

Eden Court Cinema
Monday, 04 May 2015
at 8.15pm

Black comedy 1990
UK Colour 98 mins.

Director:
Mike Leigh

Cast:
Alison Steadman, Jim
Broadbent, Jane
Horrocks, Claire
Skinner, Stephen Rae,
Timothy Spall, David
Thewlis, Moya Brady,
David Neilson.



Life is Sweet

Notes assembled by Ann MacInnes

Leigh's third cinematic film, it was his most commercially successful title at the time of its release. The, by turns, tragi-comic story follows the fortunes of a working-class North London family over a few weeks one summer.

The script was developed by Leigh and the cast, employing his established practice of collectively improvising and rehearsing for several weeks prior to actual shooting. For example, Aubrey's bizarre recipes were devised by Leigh and Timothy Spall over the course of an evening, and then checked for plausibility with a professional chef, who advised them about which ones were technically impossible to prepare; all the ones that appear in the film are, as Leigh put it, "all feasible, gross as it sounds."

David Thewlis, who played Nicola's anonymous lover, was disappointed at being given such a small role. Leigh promised him that the next time he considered Thewlis for

a role in a film, "he'd be given a fair slice of the pie." Thewlis' next role in a Leigh film was his award-winning performance as the lead character Johnny in *Naked*.

The film was shot entirely on location in Enfield, Middlesex, UK and used local people as extras including an Enfield based dance school for the opening title sequence. It received very favourable reviews, the Guardian film reviewer awarding it seven stars out of a possible ten.

Hal Hinson of the Washington Post called the film "sublime" and "gently brilliant." Desson Thompson of the same paper agreed, praising Leigh for discovering "the tragic beauty of the mundane."

David Sexton in the Times Literary Supplement was critical however, and said that "the film never transcends sit-com and remains static and anecdotal, its unit the scene, not the complete story." Further, he wrote that the film is, "the product of an unresolved attitude to its subject matter and in particular of an uneasy relation to questions of class."

from Wiki, edited

A splendid follow-up to *High Hopes*, in which Leigh's improvisational method achieves symmetry in the form of two very different chefs and twin daughters who are very different from their indomitably normal parents. Andy (Broadbent), is a good-natured cook with an ambition to run his own business from a disgusting mobile snack-bar flogged to him by a

drunken mate (Rea); Aubrey (Spall) is a clueless fatty with a desire to be supercool mastermind of a disastrous venture to bring gourmet cooking to Enfield. Offering such hideous fare as liver in lager and duck in chocolate sauce, Aubrey ropes in Andy's innuendo-prone wife Wendy (Steadman) as a replacement waitress. While the restaurant opening provides narrative focus, Leigh divides his interest between this and the plight of Andy and Wendy's teenage daughters, one (Skinner) a tomboy plumber, the other (Horrocks) an antisocial anorexic whose only enthusiasms are bulimic binges and casual sex with the aid of a jar of peanut butter. Despite two performances of insufficient conviction (Spall and Horrocks), the film is magnificent, mixing enormous fun with sad, serious subjects: the enterprise rip-off, adolescent despair, parents' lost dreams for their children, role-playing [and] the gutsy optimism of decent, ordinary humanity (represented by Broadbent and Steadman in two stunningly unflashy performances).

from Time Out - 3 out of 5 stars

Most movies begin by knowing everything about their characters.

"Life is Sweet" seems to make discoveries as it goes along; it really feels as if the story is as surprising to the characters as it is to us. The filmmaker, Mike Leigh, works in a unique way: He assembles his actors, and then they spend weeks or months devising the screenplay by improvising together. When it's finished, they start shooting,

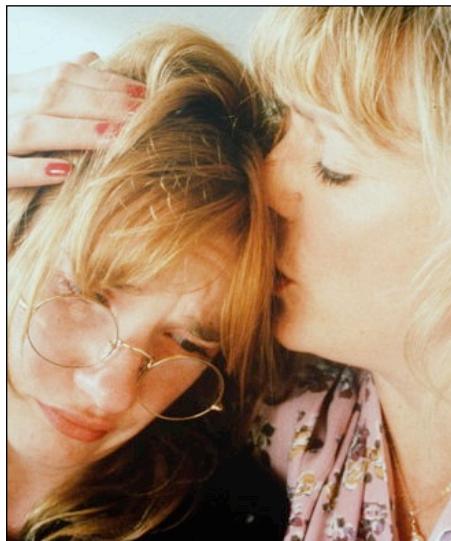
having invented the characters from the inside out.

