

Mike Leigh's *Hard Truths*: Life as a series of abrasive encounters

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Veteran filmmaker Mike Leigh (born 1943), the director of more than 25 feature films and televised plays, along with various stage productions, has been one of the most significant artistic figures working in a difficult political and cultural climate—“impossible,” as he described it to the WSWS in 2008. His latest film, *Hard Truths*, with Marianne Jean-Baptiste, is now playing in North America.

In the generally bleak artistic landscape of the 1980s and beyond, Leigh has stood out importantly as someone attempting to make complicated and sensitive—and socially engaged films, which are also accessible to broad audiences.

Life is Sweet (1990), *Naked* (1993), *Secrets and Lies* (1996), *Career Girls* (1997), *Topsy-Turvy* (1999), *All or Nothing* (2002), *Vera Drake* (2004), *Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008), his recent historical films, *Mr. Turner* (2014) and *Peterloo* (2018), and others have each made a deep impression on audiences, encouraging serious thought and feeling.

A quarter-century ago, in 1999, we argued that “*Life is Sweet* (1990) and *Naked* (1993) were two of the most troubling English-language films of the last decade.” About *Vera Drake*, centered on a woman who performs abortions in postwar London, we concluded that, despite its shortcomings, the film, “like Leigh’s best work, is a deeply committed piece.” On the whole, it “attempts a serious exploration, laying bare the inner and outer lives of its characters as it evolves in a class environment.”

Leigh’s method of building up characters and plots out of intense discussion and improvisation lasting months often yields remarkable results. The rigorous process results in films that generally retain spontaneity and naturalness, with dialogue and drama that seem organic because they have been developed by the director and actors together, yet are imbued with social insight.

Hard Truths is unconventional by contemporary standards, diving slowly, keenly into character psychologies and interpersonal dynamics. Leigh’s new film features Baptiste (*Secrets and Lies*), an actor-collaborator who plays mother and wife Pansy, anything but a delicate flower. The lead characters’ names in general seem to alternate between precision and irony. Pansy has soul-shaking grievances with every aspect of life, including her closed-mouthed husband Curtley (David Webber), a plumber, and her teenage son Moses (Tuwaine Barrett), a large, silent, unhappy figure poorly positioned to lead his people toward the promised land.

Initially, some of Pansy’s over-the-top gripes are semi-

humorous. For example, when overweight and depressed Moses is leaving the house, she says, “Don’t call me if you get picked up by the police. I won’t be coming to bail you out.” All Moses ever does apparently is walk the streets of London, listening to his music.

She then launches into a tirade at Curtly, as he heads into the small back garden:

I know exactly where you’re going. You’re going out there into that godforsaken wilderness, digging about in your useless bits and pieces in that rat-infested hovel of yours, stepping in disgusting squirrel doo-doo and rancid bird droppings, so you can traipse ‘em back in through onto my kitchen floor. Why you still got shoes on?

Salesclerks can also render her apoplectic...

I could be suffering from a terminal disease, for all you know. You don’t know my suffering. You don’t know my pain. Go and cheer your husband up, put a smile on his face for a change.

...as well as the grocery shopping experience as a whole...

You can’t go in or out of a supermarket without being harassed by those grinning, cheerful charity workers begging you for money for their stupid causes. Why they got to skin their teeth like that? Cheerful, grinning people. Can’t stand them.

But as the drama and its pathos build, she sinks deeper into an emotional quagmire. Even worse, both father and son have been so beaten down by Pansy, they are close to catatonia.

On the other hand, sister Chantelle (Michele Austin, another repeat collaborator with Leigh) runs a successful, lively beauty shop and has two adult children Kayla (Ani Nelson) and Aleisha (Sophia Brown), who are cheery and have a close relationship with

their mother.

Ever encroaching and narrowing, Pansy's world feels to her like a prison. Her relationship with her family increasingly breeds contempt: "I'm so lonely. I'm lonely when they're there, I'm lonely when they're not. I don't feel safe."

