

pauses, unsure of what to say. He is devastated. He gives Cynthia some cash, reminds her about the barbecue and leaves.

Maurice sits alone in an empty pub.

Back home, Maurice talks to Monica in the kitchen. They speculate about the half-brother or -sister that Roxanne has never met and probably doesn't even know about. In their council house, Cynthia asks Roxanne if she's going to bring her bloke to the barbecue; she says not. A little later, Cynthia asks her daughter if she's on the Pill. She asks to meet Paul again. She says if Roxanne gets pregnant she'll look after the baby. Roxanne loses her temper, pushes her mother onto the bed and rushes out, slamming the front door.

Cynthia is crying on Roxanne's bed. The phone rings; it's Hortense. She slowly introduces herself. Cynthia is in shock. She hangs up and is sick in the kitchen sink.

Hortense redials. Cynthia says, 'You mustn't come round 'ere, sweet'eat.' She is crying. Finally, she takes Hortense's number. A little later, she rings back and they arrange to meet outside Holborn tube station on Saturday.

When they meet, Cynthia doesn't see how Hortense could be her daughter. They go to an empty cafe and sit side by side. Cynthia: 'Listen, I don't mean nothin' by it, darlin', but I ain't never been with a black man in my life. No disrespect nor nothing . . .' Then she remembers. 'Oh, bloody 'ell . . .! Oh, Jesus Christ Almighty!' She thinks Hortense will be disappointed by her. She reveals that when she gave birth she was just sixteen and couldn't face looking at or holding the baby.

The next day Cynthia rings Hortense. They arrange to go for a meal. Maurice takes a photo of a woman whose face has been disfigured by a car crash. Stuart (Ron Cook) turns up out of the blue and complains about Maurice doing well out of his old business.

Cynthia and Hortense have dinner; they get on well. Later, Roxanne and Cynthia sit at the dinner table. Roxanne is intrigued by the change in her mother, who now takes care of her appearance, as well as seeming to be happy for the first time in years. When Cynthia meets Hortense again, she invites her to the barbecue. She tells Maurice she's bringing someone from work.

The barbecue. Cynthia, Roxanne and Paul turn up with beer, sparkling wine and flowers. Maurice's assistant Jane also arrives.

Maurice asks Roxanne when she's going to apply for college. Monica conducts a tour of the house. Hortense arrives. They sit down to lunch. There are some awkward moments when Hortense has to pretend she works in the cardboard-box factory with Cynthia.

They move inside. Hortense goes to the downstairs toilet. Cynthia reveals her secret: 'Maurice . . . it's me daughter.' Chaos ensues. Roxanne is bewildered, angry. 'You fuckin' slag!! Ain't it enough you 'ad to 'ave one bastard, you 'ad to 'ave two an' all?!' She leaves. Paul and then Maurice follow; they sit at the bus stop. Meanwhile, Cynthia and Monica argue. Roxanne, Paul and Maurice return to the house.

Cynthia asks Monica why she hasn't behaved like a wife and given Maurice kids. Maurice tells their secret: after fifteen years of trying, Monica is 'physically incapable' of having children. He breaks down. Cynthia tells Roxanne that she met her medical-student father while on holiday in Benidorm. She isn't ready yet to tell Hortense much, apart from the fact that she got pregnant at fifteen and was sent away by her father to have the baby away from home.

In bed that night, Maurice and Monica talk of their fears and love for one another.

Some time later, Roxanne and Hortense chat and laugh in Cynthia's back garden. Their mother brings out tea and biscuits on a tray.

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AMY RAPHAEL: Did you have a very personal take on adoption?

MIKE LEIGH: By 1994, which is when we set about working on what was to become *Secrets & Lies*, the notion of adoption had already been festering in my mind for over twenty years. There are people very close to me who have had adoption-related experiences, although I can't talk about this in detail for obvious reasons. When I started to look into it, I realised that for me the important aspect wasn't so much the relationship between the adoptee and the adoptive parents as the whole issue surrounding the birth parent – and the mother in particular. I was also fascinated by the sense of identity surrounding the person who's actually been given away and adopted. Then, in the course of doing the preliminary

basic research, I hit on the fact that in the 1960s a lot of white girls gave away black babies. Those were the starting points.

