

Photo: John Haynes



MIKE LEIGH COMES OUT

The renowned writer and director talks to GOLDA ZAFER SMITH about his attitude towards his Jewish identity, the role it has played in his life and in the creation of his new play, *Two Thousand Years*.

because of its complexity, Leigh feels unable to talk comprehensively about it yet. “It’s virtually wet on the page – and I’m very close to it and still a bit unexorcised.”

Two Thousand Years is the product of Leigh’s trademark theatrical methodology; gathering a band of actors who meticulously research, co-construct and then improvise to reveal their characters – sometimes individually, sometimes with others – but always nurtured by Mike Leigh. It is the equivalent of verbal jamming under the leadership of an inspirational conductor, who is also a perfectionist. This exacting creative process demands 14-hour days and commitment to totally preserving confidentiality about the play.

Mike Leigh (second cousin to the late cookery doyen, Evelyn Rose) has immaculate Jewish/Zionist credentials. His grandparents were all Yiddish-speaking immigrants, and great-grandfather, David Blain, edited a Zionist newspaper. Leigh’s parents even met each other at a *Habonim*, (Jewish youth movement) camp in 1935. He was born in Salford in 1943 to Phyllis, a nurse from Finsbury Park and daughter of a kosher butcher, and Abe, a Salford GP who changed the family name from Liebermann to Leigh in 1939. Mike warmly describes his paternal grandfather, Mayer Liebermann, leaving Mogilev near Moscow in 1902 to avoid mandatory conscription into the Tzar’s army. Stopping off to visit *landsmen* (countrymen) en route from Hamburg to New York via Hull, he cashed in his ticket and settled in Manchester. Significantly, Mayer Liebermann attended art school in St. Petersburg and then earned his living painting black and white photographs.

Leigh describes his grandfather’s progress from ‘commercial artist’ (on his parent’s marriage certificate) to ‘businessman’ (on his father’s birth certificate). But that journey included experience of the poverty and hardship shared by many Cheetham Hill residents – memories which later contributed to Abe Leigh’s adamant resistance to his 17 year-old son following the Arts path

which eventually led Mike from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, (RADA), via the London Film School, Central School of Art and Design and Camberwell College of Art, to where he is now. Mike Leigh’s eyes still shine as he recalls visits to Progress Ltd, his grandfather’s shop in a big Victorian building which had rusting, copper pipes filled with compressed air. It was where the ‘artists’ – all of them mad, chain smoking, swearing and a bit bohemian – sat at easels in the shop’s back room, colouring photos when everyone wanted pictures of their loved ones during World War II.

In 1940 Leigh’s maternal grandparents were evacuated from London’s East End to Letchworth, Hertfordshire where they kept chickens in the garden. Mike remembers a *shochet*, (religious slaughterer), travelling down from London once a week and sharing schnapps with his grandfather before doing what he had come to do. A (dead) chicken would then be put on the train to Manchester, and duly met by grateful Leighs.

In 1946 Mike’s sister Ruth was born, just six weeks after Abe Leigh’s discharge from the British army. Abe was away for most of Mike’s first three years and though Leigh does not refer to the impact of this absence, his biographer, Mike Coveney, has noted that an absent father features in several of his works. Leigh was in Australia when his father died. He sighs deeply, says he loved his father hugely, misses him terribly and it was devastating that he died aged only 71.

While maternal aunts and grandparents had gone to live in Israel, the Leighs all became “part of the Manchester Jewish scene” and Mike’s mother started a Friends of Habonim. Using *Ivrit* (modern Hebrew) with fond familiarity, he recalls *chaverim*, (members) were in and out of their house, people came to stay and visiting *shlichim*, (Israeli youth workers) were made welcome. Certain images stay with him, like everybody grouped nightly round a radio trying to find the crackly station that said ‘*Kol Zion La’Golah*’, (The voice of Zion to the Diaspora).

