

ABIGAILS PARTY

Education Notes

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The Play and Its Times

People criticised us for poking fun, but what is comedy if it isn't laughing at each other?

Alison Steadman's response to criticism of Abigail's Party

In organic terms, these people lack roots; in terms of energy, they are unearthed. Their problem is our world's, they are torn loose from history, faith, spirit and even language, because they are torn loose from themselves.

Bernard Levin, 1977

Abigail's Party was the first description of the Seventies wannabes, their acquisitiveness, aspirations and so on. It's comedy, but a very black comedy.

Terry Hands, 1977

A notably sleek structure of tension, acceleration and climax, it is more akin to Greek tragedy than a soap opera.

Michael Coveney, *The World According to Mike Leigh*, 1996

Early in 1977 Mike Leigh was planning a film for the autumn when Michael Rudman and David Aukin, who ran the Hampstead Theatre, suddenly had to cancel a play at short notice and pressured him to slot in *Abigail's Party* in its place.

A seemingly inauspicious start for a play which ran for over a hundred performances and was so successful that no less than five managements wanted to transfer it into the West End! By this time, however, Alison Steadman was pregnant so a long run was out of the question. Then a television play was also suddenly cancelled, and the producer persuaded Leigh to televise what he had previously considered an essentially theatrical piece.

He was not too happy with this version in terms of technical detail but, worse than that, it was deemed necessary, for copyright reasons, to replace all the artistes mentioned in the play, with others recorded on British labels, in case the BBC ever wanted to sell the play to the USA (they never have).

When this version was repeated, it was shown on BBC1 during an ITV strike with only an extremely highbrow alternative on BBC2 – and before the advent of Channel 4. Added to this, it was a stormy night all over the British Isles, so a staggering sixteen million people tuned in to *Abigail's Party*, and Mike Leigh attributes the play's success to this bizarre collection of circumstances:

In the '70s and '80s I didn't make films for the cinema but for the television...we did films called 'Play for Today' on Monday and Wednesday evenings. People loved them. They had huge viewing figures...people love to see a film which reflects their own lives...

Around the same time as Mike Leigh and his actors were creating *Abigail's Party*, Willy Russell's *One for the Road* – another eventful evening in suburban Britain – appeared and Alan Ayckbourn's *Bedroom Farce* – 'set in three bedrooms side by side, on the night of a disastrous party, it exploits the gaucheness, embarrassments and sexual hang-ups of three middle-class couples' – was one of the plays in the first season at the National Theatre. Was something rotten in the state of Britain to bring forth this torrent of deadly social observation?

In the year of Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee, all was not well, even if millions of people had street parties and Virginia Wade did somehow manage to win Wimbledon. The economic situation was not good, with record levels of unemployment and seemingly insoluble industrial disputes. Those in work may have been workaholics or snobs – Beverly Laurence is both. There is certainly an implicit one-upmanship in the distinction between Beverly's brother who is a computer programmer and Tony who is a lowly computer operator.

Angela is at pains to point out more than once that they managed to beat down the price of their house from twenty-two to twenty-one thousand pounds, and there is a whole intricate system of conversation where it is necessary, as one later director of the play implies, to say the right thing, hold the correct opinion, wear the right clothes and ask for the right drink. There is a subtle but definite distinction, for instance, between real leather and leather-look furniture and Tudor and mock-Tudor architecture.

Susan is more difficult to categorise, although a few years previously she would not have been. A housewife with an architect husband, children called *Abigail* and *Jeremy*, the very model of upper middle-class suburbia. Now, however, she is a divorced single mother and her daughter is a punk.

Although *Abigail's Party* is very firmly set in the mid 1970s, what is going on under the contemporary veneer is not confined to any such specific space-time coordinates. Interaction between complex human beings with all their foibles, prejudices and aspirations, realistically explored and presented, is always going to make for compelling theatre and, nearly thirty years after it first appeared, *Abigail's Party* is still one of the best examples of this process in action.

MIKE LEIGH

I grew up from the earliest with a consciousness of the existence of class. I think that is an important aspect of what it is I naturally keep saying and looking at.

Born in Salford in 1943, Mike Leigh grew up as a middle-class boy — the son of a doctor — in the middle of a working-class area. Educated at the local primary school and Salford Grammar School, Leigh showed a precocious early talent for drawing, amusing friends with cartoons and caricatures. At the age of seventeen and armed with three 'O' levels, he went to RADA on a scholarship with the rather vague ambition to at some point write, direct and make films.

