

cally out of his bed. Andy and Wendy lie in their bed. Andy explains his plan for the burger van – to be used initially at weekends until business is strong enough for him to give up his day job – and Wendy calls him a ‘big softie’. She talks of her concern for Nicola and her guilt for shouting at her. In her room, Nicola opens a suitcase stuffed with chocolate and crisps, gorges herself and vomits into a carrier bag. She is clearly anorexic. Natalie, back from an evening in the pub, lies listening in her bedroom next door.

It turns out that Andy is the head chef in an industrial kitchen. Wendy has a second job as an assistant at a children’s clothes shop. Natalie is installing central heating in a house. Nicola is at home. When her lover (David Thewlis) shows up, she calls him a ‘middle-class wanker’ and then instructs him to tie her up and smear chocolate over her naked body. She calls him a ‘sexist pig’, and he asks her why she never wants him to stay. She doesn’t reply.

Andy is in the pub with Patsy, who tries to sell him a pocket television. Aubrey opens the restaurant but has forgotten to advertise. Not a single customer turns up. Drunk, he stands in the street trying to attract people. He makes a pass at Wendy – ‘I love you . . . I want to fuck you’ – takes his suit off, turns over all the tables, smashes the glassware and collapses on the floor in his underwear. Paula (Moya Brady), an odd, quiet girl who has been helping Aubrey in the restaurant and who Aubrey tried to seduce earlier by teaching her how to play his drums, is disappointed they’ll no longer be going to get chips together. When Wendy arrives home from the restaurant, Andy has passed out in the van with his feet sticking out of the door. He claims he’s been tidying up.

The next morning, Nicola’s lover comes round and tries to talk to her. She claims to be a feminist, but he accuses her of being a ‘bit vacant’ and a fake. Wendy decides to talk to Nicola in her bedroom. She tells her daughter, ‘Dr Harry told us you had two weeks to live . . . life’s not easy.’ Nicola says she didn’t ask to be born. With great sadness, Wendy observes, ‘Something inside you has died.’ Her mother says they all love her, and Nicola starts to cry.

Andy breaks his leg at work. Wendy brings him home. The spoon on which he slipped is hung on the living-room wall. Wendy talks to Nicola again. Natalie plans to go travelling in North America. Natalie and Nicola sit side by side in the back garden, chatting

in the late-afternoon sunlight. Natalie says she knows about her sister’s problem and wants to help.

\* \* \*

AMY RAPHAEL: *Life Is Sweet* was the first film made by Thin Man Films, the production company you set up with Simon Channing Williams.

MIKE LEIGH: The unmade film of 1986, *The Short and Curlies and High Hopes* were all made for Portman Productions, a company that had been going for many years. Simon Channing Williams and Victor Glynn were co-producers on *The Short and Curlies* and *High Hopes*. While we were doing *High Hopes*, Simon and I started to talk and wondered why we were working for another company. At which point we decided to start our own company. So yes, *Life Is Sweet* was the first production of Thin Man Films. Nothing to do with the famous series of films: the ‘thin man’ in question is, in fact, an ironical reflection on the fact that both Simon and I are given to a certain degree of portliness. He is rather larger, both horizontally and vertically, than I am.

*Did forming Thin Man make you feel more secure, give you a base from which to work?*

It’s not about feeling secure; it’s about the means of production. I’ve always said that the only way to make things happen in show business is to make them happen yourself. The roots of all this are in the early 1960s, which is very much to do with finding ways to challenge the status quo and get stuff on against all the odds. Les Blair and I formed our own company to make *Bleak Moments*, and, long before that, I formed a company with David Halliwell to put on the original production of *Little Malcom and his Struggle Against the Eunuchs*. It was a natural and logical thing to do, particularly with Channel 4 stimulating, encouraging and promoting independent companies to make programmes for them. I just felt we should be in control as much as possible. Of course, it still means we have to go with the begging bowl for each movie, but when we get the money we’re in control of how we make the film.

*Was it any easier to get funding by this stage?*

We started going to Channel 4 for meetings about this next film, at that point known simply as 'Untitled '90'. We had meetings with David Rose and Simon Relph, who was head of British Screen, the main funders. We said we've got Jim Broadbent, Timothy Spall and Alison Steadman. We don't know what the film's about but they're signed up. They asked for another meeting, during which Simon Relph wanted to know if I'd thought about using Bob Hoskins. I told him it was out of the question: he's not my sort of actor – no disrespect to him.