I climb the stairs to Mike Leigh’s office in the heart of Soho. Punctual and welcoming, Leigh leads the way into a casually comfortable room. He settles into the softness of a settee, strokes his silver beard and – for whatever reasons – it feels like I have known him for years.

Mike Leigh explains that this *Jewish Renaissance* interview, promised long ago, would be the sole interview on his new play *Two Thousand Years*. (And for those who have not read a newspaper, listened to the radio, watched television or been in the UK recently, Leigh’s contemporary play takes a leftist, and otherwise tolerant middle-class Jewish family living in Cricklewood, North West London and chronicles their intolerance as Josh, the only son/brother/grandson, rejects secular values and becomes *frum*.)

It seems that after a film has been completed and by the time interviews come around, there has been time to ‘digest’ what has been created, whereas the performance of this play has come immediately on its completion and

Mike did not do well at school – he left with only three O-levels. However he thrived in Habonim, a movement that also turned out Arnold Wesker, Jonathan Freedland, David Badiel and Ali G. We contemplate enduring effects of Habonim sketches (*zigs*) and he laughs with evident pleasure, remembering girls who didn't wear make-up, guys who didn't wear ties and all of them wearing sandals, going camping, to coffee bars and taking life very seriously – with a great sense of humour. When I ask if he was a *madrich*, (leader) years drop away from his face, and typically he replies “Who wasn't?”

Leigh learnt his leadership skills in the movement and did the whole thing, including Israel Camp in 1960. He returned alone in 1961 and emphasizes that after that visit he wouldn't have anything to do with going back to Israel for a very long time. In fact he has only visited once since then – when invited to the Jerusalem Film Festival in 1991 with *Life is Sweet*. He says “I am unapologetic. I subscribe to Jews for Justice for Palestinians.” I do not ask exactly what he saw in 1960, or 30 years later in 1991. Certainly some of it is in the play.

Vera Drake's period and subject matter caused Leigh to think about the very uncertain world, which he was born into in 1943. He reflects that though it was a tough time, there was a sense of certainty, optimism and a massive lack of cynicism, compared with now. Leigh realises increasingly that everyone who had been through the traumas of war was putting the world back together again in an orderly fashion, in a decent way.

But it was the ‘decency’ which his generation found repugnant, so that those who actually grew up during that era mostly remember the repressive, boring and straight-laced 40s and 50s, rather than a post-war world in disarray. He adds, “this is the world us ‘sixtiesniks’ were so passionate about chucking out – and we did chuck it out!”

There has been nothing manifestly Jewish in Mike Leigh's life in any conventional, practising way, since he walked away from it all aged 17 but on the other hand, he says, “it is what I am.” He *absolutely* regards himself as Jewish, as do secular friends from Habonim days. Leigh adds his two sons are not Jewish, because their mother, Alison Steadman, is not Jewish.

I comment that until very recently it was not widely known that Leigh is Jewish. He says, “Well, that's right. You see I am one of those people – and I make no apology for

it – who for many years didn't crack on at all about being Jewish, because you didn't. You thought your identity was everything apart from that really. And I never used to refer to it at all. And then I started for various reasons to mention it. But I wouldn't have envisaged what I have just done at the National 20 or certainly 25 years ago. It's all part of the journey.”

I observe that maybe it is a communal journey which Anglo-Jewry is now making with newly found self-confidence to begin placing heads above the parapet and claiming our right to have warts like everyone else? Leigh agrees, observing the massive shift in society that has made it not only possible, but inevitable and necessary for us all to identify what we are, and deal with it. He says the very existence of *Jewish Renaissance* is a

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manifestation of the new world in which we are another ethnic, cultural faction.