The project previous to *Secrets & Lies* wasn't, of course, *Naked* but the stage play *It's a Great Big Shame!* The first act was set in 1893 in a house lived in by white cockneys; the second act was set in 1993 in the same house but everyone was black. With that play came the discovery of Marianne Jean-Baptiste in particular but also Michele Austin; they played sisters in that production.

You had the notion of adoption floating around, but when, for example, did you decide that Timothy Spall and Brenda Blethyn would be brother and sister?

If you want the crude answer: when I cast the film. Those creative decisions are always inherent in the basic scheduling, in a way. So we started with those two and went from there.

No film has ever deviated in its process from the first principle that the actors never know anything beyond what their individual characters would know. But *Secrets & Lies*, given its secrets and lies, was also followed through with an extraordinary degree of military precision. But let's talk about its methods later.

OK. Why do you think Secrets & Lies was your most commercially successful film internationally?

There are a number of reasons. Everybody strives for the piece of work that hits a nerve. I'd say two of my pieces have really done so: *Abigail's Party* and *Secrets & Lies*. Some films that you think ought to just bloody don't, like *All or Nothing*, which some people like, but it's a very rarefied coterie of people around the world who even know what it is. But *Secrets & Lies* seemed to get through to people, perhaps because it's about identity.

The second reason is that it won the Palme d'Or at Cannes, which does an amazing amount of good for a film. Then it was nominated for five Oscars, none of which it got. It was snookered by *The English Patient*.

The third reason is quite different. It was immensely successful in a number of countries where it was – and still is – illegal to trace your birth mother. Which is to say, all the Catholic countries, all the South American countries, France, Italy, Spain. Although I

think it's changed in Spain recently. And fifty out of the fifty-two states of America, where it was a big issue for a lot of people.

Did you have a sense of its potential when you were making it?

We did, up to a point. When Maurice goes round to visit Cynthia in her house and they go upstairs to their mother and father's old room . . . if you look at it very carefully, there's a subtle tracking shot in this very small room, where the camera moves in and out. We were setting this up and we knew it was a really powerful, quirky, emotionally charged scene.

In passing, I'm only aware of two people who work on my films who have any kind of ongoing dialogue about the future currency of the film: me and the cinematographer, because we're the only two people constantly looking at the film from the audience's point of view, as it were, apart from the editor. When you're in the mad heat of shooting, no one else is actually at the epicentre of the thing. Anyway, when we were setting up this scene in the bedroom, Dick and I said to each other, 'This is going to earn us some really nice dinners!' – meaning we'd probably go to Cannes. And, of course, we did – rather successfully!

So, yes, one does have a sense, but one isn't always right. Having been encouraged by the success of *Secrets & Lies*, we were able to get a much bigger budget for *Topsy-Turvy* and we were in no doubt that that film would be a massive commercial breakthrough. It was no such thing. It's so tough to tell if art – whether it's a film, a record, a book – will find success. Actually, I suspect that if I'm honest I'd succumb to the received wisdom that the harder you try, the less successful you become.

Does it get easier as you get older to care less about commercial success, or do you simply crave it more because your career is increasingly finite?

Very good question. Both. It actually gets harder in one sense. The more you do, the more you've done; the more you've done, the more you've already done. The more you've already done, the more you're left wondering what to do next. So there's that. It's not a problem. Provided you don't navel-gaze, it's all going on out there in the world; there's still plenty of things to make films about.

One's experience counts for quite a lot. So if I'm worried now about 'Untitled '06', I'm experienced enough to know what I'm up to or not up to. When you're younger, of course, you do things with gay abandon. I've vaguely learned how to cope with getting older, although I'm not a particularly strong person physically.