I remember one very inspirational moment when I was about twelve. My grandfather had died. It was a very cold, snowy day in December 1955. We were in the house. It was full of mourners and these old guys staggered downstairs with this coffin. I remember thinking that this would make a great film. I then thought, "That's what I want to do. I want to make films." But you don't really have a moment. It creeps up on you and becomes an obsession. It comes out of watching a million movies.

His two years at RADA did not inspire Leigh, so in 1963, after a time as an ASM and a bit part film actor, he enrolled at Camberwell Art School. From there he studied at the Central School of Arts and Crafts and the London Film School, and these experiences, along with an early admiration for the work of Joan Littlewood and the Theatre Workshop, gradually led him to evolve his own working methods.

Between 1965 and 1969 he wrote nine plays which originated from improvisation, although it was not until 1969 that he realised that he was never going to be 'a solitary writer'. In 1970 *Bleak Moments* was produced at the Open Space Theatre in London and, a year later, a film based on this play and sharing its title, marked Mike Leigh's debut as a filmmaker.

Incredibly, it would be another seventeen years before his next film was released. In the intervening period, Leigh concentrated on writing for the small screen and also producing more work for the stage. In 1972 he began a productive relationship with the BBC, which included classics in the *Play for Today* series, such as *Nuts in May* (1975), which was later named Sixth Funniest Film Ever by the *Comedy Review* magazine. Theatre work included pieces for the Royal Court and the Royal Shakespeare Company. *Abigail's Party* was originally staged at London's Hampstead Theatre in 1977 and later produced as a *Play for Today*. Alison Steadman, then Leigh's wife, won the *Evening Standard* and *Plays and Players* Best Actress Award for her portrayal of Beverly.

In the 1980s Leigh moved on to produce more work for television in association with Channel 4, and it was Film Four and British Screen who financed Leigh's second film in 1988, *High Hopes*. Despite the difficulty of

getting backers for his work, *High Hopes* justified the faith of its producers; it achieved no little commercial success as well as considerable critical acclaim. Leigh founded Thin Man Films the following year, together with producer Simon Channing-Williams.

In the years since then, Leigh has produced seven more films, which have all centred on London, reinforcing his status as 'the cinematic poet of London'. In 1993 he won the Best Director's Award at the Cannes Film Festival for *Naked* and, later that year, he was also awarded an OBE in recognition of his contribution to the dramatic arts. More awards have followed, including BAFTA's prestigious Alexander Korda Award and the Michael Balcon Award for outstanding contribution to cinema. *Secrets and Lies* took the Palme d'Or at Cannes in 1996. Last September Leigh's story of a back-street abortionist, *Vera Drake*, won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, with Imelda Staunton winning Best Actress.

You like to think that you're getting closer to something, if only because you get older...As to the fatuous notion that I'm arriving at 'the truth', I feel that would be somewhat optimistic.

1977 and all that

In the *Sunday Times* of 24 April 1977, a shell-shocked Bernard Levin described *Abigail's Party*, which had just opened at the Hampstead Theatre, as "One of the most horrible plays I have ever seen (though meant to be), and in some ways one of the most remarkable too ... a study of the *mores*, attitudes, conduct and speech of Affluent-Yobbonia (a large delegation from which dread land appeared to be in the first-night audience, to judge from the vacant braying which punctuated it throughout)".

The following week, having regained his composure, Levin wrote at greater length about Mike Leigh's play, and speculated on the motivation behind the "braying" which had so irked him on the first night. "The stage had become a mirror," he concluded, "wherein the spectators saw themselves, and did not like what they saw, the recognition being so painful that it had to be walled in by the defence-release of laughter".

The continuing popularity of *Abigail's Party* over the last 18 years has shown the play's characters and their quirks to be embarrassingly but gloriously timeless. Yet there was also something about the play which was peculiarly apt to its time of conception. The sight of Beverly frantically trying to force drinks and snacks and cigarettes on people, in the hope of disguising both the failure of her party and the increasingly apparent failure of her marriage, seemed to typify the United Kingdom of 1977 - a nation which chose to fiddle while home burned.

It wasn't literally burning, of course - the riots were a few years away yet - but even as Britain celebrated 25 years of its second Elizabethan age, it was facing problems which no amount of flag-waving would disguise for long. Under Jim Callaghan's Labour government, inflation was high, and so, it seemed, was unemployment (two years later, Margaret Thatcher would be swept to power with the aid of the slogan "Labour isn't working", only to drop the issue from the agenda once elected). The whole world was undergoing economic problems, but no country had industrial relations like Britain: industry - both public and private - seemed almost constantly to be affected by strike action, much of it pay-related and in defiance of the government's desperate attempts to get people to show wage claim restraint.

