

MIKE LEIGH



IN FOCUS

Week Two

Welcome to *Mike Leigh In Focus*

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Last week, we began our journey into Mike Leigh's filmography with the first part of his television work. This week, we continue to investigate the development of his style, transforming his theatrical background onto film.

It would still be more than a decade before Leigh found the success and backers necessary to begin a full-fledged career as a feature filmmaker for cinema, but he was already beginning to develop his reputation as a unique storyteller.

It would be in 1977 when he produced, for TV, one of the works for which he is still known, in the shape of *Abigail's Party*. It was a landmark production in many ways, not least because it solidified the public's interest in Leigh. It also gave Alison Steadman one of her signature roles and captured a genuine moment in British social history that, it would seem, continues to resonate.

Leigh himself, however, took *Abigail's Party* as a sign that television was beginning to restrict him. The project had begun, after all, with his being persuaded to return to the theatre, where *Abigail* began its life and where it proved to be an enormous success.

The television production, however, to Leigh's eyes felt intolerably studio-bound, and it reinforced his desire to progress back to the cinema.

It was also a play that crystallised the views of some of Leigh's detractors.

Writing for *The Guardian*, Leigh looked back on some of the reaction, including from his peers:

In his review for the Sunday Times, Dennis Potter accused Abigail's Party of being "based on nothing more edifying than rancid disdain, for it is a prolonged jeer, twitching with genuine hatred, about the dreadful suburban tastes of the dreadful lower middle classes". This reveals Potter not only as understanding neither the play nor its world, but also of having no sense of humour – which is to say, no sense of humanity. For Abigail's Party goes beyond being a comedy: it is a tragi-comedy. It is very much a play about "us", not "them". It is obviously sympathetic to all the characters, whatever their foibles, not least Beverly. And if it works, it does so precisely because the audience experiences them in a real, three-dimensional way. These are people we recognise and understand. The play is a lamentation, not a sneer.

The debate on Leigh's intent – sympathy versus sneering – continues to this day.

FILMS – WEEK TWO

The Kiss of Death (1977)

Abigail's Party (1977)

Who's Who (1979)

Grown-Ups (1980)

SUGGESTED READING

Mike Leigh on Mike Leigh

Amy Raphael and Mike Leigh

Mike Leigh: Interviews

Howie Movshovitz