In a moment of unexplained lunacy, Pansy grabs all of Curtley's belongings from a bedroom closet and throws them on the hallway floor.

In the final anguished sequence, Curtley sits in pain, having injured himself on the job. As he suffers downstairs, Pansy sits frozen in her bedroom upstairs. Meanwhile, as his parents continue to claw at each other, Moses enjoys one well-deserved moment of human kindness.

With *Hard Truths*, Leigh's produces multi-dimensional characters and avoids creating mere ciphers or non-people. Each scene, each moment is purposeful and deliberate. At the same time, as noted above, he avoids patness through his time-consuming, thoughtful methods of constructing his films. The film is deliberate, conscious of its aims, but also contains the contradictoriness and unexpectedness of real life.

Leigh has described *Hard Truths* as a personal and exploratory film that delves into family dynamics, mental health, and isolation, particularly within the context of British working-class life.

Rather than offering hero-villain dynamics, much less mindless "blockbuster" action, the filmmaker works at creating multifaceted human beings whose behavior is deeply ingrained, socially shaped and not easily explained away. This approach challenges viewers to understand and empathize with difficult personalities. Though not all the elements, past and present, are revealed, Pansy's anger, we feel, stems from frustration, disappointment and anxiety about the state of things. And, indeed, she lives in a frustrating, disappointing and anxiety-producing reality.

Hard Truths examines how inner life is influenced and altered by the world at large. It provides a microcosmic view of British society, revealing the tensions and complexities within various social strata.

In a relatively brief scene, Leigh depicts Chantelle's daughters, more "career girls," sipping prosecco in a fashionable watering hole, smilingly trading falsehoods about their stressful lives. Pansy is certainly no role model, but consoling oneself and keeping up pretenses, Leigh seems to indicate, is not a viable alternative.

Concerning Pansy, he asserted to NPR, "she's obviously in a lot of pain, but she is also insufferable...Layers are stripped away, if you like, and you then get down to the hard truths."

Revealing something of his method, Leigh stated: "I like to work with actors whom I regard as creative artists in their own right, not just interpretive artists. And I'm as concerned as anybody—any writer or anybody else—to arrive at a very precisely scripted and thoroughly motivated piece of work."

In a conversation with *Interview* magazine, the director spoke about the difficulty of financing his projects:

It's 100 percent impossible. It's very tough, and it's gotten tougher. Make no mistake. I've made 20-odd films, 28, I think, and over the years, working the way I do and

saying no script, no discussion about casting, no interference, it's got worse. It's got bad. This is as low a budget as I've had in a long time. It is reflected in the lack of complexity in the narrative.

It should be noted that in *Hard Truths*, Leigh—almost in passing, with one stroke, so to speak, as any significant artist would do—helps demolish the reactionary chatter of the race- and gender-obsessed circles. An 81-year-old white filmmaker, from a Jewish family, has dared to direct a movie about a black, working class community of Caribbean background!

To his credit, Leigh refuses to bow down to those who denounce him for undertaking such an act of "cultural appropriation." "It's b*****ks," he bluntly and characteristically told the *Independent*. "First of all, it's offensive and racist. I've got absolutely no time for it at all. I've looked at all corners of society." Leigh went on:

I did a play about Greek Australians [*Greek Tragedy*], a film in Northern Ireland [*Four Days in July*], plus three films set among a very remote people called 19th-century human beings [*Topsy-Turvy*, *Mr Turner* and *Peterloo*]. The fear of 'Am I allowed to tell this story?'—it's shocking. It has no justification whatsoever.

Hard Truths emerges at a specific social and historical moment. One feels that it arises to some degree out of our particular conjuncture, with its bitter, rancorous social tensions, the endless wars, deadly pandemics, the braying and ranting of right-wing and even fascist politicians.

Is it accidental that Leigh, who himself does not suffer fools gladly, has chosen to represent a super-angry, super-contrarian individual, almost literally consumed with outrage? This is someone whose life is a series of abrasive encounters, for whom nearly everyone and everything she rubs up against causes pain, like someone who has no skin or flesh, just exposed nerve endings.



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