Your energy levels must change as you get older, which must also make a difference, especially with such a labour-intensive job.

They do change. I invented my way of working when I was twenty-two or twenty-three. I used to rehearse or shoot all day and all night. I never had days off. There always comes a point, particularly with shooting, when you work seven days on the trot for several weeks. You have to spend every moment away from the crew actually rehearsing the scenes. The adrenalin carries you through; you get into the rhythm of it. But as I've said, the rehearsals are a form of purgatory. They can be very enjoyable, and it's very nice working with people and all that, but I grind away for months with nothing to show for it. I still have to get out of bed and be there at 9 a.m. every day. I have to make something happen. If I didn't have that gruelling discipline, you'd basically never have heard of me.

You've talked about 'reading days' before, when you sit around leafing through books and not doing much.

Oh God, I'm without doubt the biggest procrastinator in the history of might-have-been-writers. I still leave everything to the last possible minute.

The real point is that the preparatory improvisational rehearsals are much lonelier. It's all about getting it together, getting the dramatic premise together. Part of my craft is giving actors space, which involves massive amounts of time with them getting into character and staying in character. On the surface, nothing seems to happen. It can be very, very boring. Sometimes I go to sleep in the corner in rehearsals. You are putting it in the oven and letting it cook.

When you hit the shoot, however, it's a whole different experience. At the end of every day you've created something. It's just fantastic. I love it! It's at that point, at the back end of these shoots,

that we have seven-day weeks for weeks on end, but it's not really a problem. I never used to bother about taking days off, but now I'm very disciplined about taking Sunday off during rehearsals.

Secrets & Lies was internationally successful; do you ever feel that your work is appreciated more abroad than in the UK?

The films may be appreciated in different ways in different places, but universally they are understood on the same level. The thing that gets people about *Secrets & Lies* has nothing to do with the audience being from South America or Japan or Australia. The question relates back to the 'Play for Today' films, because there's a definite notion that they were very English, or at least very British, and wouldn't really travel. I remember when we made *High Hopes* – which to all intents and purposes was the first feature – it had no distributor when it was finished. Romaine Hart of the Screen on the Green, Screen on the Hill, et cetera, rejected it completely as mere British domestic television. She said it wouldn't travel and had no future. It then went to Venice, where it won a prize, and, to my amazement, the international press was suddenly on our case.

Did Hollywood come calling following the success of Secrets & Lies?

No, not at all. The issue of Hollywood is quite clear. At no stage has anybody begged us – Simon and me – to make a film there. And at no time have we made a film for a Hollywood production company. First of all, everybody knows that nobody in Hollywood ever says no to anything. They are enthusiastic about everything and they pass on virtually everything. Most of what I'd have to say about Hollywood is in Peter Biskind's wonderful book *Down and Dirty Pictures*, in which I figure occasionally.

On the one hand, Hollywood hasn't come crawling because that just doesn't happen. But on the other, we have had discussions with everyone at some stage or another, including a massive number of time-wasting ones. However, we continue to make films with some American money, including 'Untitled '06'.

In *Down and Dirty Pictures* there's the following story: Skouras Pictures distributed *High Hopes* in the States, and the guy in

charge of distribution, Jeff Lipsky, got together with Bingham Ray and they formed their own distribution company, October Films. The first film their company released in the US was *Life Is Sweet*. Simon helped them from the UK to get their finances together so that could happen. They were then very keen to distribute *Naked*, and would have made a fantastic job of it. They were really original, independent distributors. They came to visit us while we were shooting *Naked*. It went to Cannes and went on the open market, but New Line had more dosh, so October Films didn't get it. But our relationship with them continued; they distributed *Secrets & Lies* very successfully. And *Career Girls*. They were involved with *Topsy-Turvy*. At this point they were taken over by Universal, and all kinds of dreadful things happened. Jeff Lipsky had already left, and Bingham Ray was then sacked from his own company – all of which is in that book.