In fact *Topsy Turvy* was a film working out yet another aspect of the Manchester Jewish experience. He remembers being interviewed by a posh lad from *The Times* who said, “Uhm, it's a bit strange. You come from this Jewish background, lived in Manchester and like Gilbert and Sullivan?” Leigh told him that going to the Manchester Opera House during the D'Oyle Carte season in the 50s was like going to a synagogue on *Yom Kippur*. (He adds that the National has two performances of *Two Thousand Years* scheduled on *Yom Kippur*, which nobody involved minds a bit, “but it will be interesting to see who goes to them”.)

Leigh declares himself a film-maker who is passionate about film and only does theatre very rarely, the last play being *It's a Great Big Shame!* in 1993. He says, “film is what it's about for me,” explaining he had not sought to do theatre but there had been endless, fruitless discussions with past directors of the National Theatre about him doing a piece. Then Nick Hytner did something nobody else had done and simply asked Mike Leigh out to lunch (which he says is always a good move). Hytner said ‘come and do whatever you want,’ and was delighted when Leigh replied that what he wanted was to do a Jewish play.

Still pondering this, Leigh went to the Cottesloe to see Kwame Kwei-Lamah's play, *Elmina's Kitchen*, sat listening to Black actors talking patois and thought,

“Hey I know what I want to do. I'm going to finally come out and pull together a good gang of Jewish actors – and not the ones everybody will expect. So, in the way I have fought for years against actors blacking up, I am against the approach of people *playing* Jews – because 90 per cent of the time Jews are played by non-Jews and of course it is never believable, although they might have a jolly good go at it but they don't know what the hell they are doing really. So I thought well OK, let's find a *chevrah* (group) and with the help of a researcher and all kinds of stuff like a *rikkudim* (Israeli dance) session which was going to be in the play at one stage, we did it.”

He had been fascinated about the idea of doing a Jewish play for a long time. There was a cleaner working for a Jewish

family in Leigh's first television film *Hard Labour* (1973) whose genesis lay in his mother's relationship with her own cleaner, and also a second Jewish character, the tallyman played by Louis Raynes. But he says that was covert, and prior to *Two Thousand Years* it was the only way he had dealt with Jewishness.

So, Leigh determined to make a Jewish piece of work dealing with his own perspective of Jewishness and decided to do it as a play because he wanted it to be more of a metaphor than a literal or period evocation. He considered dealing with the whole question of Orthodoxy and seeing

Being born aloft by his Habonim friends on a portable lavatory, Wirral peninsula, 1959





Leigh's *Spotlight* photo when he left RADA in 1962

things through the eyes of the Orthodox world but says, "not only would it have been hard to research, but actually I've got nothing to say about it." Then he thought about the phenomenon happening now, to kids who are 'taking to religion'.

Leigh thinks the most Jewish thing about what he does is that in a basically totally Talmudic way, his work asks more questions than it delivers answers. He believes, "an audience should walk away with questions to answer, debates to have, things to weigh up. That's what it is about."

I ask if there is a voice in the play that is Leigh's. He answers that his voice is in every play, and whilst Sheridan Morley who reviewed *Two Thousand Years* for the Daily Express holds on to a ludicrous, erroneous idea that Leigh's work is a kind of free-for-all with no author and no author's voice, that is both eccentric and out of the question.

Leigh mentions esoteric aspects of the play, including the cast's use of Yiddish and Hebrew, which clearly does not speak to everybody in the audience. It seemed to me the actors rarely explained Yiddish words, but Leigh says they mostly do.

"For example, we struggled for days with, 'what do you want her to do? Put on a *sheitl* and go to a *mikveh*?' And we finally said, 'put a *sheitl* on her head and go to a *mikveh* and clean herself.' But anyhow I feel – and I hope that I am not deluding myself – that the integrity of a piece of work will have a three-dimensional resonance that will get through to the audience. And the fact that people don't get everything is not entirely relevant."

I wonder if Leigh intends updates to *Two Thousand Years*, or places it permanently in September 2005 with references to Israel's disengagement from Gaza and Hurricane Katrina. He confirms it "sits where it sits", on the assumption that the exit from Gaza, the non-exit from the

West Bank and indeed Hurricane Katrina are major enough to be meaningful in 10 or 20 years time.