Some of the nation's short-term problems were alleviated by a loan from the International Monetary Fund, but unfortunately it was a loan with strings: at the IMF's insistence, Chancellor Dennis Healey implemented a programme of public spending cuts, which in turn resulted in yet more civil strife and helped to whittle away the government's majority at a succession of by-elections. Even as early as March '77, Callaghan was dependent on the support of the Liberals to defeat a no-confidence motion in the House of Commons.

As if all this weren't enough, it was business pretty much as usual in the Northern Ireland conflict. Admittedly civilian casualties were down, but this was no thanks to the IRA, who celebrated the new year by letting off seven bombs in the West End of London. The authorities weren't hugely helpful either: although the besiegers of

Balcombe Street (captured in December '75) were convicted in February of six terrorist murders, the police declined to investigate the prisoners' claims that they had carried out the 1974 Guildford bombings. With the Guildford Four already doing time for that job, it was apparently thought expedient to let sleeping dogs lie.

Despite all its problems, Britain put its heart and soul into celebrating the Queen's Silver Jubilee. Most of its heart and soul, anyway. Some, like the Sex Pistols, argued noisily that there was nothing to celebrate, and one or two others pointed out that even if there were something to celebrate, the nation didn't have a great deal of spare cash with which to do it. However, healthy debate on the monarchy was not then encouraged in the way it is now, so the dissenters maintained a low profile as HMQ and Prince Philip set out on an expensive celebratory tour of both the nation and the Commonwealth. On Jubilee Day, 7 June, thousands of street parties were held across the land, and in the centre of London massive crowds thronged the thoroughfares around Buckingham Palace to salute the Royal Family.

Of course, standing in the Mall with millions of other people, trying to get a glimpse of some flea-sized celebrities on a balcony half-a-mile away was not the only form of entertainment to be had in 1977. A lot of young people were equally happy to be skate-boarding. Others, including the new US President, Jimmy Carter, took up jogging (a craze which was soon to become a menace to cars and pedestrians alike in parts of central London), while many more, influenced by John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*, got down at the disco to strut their funky stuff. Cinematic alternatives to Mr Travolta's New York disco japery included such blockbusters as George Lucas's comic-book classic *Star Wars* and Steve Spielberg's more serious *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. More down-to-earth fare was to be found in the company of Woody Allen and Diane Keaton in *Annie Hall*, Richard Dreyfuss and Marsha Mason in *The Goodbye Girl*, Burt Reynolds and Jackie Gleason as *Smokey and the Bandit*, Barbara Streisand and Kris Kristofferson in the third and most tedious version of *A Star Is Born*, and Roger Moore in *The Spy Who Loved Me*, his third outing as 007.

Sporting highlights of the years included Virginia Wade's victory over Betty Stove in the Wimbledon Ladies' final, John Conteh's retention of the World Light-Heavyweight boxing title in a bout with the American Len Hutchings, Geoff Boycott's hundredth century, scored against the Australians in the Fourth Test at Headingley, and James Hunt's victory in the British Grand Prix at Silverstone. In the exclusively domestic events, Lester Piggott clocked up his eighth Derby win on *The Minstrel*, supernag Red Rum galloped into the record books with a third Grand National victory, and Manchester United beat Liverpool 2-1 in the FA Cup Final.

If you didn't like sport you could occasionally find other things to watch on the TV, even on a Saturday. If you wanted comedy there was *The Good Life*, *Porridge*, American import *Happy Days*, *Morecambe and Wise*, *Citizen Smith*, *The Goodies*, *Wodehouse Playhouse*, and Jim Henson's *The Muppet Show*. If you wanted cops'n'robbers there was *Starsky and Hutch*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Kojak*, and the infinitely superior *The Sweeney*. If for some reason you wanted game shows there was *Celebrity Squares* with Bob Monkhouse, and *Sale of the Century* ("The Quiz of the Week") with Nicholas Parsons. Plays were a common sight on all channels in 1977, and in November that year *Abigail's Party* was seen in the BBC's *Play For Today* slot,

following its earlier stage success. Popular drama series included *Poldark*, *The Duchess of Duke Street*, *Roots*, based on the book by Alex Haley, and *Holocaust*, an American drama series about Hitler's "final solution".