So by the time of *Topsy-Turvy* we were dealing with Universal. They renamed October Films as USA Films. Basically we were dealing with the big boys in Hollywood. It put us in communication with Hollywood, so by that route and independently we have had dealings. When we started on *Topsy-Turvy*, we talked to everyone, including Harvey Weinstein. When we were shooting it, we used to say, 'Thank goodness Harvey turned us down.' He wouldn't have got how we worked. Our special skill is to reinvent constantly the concepts of schedule and budget. We couldn't have made the film without the complete freedom to move the goalposts endlessly. And we certainly wouldn't have had that with him.

Would you ever consider relinquishing the smallest amount of freedom for a considerably bigger budget?

No! Slippery slope. There's no such thing as 'relinquishing a small amount of freedom'. It's the thin end of the wedge, as far as I can see. Look, Simon has endlessly gone to meetings over the years – less so now – where they say they don't mind that there isn't a script or a plot as such, but you must have a name. By which they mean someone like Nicole Kidman. And if I start from that premise, I'm buggered – no disrespect to Nicole Kidman.

This whole thing about Hollywood has a double answer: the basic answer is no, but on the other hand, as I said, we've had

some kind of American backing over the years. And we've had interest. Two very well-known producers from a very well-known independent Stateside company had breakfast with me and Simon two years ago in New York. They said, 'There are three great film-makers in the world: Pedro Almodóvar, Wong Kar-Wai and you. We've worked with the other two and we have to work with you. What do you want to do?'

These particular people have dithered and buggered about and walked away twice. As late as yesterday they phoned up and said, 'Can we assume we're still involved in the next Mike Leigh film?' – long after we've signed and sealed with other people. They live in this egocentric world where everybody else's lives are static and in freeze-frame. It's an ongoing thing.

I was talking recently to Christine Blundell, our make-up designer, who worked on *Casino Royale*. They shot one scene at Shepperton, where they constructed what was supposed to be the interior of a building in Venice. The room goes up and down hydraulically. This one set cost £12 million. What I couldn't do with £12 million . . .

The other really important and fundamental answer to the whole Hollywood question is this: we're not in Hollywood and we're not in America; we're in Europe. We're independent European film-makers. That's why Cannes is such good news. It's the one thing that Hollywood producers cannot get their hands on. They try. They go to Cannes and they try to subvert it, with all their huge bloody billboards blocking out the palm trees. But they can't touch it. It's immune. When I was on the jury at Cannes in 1997, *LA Confidential* was one of the films in competition. It's a perfectly respectable film but the truth is that the entire jury unanimously dismissed it. Harvey Weinstein was furious with us. But there was nothing he could do about it. Nobody nobbles the Cannes jury, despite what people tell you. It's beyond anybody's reach. It's great that Cannes is there. It fulfils an important function in our independence.

The bottom line is that there's no point whinging about Hollywood. Of course, it would be great to go there, take the money in large quantities and do what you like with it. But it doesn't work like that. When you ask about a tiny bit of compromise, you have to remember this is a world where a lot of people earn a lot of

bread and their job is to interfere with everything at every level. Mostly before anyone's even put a roll of film in a camera.

One of the many massive turn-offs about making a film conventionally with a script is that everyone has made the film in their heads before you get on location. For me, the buzz of making a film my way is that you don't know what it is till you've done it. And neither does anybody else, including – and especially – the backers!

What difference would a huge injection of cash make to a Mike Leigh film?

I'd make bigger films. Money would basically enable us to make films that we currently can't make. Bigger canvas. Epic scale.

A few weeks ago I went to talk to students at Newport, Gwent. There's a very strong film department at the university, which is run by a brilliant ex-NFTS student of mine, Coral Houtman. One of the students asked me what the budget would be for 'Untitled '06'. I replied, 'Hold onto your seats because what I'm going to say now you will find obscene and outrageous. The answer is only £6.5 million.'