Leigh says, "we have located it in a very precise way in time, because in the context of what the play is dealing with you have to, and there is no time like the present. One of the things the play is about, obviously, is the tension between being completely self-absorbed and being concerned and caring for the world out there. So that obviously the sister, Michelle, is completely self-absorbed. And so in his way is Josh."

And what of the struggle which my late father called, 'being yourself?' Leigh says, "Yes, absolutely. That is an inevitable struggle – being truthful, being who you are – against received notions of how we ought to be and the masks that we wear. All of those things run right throughout all my stuff. And it is of course what *Topsy Turvy* is all about. That undoubtedly comes out of my growing up in a pretty reactionary Jewish home – enlightened, cultured and educated, but also philistine, reactionary, and intolerant and frightened of radical notions, ideas and, above all, behaviour."

We discuss the differences between Jewish playwrights and film directors who start careers with Jewish themes, thereby acquiring the 'Jewish' label – and others who first establish reputations and only later address Jewish themes. Mike Leigh suggests choices between the 'Wesker mode' and the 'Pinter mode', given the similarity in their backgrounds and the time they began writing.

"Wesker being a Jewish writer and Pinter being a Jewish writer without actually identifying himself as such." Leigh was very influenced by Harold Pinter. The first thing he ever directed was *The Caretaker*, whilst still at RADA. He says he has been thinking about Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*, as a totally accurate portrait of an East End Jewish spiv, but within the abstract, surreal world of Pinter's play, he has no resonance beyond something that is implicit – just as Goldberg's partner, the Irishman, McCann, who is also the quintessence of Irishness, has no resonance outside the strange world they inhabit.

"But in a way, it's like Miller's Willy Loman and there is no doubt that *Death of a Salesman* is undeniably a Jewish play. Again, Miller only started to 'come out' in his later plays. And that is there in Pinter in a different sort of way. I am not saying that over the years I have not reflected on

these things. To be honest with you, if I had a resistance to anything in this department of activity it's not so much not wanting to be identified as being Jewish, but I would hate to be classified as one of those 'professional' Jews, that is to say people whose Jewishness, their pre-occupation with things Jewish stands as what they are about. Because to me it is one aspect among many of what life is about. On the other hand there is a far more interesting and relevant thing, about how easily we are able to let our Jewishness sit with us." Leigh observes this has changed and that younger people are more relaxed about it and may have an easier time of it for a variety of cultural and sociological reasons. "Some of us are old enough to remember what it was like when you didn't say you were Jewish".

I ask Leigh whether he has been subject to anti-Semitism. He says the anti-Semitism he has experienced is, for the most part, not of the nature he was warned against which was, "beware of non-people who say some of my best friends are Jews". Rather, it has rather been from people who innocently say fundamentally anti-Semitic things. "And if you said to them, 'excuse me, you are an anti-Semite' they would be basically horrified. The truth is I have never experienced anti-Semitism in any palpable form – I was standing at a bus stop when I was a kid of seven or eight in Salford, and there were a lot of nuns about then, and a nun said, (Irish accent), 'well now, would you not be a little Jew boy then?' And I said 'Yes'. But that's not anti-Semitism, it's part of the texture".

I finish by asking him what he has most enjoyed and what has been most meaningful to him. Leigh is not comfortable with the question but says, "I dunno – I am a parent, I get *nachus* from my kids. And it's great when people say they have some affection for what I do."

Two hours have gone by. Mike Leigh asks, "you've got something to work with then?" I say I hope to do him justice. Leigh says, "Well I hope you do. If you don't, the boys will be round!"

Golda Zafer-Smith is a psychologist working with children and families.

For review of *Two Thousand Years* see page 36, for UK tour next year, page 28.

FURTHER READING

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