So then we had another meeting in which Lenny Henry and Victoria Wood were suggested. Simon Relph wanted it to be a comedy. At the next meeting he said that American distribution was important and had I thought about Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep? 'They're really good, they're character actors and they're bright, but that's not the point,' I replied. In the final meeting he said, 'The word is that Robert De Niro is very keen to do a low-budget British movie.' I told him he had to be joking.

It would be quite wrong and disingenuous to suggest that these conversations translated into real pressure, because at the end of the day they gave us complete freedom. It was all talk. I'm not complaining, and Simon, like David, was friendly and supportive. It's just part of the background to what went on.

*So, at a certain point, you could basically get on with the film?*

Oh yes, with complete freedom. I had a slight wobble in preparing 'Untitled '90' because I got hit by some kind of flu bug and was laid out in the middle of rehearsals. I suddenly recalled the complete collapse and lack of confidence I had which led to the cancelling of the film in 1986. And this was only four years later. I had a real panic attack and thought I couldn't continue with the film. But they filled me with vitamin B12 injections, and Alison, who, of course, was also in the film, fed me smoked salmon and avocado pears, and it was all right in the end.

During every project I have a wobble and think it's not going to happen. It's terrifying. But that's probably the last time I had a wobble that felt so serious, or at least felt that I wasn't able to deal with it.

*This is the first time you worked with Dick Pope, who replaced Roger Pratt as cinematographer. In The World According to Mike Leigh, Pope tells Michael Coveney that on the first day he set a shot up and was feeling pleased with himself, when you 'tore it to pieces, questioning why the camera was cutting to certain shots and from whose point of view . . . I didn't know then how nervous he was.'*

We were all wandering about the estate in Enfield looking for the right opening shot, and all it came down to was a static exterior shot of the house. At first we simply weren't talking the same language, but that lasted for less than an hour.

*The cast was a mix of old favourites and new discoveries. You already had Jim Broadbent, Timothy Spall and Alison Steadman lined up; what about the newer names?*

Well, David Thewlis we knew about from *The Short and Curlies*. Moya Brady came on the scene because for a long time she had been Thewlis's partner from up north, from Blackpool. This funny little character was always skulking about, so I got her in the film. I love what she does. I suppose the main discussion is about Claire Skinner and Jane Horrocks. They are two very different kinds of actor, though the chemistry between Nicola and Natalie is really good in the film. They were both in their mid-twenties at the time; they're both mothers now.

Somebody recently wrote to me saying his wife was the model for Jane Horrocks's character in *Life Is Sweet*. It's an agreed rule that nobody ever says what the sources are for their character. I wrote back saying it was a myth. He wrote back again saying I should watch a *Parkinson* show from a particular date – apparently Jane actually talked about it on his show . . .

Jane Horrocks has a great deal of wit but she's very much a personality in her own right. What she did on *Life Is Sweet* is fine and she really went for it. She researched the anorexic-bulimic side of things. She's a very different kettle of fish to Claire Skinner, who brings a certain profundity, serenity, panache and humour. Witness the extraordinary contribution she makes at the end of *Naked*. It's one of the best performances I've been associated with.



20 *Life Is Sweet*: Nicola (Jane Horrocks).

*This was the first time you'd worked with Jim Broadbent on screen.*

Yes. He'd already been in two of my plays, *Ecstasy* and *Goose-Pimples*. He does a great thing in *Life Is Sweet*; it's very subtle. And very funny. This was only the second time I'd worked with Mr Spall. Aubrey is a fairly outrageous character, although he resonates with a lot of people I've come across. He is the worst example of received-behaviour characters in my whole canon. Gordon, Tim's character in *Home Sweet Home*, and Aubrey are both over-the-top characters. I love it when he's shouting, 'I ain't fat!' When you get to the next three contributions – Maurice in *Secrets & Lies*, Richard Temple in *Topsy-Turvy* and Phil in *All or Nothing* – we hit his sensitivity and deep pools of emotional reserve.