They all gasped. I went on, 'OK, £6.5 million under your bed in a suitcase is a lot of bread; it would be one hell of a budget if you were to spend it shooting a film on the streets of Newport with your DV camera.' The problem is, making a film in the industrial context in which we work, you have to be incredibly inventive in spreading the money out and making it work. *Vera Drake* was made for a tiny touch more and was a real stretch.

Money would enable me to make period films. It would give me time; there are things I'd like to do on a big scale but time costs money. Money disappears so quickly. For example, there are American backers for 'Untitled '06' and as soon as you sit down to discuss the budget it's a given that the American lawyers take a slice off the top. The bigger the budget, the more you pay people. And the more people there are to pay. But, at the same time, you can start to do other things and you have the luxury of time, space and other production values.

The challenge is to put interesting things on the screen with very limited resources. The difference in cost between a period film like

Topsy-Turvy and *All or Nothing* is ludicrous. *Topsy-Turvy* had a massive costume budget alone. It was sumptuous and theatrical; in *All or Nothing* virtually everyone's costume came from charity shops around Greenwich. If I decide to do a film that is monochromatic and generally a downer, which is what *All or Nothing* is perceived as being, then it's cheaper. But if I want to be jolly, it's more expensive.

There is another aspect to this Hollywood discussion: actually going to Hollywood and making a film there. It has no appeal to me at all. I would see it as being a recipe for disaster.

An anecdote to end this rather long discussion: Pierre Rissient, the doyen of the Paris film scene who was active in getting *Naked* into Cannes and who was directly and helpfully involved in *Secrets & Lies* and *Topsy-Turvy*, got in touch the year after *Secrets & Lies* was released. I was at home with my boys on a Saturday night, watching *American Graffiti*, a nice film that you don't want to have interrupted. Pierre calls. He's in Hollywood with some old fart of a producer, whose name I can't remember now. Pierre's very apologetic. He's told the producer I won't be interested, that he's wasting his time, but he insists on talking to me. Pissed off about *American Graffiti*, I agree to have a word. Pierre puts him on.

'Michael –!'

'It's Mike.'

'Michael! I wanna tell you a story . . .!'

He then goes into this very long, ridiculously elaborate and mostly impenetrable story, a large proportion of which seems to have to do with his private library, and ends with: 'So, whaddya say?'

Cautiously, I ask, 'Do I understand that you're asking me to direct a remake of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?'

'You goddit!'

'Out of the question.'

Long pause. I assume he's dropped dead from shock. People in Hollywood don't say, 'Out of the question.' He'd never heard such a thing. It's not in the Hollywood vocabulary. That's as near as I ever got to working there.

However ambivalent your feelings about Hollywood, Secrets & Lies undeniably got a great reception in America. Not only was the

film nominated for five Oscars but you and Brenda Blethyn also won the LA Film Critics Association Best Director and Best Actress awards and she picked up a Golden Globe.

Brenda Blethyn throws herself at the part totally. The great thing about her is that, in a positive sense, she never stops working. She's constantly making suggestions. She's a very complicated character in her own right. She's an extraordinary combination of complete guts and confidence and a massive amount of self-doubt at all times.

Let's talk about the rest of the cast too. Tim Spall is just terrific. He has a great sense of humour. But he's also completely serious about it and he loves the work. He's very versatile.

He turned out to be seriously ill after Secrets & Lies.

No one knew when we were making *Secrets & Lies* that Tim had leukaemia. We wrapped *Career Girls* on a Saturday night and had a party. We had the cast and crew screening for *Secrets & Lies* the next day. Unusually we'd made the two films close up to each other. On the Thursday we were flying down to Cannes for the screening of *Secrets & Lies*, which was the next day. At the cast and crew party Tim felt a bit odd. He went to the doctor the next day – the posh film-insurance doctor, the legendary Dr Gayner in Sloane Square. He diagnosed leukaemia and bunged him straight into hospital. The word was that if he'd gone to Cannes that week they'd have brought him back in a box. He went through a hell of a time and came through the other end.