With "Life is Sweet," that approach combines more humor and more poignancy into the same story than most screenwriters would have dared. There are scenes here that are funnier than those of any other movie this year, and other scenes that weep with the pain of sad family secrets, and when it's over we have seen some kind of masterpiece. This is one of the best films of the year.

The story takes place in a small home in a London suburb, where the parents, Wendy and Andy (Alison Steadman and Jim Broadbent) live with twin daughters who are 20ish (Claire Skinner and Jane Horrocks). These daughters are like the night and day. Nicola, played by Horrocks, hides behind glasses, tangled hair and cigarettes, and affects a great contempt for all things conventional, progressive, or healthy. Natalie, played by Skinner, is clean-cut, cheerful and dutiful. Each sister is a rebuke to the other.

Andy, the father, was athletic when he was younger, but is now going comfortably to seed. He and Wendy were married when they were quite young, and have grown up together, learning some hard lessons along the way. But now they seem to have settled into a comfortable accommodation with one another, inspired partly by Andy's lunatic schemes, and partly by the way Wendy is both horrified and amused by them. There is a moment when Andy leads his wife out into the front of the house with her eyes covered, and then - ta ta! - unveils them to reveal his latest scheme for independent living, a mobile hot dog stand.

In his day job, Andy works in the food preparation industry and hates it. When he trips over a spoon and breaks a leg, he brings the spoon home with him, hangs it in a place of shame on the wall, and accuses it of treachery in the warmest and most personal terms. It is hard to imagine a screenwriter coming up with this dialogue, but it feels both original and exactly right; the sort of



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things that would come out of an improvisational investigation.

The funniest passage in the movie actually has little to do with the rest of it; it involves a family friend (the feckless Timothy Spall) who opens a grotty French restaurant on the high road, hires one of the girls as his waitress, and then gets doggedly drunk while waiting for customers and reviewing his implausible menu.

Meanwhile, at home, in such a subtle way we don't at first realize it, the movie reveals its more serious undertones. Nicola really is seriously disturbed - convinced she is ugly and fat - and the sunny cheerfulness of her sister acts only as a daily depressant. The twins know almost everything about each other, but several important secrets have never been openly discussed, and now they are, as the family's underlying problems come out into the open...



By the end of "Life is Sweet," we are treading close to the stuff of life itself - to the way we all struggle and make do, compromise some of our dreams and insist on the others. Watching this movie made me realize how boring and thin many movies are; how they substitute plots for the fascinations of life.

"Life is Sweet" has been the greatest success so far in the long, brave career of Mike Leigh, who made a film named "Bleak Moments" that made my "best of the year" list in 1972, and then did not make another film until "High Hopes" in 1989 (that also made my "best 10" list - so he's never made a film that didn't). Film financiers are understandably slow to back a film that doesn't have a

screenplay, but Leigh has persisted in his collaborations with actors where in his own brave and stubborn way he has finally become something of a hero.

What is amazing is that a man can labor against the market forces of the stage and screen for 20 years and still retain his sense of humor. And yet that is what he has done. "Life is Sweet" is as funny, spontaneous and free as if it had been made on a lark by a millionaire. See it, and you will sense the freedom with which movies can be made when they are freed from the lockstep of the assembly line.

Roger Ebert; December 24, 1991



Eden Court Cinema
Monday 18 May 2015
at 8.15pm

Our next screening...
Leo McCarey's

Duck Soup

Opening our
Marx Brothers season

Inverness Film Fans (Infifa) meet fortnightly at Eden Court Cinema for screenings and post-film discussions.

For more information and to join us, free, go to:

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Madness and laughs aplenty are unleashed when the bankrupt state of Freedonia appoints Rufus T. Firefly (Groucho Marx) as its leader at the request of wealthy patron Mrs. Teasdale (the wonderfully deadpan Margaret Dumont). Featuring some of the best comic sequences ever filmed including the famous "mirror scene" and "three hat routine," Duck Soup is one of the Marx Brothers' finest comedies.