I think what Alison does is another of her extraordinary contributions. What's great is that, from my point of view, part of the device of the film is the way your assumptions about people are challenged. The big hoax with *Life Is Sweet* is that you meet this guy who just doesn't get it together at all; he spends all his time procrastinating, and then you discover he's a serious pro in the kitchen. What we're up to with Wendy is precisely that. You think she's a dickhead, but when it comes to it she's not: she's a proper

person with real emotional reserves. She has an interesting background that at a certain point is revealed.

Of course, *Life Is Sweet* is the last film on which I worked with Alison before we split up, which was around the time of *Secrets & Lies*. There's nothing I have to say about that apart from the fact that the investigation of family life on which we collaborated in *Life Is Sweet* came at a time when our family life, to all intents and purposes, was intact.

*David Thewlis was apparently disappointed by having only a relatively small part.*

Of course he was, and rightly so! We had a whole thing on the go but dramatically it became obvious to me that you only needed to see him twice. He hung on in there because I kept trying to invent ways of bringing him back at the end. I thought it might be quite interesting if he came round at the end with none of the others knowing who he was. He'd just show up. Eventually I decided it was irrelevant to what the film was about.

So yes, Thewlis was in some ways short-changed because there wasn't very much of him in the film. He was disappointed, but people always are. It happens all the time, especially in my films. He was fine about it; he just didn't want to do it again. Especially for a man of undoubted star quality. Therefore, when I asked him some time later if he'd be in the next one, he wanted reassurance that the same thing wouldn't happen again. I promised him he'd have a fair slice of the pie. And of all the promises I've made in my life, I'd have to say that was the best kept!

*Stephen Rea isn't in the film much either, but he is in that lovely scene in the pub with Andy.*

I'd arranged that scene in a quite different way. With a normal film you write a scene, then go and shoot it. With me it was a case of find a pub and let's see what happens. We got there, and the first assistant asked how many extras we'd need. I asked for forty people to cover us. We showed up in the pub, and there were the people.

Sometimes, when I'm not on top of the material, I get subsumed by some kind of misplaced sense of responsibility. I kept thinking



21 *Life Is Sweet*: Wendy (Alison Steadman), Andy (Jim Broadbent), Natalie (Claire Skinner), Patsy (Stephen Rea) and Aubrey (Timothy Spall).

we had to show the pub and all the people simply because they were there. I constructed a scene around that notion. I knew in my belly it wasn't a real turn-on like it should be. I was doing it for the wrong reasons. When we showed up to shoot the scene – and this is something I battled with every time I'd made a film – I'd been persuaded to allow a TV crew to film us filming. I've learned to deal with it now. I say no. I hate having people filming us. It's the worst thing in the world, really inhibitive.

On this occasion it completely threw me. We were shooting bland wide shots. So I tumbled into a room somewhere with Jim and Stephen and rethought the scene completely. As I've had to do on a number of occasions, I took a grip of myself and said, 'Fuck the location, fuck all the extras, let's just tell the story in a way that's appropriate: intimate, close and, therefore, interesting.' There are extras but they're seen incidentally within this static two-shot. It's an object lesson in what it's all about, similar to what I talked about in respect of the pub that was lined up with a whole load of people for *Secrets & Lies*, and I gradually got rid of the extras one by one until it was just Tim sitting there all by himself.

*Stephen Rea had to betray his real football team for the scene.*

Yeah, it was very difficult for him, in a not very serious way, because he's an Arsenal fan and there he was talking about supporting Tottenham. Patsy's a great character and obviously a distant relation of Dixie from *Four Days in July*. Dixie is probably brighter than Patsy.

*The scene provides a good insight into male relationships: Andy's just been ripped off by Patsy, yet they still go for a good-natured pint together. Because Wendy puts up with and laughs about the caravan, it doesn't really matter.*

Absolutely. But I had terrible trouble with that scene when Andy and Patsy show the caravan to Wendy and the twins. It was a classic case of finding your cinema eye: I was really perplexed till I realised the camera should be inside the caravan. It all made sense. It's not an obvious place for the camera to be, but it works.