Phyllis Logan is an important player in this film too. I like her enormously; she's one of the funniest people I know. There's no reason why I haven't worked with her again; you just don't get round to everybody. Claire Rushbrook is also a good actress. I felt it important to pull Michèle Austin in because she'd been such a good double act with Marianne in the play. In fact, the scenes where Hortense and Dionne are talking and drinking and where Ron Cook's character visits the photographic studio became the point of a massive stand-off with Ciby 2000, the Parisian backers. They insisted we cut those scenes because they felt them to be redundant to the plot.

This massive stand-off quickly became very acrimonious. They



29 *Secrets & Lies*: Monica (Phyllis Logan), Roxanne (Claire Rushbrook) and Paul (Lee Ross).

wanted to wash their hands of the film. They were even keen to sell it and banned us from submitting it to Cannes. This went on for months and months. To cut a long story short, they 'tested' the film in Slough in a three-hundred-seat multiplex – one of only two times I've been subjected to Hollywood-style testing. They showed a work print with no music or mixed sound to a fucking audience in Slough! It cost them £10,000 – money I could have happily wasted on buying caviar and champagne for my friends, I told them.

They then showed it to all the American distributors who were in London for the film market. They were after unassailable support; they were convinced everyone would agree that the two scenes should go. But every single distributor, including the likes of Disney, said it was fantastic, don't touch it. Eventually they backed down and we went to Cannes, where we won the Palme d'Or, thank you very much. They did apologise.

Interestingly enough, I went to a tiny festival in Umbria a few years ago where *Secrets & Lies* was screened. Each year they give the freedom of the town to a film-maker and you get the key. They screened an old Italian distribution print of the film and those

same two scenes were missing. The Italians had done the same thing and I didn't know!

The point is that the scene of the two women in the flat drinking is axiomatic. Without it, you don't get a complete picture of Hortense. Similarly, the scene with the ex-owner shows a stronger side to Maurice, which you don't otherwise see.

Otherwise Hortense is mostly on her own in her flat or at work peering into people's eyes.

Exactly. We needed to see her talking about life with a friend. Dionne asks her what she's been doing, and she says, 'Living,' or something. She doesn't say she's been tracing her birth mother.

Didn't Lesley Manville join the cast late in the day?

Yes. An actor who will remain nameless was playing the social worker. He was useless, dreadful. It wasn't his fault: he was out of his depth. We shot the scene but it was laughable, an embarrassment. Ciby 2000 very reluctantly allowed us to do a reshoot, so I got Lesley Manville in. I hadn't worked with her for quite a long



30 *Secrets & Lies*: Hortense (Marianne Jean-Baptiste) and the social worker (Lesley Manville).

time. We wrapped the entire picture, and then a couple of weeks later I worked with her for a week on the character. I went on holiday to France while she did social-worker research. I came back and rehearsed the scene for a week with Marianne, then we shot it over a weekend. It was brilliant. We had all the advantages of having the power and strength of the film behind us.

I blame myself for not spotting how bad this poor actor was. I auditioned him and thought he'd be fine. This has happened maybe four or five times before, but we never usually get as far as filming. Somebody was ditched in the rehearsals of *Vera Drake*; somebody else just before shooting a scene in *High Hopes*. It has happened in the theatre once or twice. It's a terrible thing for anyone to get the sack in any circumstances. The kudos of being in my films is huge, and people have gone round telling all their friends – only then to get the boot. Or occasionally we've cut people out in the editing, though that's more to do with the context and structure and happens on most films.

As always, you did a lot of research for this film. How did you find out about couples who find it hard – or impossible – to conceive?

We went to Professor – now Lord – Robert Winston at Hammer-smith Hospital, who gave us a whole morning. A lovely guy. I told my assistant that we needed to talk to someone about IVF treatment, and he was prepared to talk. It was fascinating. Devastating. Of course, I've known people who've gone through it.

