on my way back to an airport that may or may not have changed I'm left to wonder if it really was Jim Broadbent, or was he practising at being someone else.

Idiosyncratic, personal, eccentric. Real.

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