*The films you made either side of Life Is Sweet – Meantime and High Hopes before, Naked after – focus on frustrated, disenfranchised, unemployed youth. In a less direct way, this is also a film about unemployment.*

In 1990, when we made the film, it was still an issue, and it remains one today. Obviously the difference between *Meantime* and *Life Is Sweet* is this: in *Meantime* the premise is that everyone is unemployed, so it's simply the status quo; in *Life Is Sweet*, they are all busy. Wendy's got several jobs, Andy's a pro, Natalie's getting on with it. It's only Nicola and her boyfriend who have the problem. It's a different take on unemployment, a different set of assumptions.

On another level, *Life Is Sweet* follows on from *High Hopes* in the context of Thatcherism and entrepreneurialism. Having discussed those things very explicitly in both films, I certainly had a strong feeling of wanting to move on. But it's still important to see *Life Is Sweet* in those terms.

I just realised a few moments ago that there's a certain irony in the fact that when discussing this film in the context of being the first Thin Man film, I made a speech about taking control of the means of distribution and exhibition, as it were. And, of course, that's just what Andy is doing with his caravan and Aubrey is

doing with his restaurant – branching out on their own. So it is, at some level, a film about entrepreneurialism – which, of course, is also discussed in the scene in *High Hopes* when Martin attempts to offer Cyril advice.

*Natalie is non-conformist in a very different way to Nicola: working as a plumber, wearing tomboy clothes, ignoring the notion of female identity.*

By the way, I didn't initially plan for Natalie and Nicola to be twins; I just thought they'd be sisters. But at an early stage of getting the characters on the go, it suddenly dawned on me that we could make them look like twins. Anyway, I think the key line in a study of Natalie is when the two sisters are talking and she says she wants children. We didn't think she was gay, as a matter of interest. I also reject the theory that she's in some way sexless. It's not true. She's challenging the status quo, making things happen, questioning things. Actually, she's a kind of young woman who's really come into existence more recently.

*There's one sister sitting around the house with her bedroom poli-*



22 *Life Is Sweet*: Nicola (Jane Horrocks), Aubrey (Timothy Spall) and Natalie (Claire Skinner).

*tics, in need of love but unable to accept it, and there's the self-sufficient sister who's challenging perceived notions of being a woman. By being a plumber and wearing a bloke's shirt she is being political in her own small way. She's happy with herself and her parents are happy with her; they don't moan at her. She is doing more than Nicola, who sits in her room feeling sorry for herself, yelping, 'Fuck the poll tax!' every now and again but achieving very little except self-hatred.*

I couldn't have put it better myself. Can you re-ascribe that speech to me?

*The scenes of Nicola in her bedroom are incredibly intimate and verge on the voyeuristic; at times it feels as though we are peeking at her diary. It's easy to laugh at her, but, of course, it feels wrong, cruel.*

Well, some of the time you can laugh at her. Mostly I don't think it's funny.

*Whose idea was it for Nicola to wear the poll tax T-shirt?*

I'd imagine it was Lindy Hemmings'.

*Were you aware the chocolate and fucking scene would go from being controversial to iconic?*

I know it's much talked about and discussed. It allows journalists to rework the 'this film did for chocolate what *Last Tango in Paris* did for butter' gag. That kind of journalistic bollocks. When you're making a film you never know what's going to become famous or celebrated. If you stop to think about it you might, but in truth you don't.

*Did you consider how far to take it?*

Of course.

*Did we have to see Nicola actually vomiting, for example, or could Natalie just have heard it through the bedroom wall?*

You had to see it. You don't want to alienate the audience to the

extent that you can no longer suspend their disbelief. On the other hand, you want to confront the audience with the visceral experience of something. So to let Natalie just hear it through the wall wouldn't have worked – in fact, it never occurred to me. There would have been the risk of it not being clear for a start. You have to show things as they are. Where you draw lines is a matter of taste.

If the principle of a film is that things happen and the audience is a fly on the wall who has to see those things happening, you can't mess around with that notion.

*One of the most powerful scenes in the film is that between Wendy and Nicola; when we discover the daughter almost died, it's an incredibly emotional, raw and memorable moment.*

It's a good scene. Those are the kind of scenes where the back story – although it's erroneous ever to call it a back story really – is really earning its keep.

*How do you stop such a scene from being sentimental?*

I am sentimentality-proof. I'm so resistant to it in any form. When we're constructing scenes which could easily be sentimental, I just



23 *Life Is Sweet*: Nicola (Jane Horrocks) and Wendy (Alison Steadman).

jump on it – so it at least stops feeling sentimental to me. There are endless scenes in these films that could have been loathsomely sentimental. The point really is this: what is going on is not sentimental. It's real and truthful. Given that the motivating participator in that scene was Alison, I doubt whether the question of sentimentality could ever have come into it.