Monica and Maurice live in their recently acquired new-build home where everything is just so. Yet they are unhappy, frustrated, angry. Obviously there's the huge issue of being childless, but do you think newly acquired money is often spent badly or that aspirational couples never find the anticipated happiness in property, material goods, etc.?

No, I don't think that. I think it's understandable but wrong to infer that because my films are consistently saying that if you're upwardly mobile and improving your life, I inevitably think you're having a bad time and I disapprove. That would be a misreading. What is true, however, is this: just because you've improved your

material life doesn't mean everything is hunky-dory. When people put a lot of energy into the trappings and the core is not all it could or should be, then all the trappings in the world won't make it any better. This is all terribly obvious . . .

Having said that, it's extremely dangerous and very inaccurate to see Maurice and Monica and such unhappiness as they have – and indeed their relationship with their home – in the same light as Barbara and John in *Meantime*, Valerie and Martin in *High Hopes* or Beverly and Laurence in *Abigail's Party*. Maurice and Monica have integrity, intelligence, sensitivity, taste and some sense of style. It's not an investigation into people who are miserable because they are vulgar. They are unhappy because they can't have children.

Cynthia may think Monica is a snob who has taken all Maurice's money, but it's simply not the case: she discovers the truth at the end. When you see Monica nervously showing everyone around on the day of the barbecue, it's a kind of comic scene and an affectionate view of her. It's been decoded as being in exactly the same territory as Beverly and Valerie. But it very definitely isn't.

Once we learn that they can't have children, we realise why Monica has been diverting all her energies into obsessive Hoovering and dusting.

That neurotic behaviour is a function of her condition. She has real problems with her menstrual cycle. If there is a dividing line between the sort of people in their Barratt homes – or whatever you might call them – who suffer from ignorance and vulgarity and those who are simply unhappy, then Monica is on the same side of the line as Barbara in *Meantime*.

When Monica is sitting on the toilet or lying in bed with a hot-water bottle, it's a painful monthly reminder of her inability to conceive.

Totally. She has very painful periods. And all that irritable stuff when Maurice comes home from work . . . My constant problem when I make these films is my reluctance to spell everything out in a crude way. As a result, a proportion of the audience may not

understand what's going on. The less perceptive person could be forgiven for thinking that Monica is a bitch, but she's not.

But it's important to have mixed thoughts about her or else the revelatory scene at the end wouldn't have such impact.

Fair enough. What's important in the context of understanding Monica's journey is that the first time you see her she's dusting the pictures and talking fondly of Roxanne. She is warm, with a dry sense of humour.

Why does it take Monica so long to reveal her secret?

It's not uncommon. It's very painful and private. She's hoping she'll suddenly get pregnant and it'll all go away again. Then nobody needed to have known. And don't forget it's the neurotic Cynthia they haven't told.

When Monica and Cynthia hug it's a pivotal moment in the film; as important as the revelation about Hortense, perhaps?

Yeah. The big question is about Cynthia not telling Hortense who her father is. That's very clear to me. Is it clear to you? What's your reading of it?

That she doesn't know much, if anything, about him.

There is no question about it: when she goes into the cafe with Hortense and says, 'I ain't never been with a black guy,' she totally believes it. And then suddenly something comes back to her. I know exactly what it was because we invented it: she went to a party, got very drunk, shagged a black guy, forgot about it. Whereas Roxanne's father was an American medical student she met on holiday and with whom she had a bit of a fling – a nice time. Plainly she got screwed by a lot of guys. That's obvious. She was vulnerable, needy. The question then is: will she tell Hortense in the fullness of time? Personally, I'm confident she will.

How will Cynthia have processed the fact that she gave a baby away for adoption? Will she have denied it to herself completely or will she have wondered how the child was getting on every now and again?



31 *Secrets & Lies*: Cynthia (Brenda Blethyn).