Coming as it did from Hollywood, *Holocaust* inevitably did a fair amount of copping out - concentration camp inmates, for example, were depicted less as walking skeletons than as people who'd been dieting slightly to excess. Nevertheless, some of the series was effective, and if nothing else, it reminded Britain of what can happen when extremists are permitted to use democracy to undemocratic ends. Sadly, a growing number of Britons needed reminding of this, for the neo-Nazi National Front was becoming alarming popular, as it demonstrated in a series of increasingly unnerving by-election results.

1977 saw frequent skirmishes between the NF and members of the Anti-Nazi League as well as members of various left-wing groups. Matters came to a head one Saturday in August when the NF held a huge march through the London borough of Lewisham - an area with a high proportion of immigrant residents - and were set upon by thousands of anti-Nazi counter-protesters. Some of the more hysterical sections of the media chose to present the affair, in which shops were damaged and policemen were injured, as a clash between extremists of left and right who were as bad as each other, but that was probably not a view shared by the black and Asian citizens of Britain who lived every day with the fear of being beaten up in the street or burnt out of their homes.

Meanwhile, in South Africa, where future President Mandela still had 13 years to serve on Robben Island, the Apartheid regime continued to stamp on anyone who objected to the idea of white supremacist rule: among its many victims of 1977 was the Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko, who was murdered by the security police in September. Murderous dictatorships also continued to prosper in Cambodia under Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge, Uganda under Idi Amin and Chile under General Pinochet, to name but a few.

More happily, in the Middle East, President Anwar Sadat of Egypt made a historic visit to Israel, and, while not glossing over the outstanding matters of dispute between the two countries - such as the rights of the Palestinians and the status of the Occupied Territories - took a first step on the long path to peace by officially recognising the State of Israel. There were also positive developments in Spain, where, subsequent to the demise of General Franco the previous year, the first general election for four decades brought Adolfo Suarez's Union of the Democratic Centre to power. Meanwhile, at superpower level, the Cold War carried on in detente mode - before long, President Carter would be talking arms limitation with his Soviet counterpart, Leonid Brezhnev.

1977, like any year, had its share of headline-grabbing disasters. On 4 March, an earthquake in Romania killed 1570 people. Later that month, in the Canary Islands, two jumbo jets collided on an airport runway, with the loss of 574 lives. On 19 November, another plane crash, this time in Madeira, killed 130 of the 164 passengers and crew. But most horrific of all, at least in terms of scale, was the disaster inflicted on India when the country's southern states were battered simultaneously by a

cyclone and a tidal wave. 20,000 people died, and ten times that number were left homeless.

It's a sad fact of human nature that these deaths are less likely to stick in our minds than those of more prominent individuals, such as Charlie Chaplin or Marc Bolan or Bing Crosby or Groucho Marx or Anthony Eden or Joan Crawford or Maria Callas or Anthony Crosland or Terence Rattigan... For most people, though, whatever their musical beliefs, even these prominent passings pale into insignificance beside the Celebrity Death of 1977, that of Mr Elvis Presley, who was struck down by a heart attack at the age of 42.

Being as obese and unhappy and as drug-ridden as we understand him to have been, Elvis was probably well out of it. All the same, it's a pity we never got to see how he might have dealt with punk rock and disco, the two big musical challenges of his final year. He had re-invented himself on several notable previous occasions, so it would not have been too surprising, had he lived, to find him cutting a few disco tracks and discussing weight control with Barry White, or perhaps recording an album of bitter and twisted (but perfectly formed) unrequited love songs with his namesake Elvis Costello.

On the other hand, he could probably have got away with ignoring these phenomena. Despite the upheavals - both musical and social - of 1977, the year's end showed that in Britain at least, the more things changed, the more they stayed the same, what with Princess Anne providing the Queen with her first grandchild (Peter Phillips) and the ever-cuddlesome Paul McCartney occupying the Christmas top-spot with the monotonously insipid *Mull of Kintyre*.

Come to think of it, *Mull of Kintyre* is just the kind of record Beverly of *Abigail's Party* fame might have bought as a Christmas present for her new boyfriend. She would then proceed to play it endlessly at her Christmas bash, toasting the arrival of 1978 as McCartney's guest bagpipers droned into earshot for the seventeenth time. "Happy New Year!" she would no doubt bray, adding for good measure, "He's a knockout, isn't he, Paul McCartney?"