*We return to the subject of child-bearing once more: Wendy was pregnant at sixteen and gave up studying, while Andy worked all hours at catering college. She struggles to communicate with Nicola, telling Andy about her guilt at shouting at Nicola. Has she managed to be a good mother?*

Yes, I think she has. And motherhood isn't easy. Saying anything to Nicola, let alone those things, is almost impossible.

*Aubrey, meanwhile, is self-deluded to the extreme, obsessed with sex and with being sophisticated. Are we to empathise or just laugh at him when he falls off his 'orthopaedic, five 'undred quid, you know' bed or passes out, pissed, on the restaurant's opening night?*

There are two different things here. On the one level he's a comic character, it's a comic idea and there's a whole line of gags. Tim and I sat down one evening and invented all those preposterous recipes. We then got in a professional cook and asked her to reject anything on the list that was technically impossible to make. So what's left is all feasible, gross as it all sounds. It's basically a joke about pretentious menus in restaurants . . . so we're laughing at that, no question. One of my favourite reads every week is Matthew Fort's restaurant review in the *Guardian Weekend*. When he takes the piss it's a scream.

However, sympathising or empathising with Aubrey the character is a whole different matter. There is an Aubrey in all of us. He is desperately sad. He really has all these aspirations, but his fear renders him dysfunctional. The only moment, paradoxically, when he knows what he's doing and is in focus in some way is when he's seducing Paula with the drums. Which is not a moment when you particularly love him. Most of the time he doesn't know what he's doing. People say, 'He's a caricature! There's nobody like that in the world!' – sorry, I've got news for you.

*Did you intend to make a film with a happy ending or did the film need some optimism by the end?*

The film's got a positive ending, so obviously I wanted one. Mostly these films arrive at natural conclusions, although there are always complexities. *Life Is Sweet* may have a positive end but that doesn't mean everything will be hunky-dory from now on and you can walk away and then forget about it. There's no way it could have a negative or pessimistic ending. It's a film about a girl coming out of a nightmare, about connections being made through things going wrong.

*How did the film do in the UK, Europe and America?*

It premiered at the London Film Festival. The festival director Sheila Whitaker said afterwards it was so popular it should've opened the festival. She said the next film would open it instead, but then changed her mind because it was *Naked*. It wasn't till *Vera Drake* that a film of ours opened the LFF.

Before we agreed that *Life Is Sweet* would be in the LFF, we checked with the Berlin Film Festival that this would not disqualify it from competition there. We were promised it didn't matter, so we screened it in London. Then Moritz de Hadeln, who ran Berlin, said this disqualified it.

*But didn't Life Is Sweet go to Berlin in the end?*

Yes, but out of competition. It was very well received. Alison and I also went to the Norwegian Film Festival, a long way north, in Haugesund. It was a big thing to do because our boys were little. We were on a plane flying across the North Sea and I suddenly thought, 'Fuck, if this plane went down the boys would become instant orphans.' So when we then went to the States on a promotional tour shortly afterwards we never flew on the same planes for the whole trip – much to the inconvenience of the distributors.

We committed a massive gaffe in New York. There are groups of adults there who get together every week and discuss a movie. The film-makers then come and talk to them. We went to this particular group that was full of middle-aged blue-rinsed women. We arrived some way through the film and sat at the back. People were

leaving. But there was still a substantial number of women left at the end. The reception was deeply frosty. The whole thing was summed up by a woman who asked why I made 'that poor girl eat all that chocolate'. They loathed the film, thought it was absolutely repulsive and reprehensible.

We were devastated. We then made a massive mistake which horrified the distributors. The next day we were interviewed by a guy who innocently asked how the film had been received. We told him the story and the next day it was all over the paper. Never tell a bloody journalist the truth!

It did particularly well in Australia. That was also the time I broke a self-imposed lifetime's ban and agreed to go to the Jerusalem Film Festival. It was very popular, as my films always are in that little country. The visit was very traumatic because I'd refused to go near the State of Israel for thirty years. But it was interesting. I'm glad I went that one time.