As soon as she picks up the phone and Hortense says, 'Baby Elizabeth Purley,' she knows what's going on. This isn't something she's blanked from her mind. What's happened is this: there were at least two fucks around the same time and as soon as she'd had the baby they took it away. She didn't want to see it, so she had no idea it was black. She will have lived with this secret and she will have hoped never to have to face up to it.

I received a massive amount of letters for many years after *Secrets & Lies* from people saying they'd traced their birth mother or parents as a result of the film. People hoping their child would get in touch with them. But a lot of people hope it will never come back to haunt them. Cynthia probably hopes both of those things deep down somewhere, or she simply wouldn't go and meet her.

The phone call also comes at a critical time, after Cynthia has had a particularly bad row with Roxanne.

Yeah, but that's me telling an interesting story. The phone call would have had the same effect whenever it came. And the rows with Roxanne go on all the time anyway.

Why is Cynthia and Roxanne's relationship so full of anger and resentment?

It's claustrophobic and unfulfilled. It's a life that is unrelieved by the sheer tedium of surviving. And, of course, Cynthia feels bitter towards Monica. She resents her and her affection for Roxanne.

You often focus on people's potential in your films. At a certain point we realise that Roxanne is not fulfilling her potential, that she could, as Maurice suggests, go to college.

Totally the case. There are a lot of kids like that around who simply put up with having a job and surviving. She'll be fine in the end. People have always said that you get more and more out of my films as you watch them a second or third time. If you look at Roxanne right from the word go, although she initially presents as just being surly, even thick, she is quite sunny and sussed. The way she deals with Paul is quite affirmative.

I can't imagine her staying with him.

That's not for me to say. But if you mean she could do better, I'd agree (*laughs*).

The contrast between Cynthia's house and Hortense's flat is interesting: the former is messy, unkempt; the latter spotless, ordered. While Cynthia is so obviously neurotic and on the edge, Hortense seems to be in control most of the time, even when she sees the adoption papers for the first time.

But you do see her crying at that point. It's not unusual for an adopted person to start looking for their birth mother or father when their adoptive mother or father die. It's understandable. It's very important in the scene with the social worker that Hortense says she loved her parents very much, meaning, of course, her adoptive parents.

Hortense is a very self-aware and sussed person. She's gone through the rigours of sorting herself out, of getting a degree; she understands a lot of things and she's disciplined in the way she lives. So in that sense she's not an out-of-control person. But she's not without emotion and she's very affected by the whole thing. It's

tough for her. We see her crying at her mother's funeral. She's emotional. But she is a career girl and she's organised. Cynthia, meanwhile, is all over the bloody show.

Where did you find an empty café in the West End for the celebrated cafe scene?

Cynthia and Hortense meet outside Holborn tube station on what's supposed to be a Saturday evening in summer. They appear to be walking in the direction of Covent Garden. The idea that there would be an empty cafe in that location and at that time demands a massive piece of dramatic licence. The cafe is actually in Moorgate and it was shot on a Saturday; in 1995 there was nothing happening round there. 'Homage to Hopper' again. I love empty pubs and cafes. And, incidentally, all film locations, once you take them over, can be as full or empty as you want to make them.

The other thing of any interest about that scene is that it was covered by several reverses, different sizes. I remember when we shot it thinking it would be nice if it held up as a single two-shot. But the main reason you have to cover such a scene with more than



32 *Secrets & Lies*: Hortense (Marianne Jean-Baptiste) and Cynthia (Brenda Blethyn).

one shot is that you might want to shorten or tighten it in the editing. But when we looked at the rushes, everybody said, 'Wow! That take is just amazing.' There were two takes. It runs for something like eight and a half minutes; a roll of film is ten minutes long. It was very, very thoroughly rehearsed. They practised it endlessly, till they could fly with it in the moment.

Did you think it was important to have the two women side by side? The lack of eye contact certainly gives the scene a certain edge.

I did an interview with Howard Feinstein, the New York film writer and critic and a friend. We were having breakfast at the Algonquin Hotel. There's only one thing he didn't quite believe: nobody sits side by side like that. I said, 'Look around. At the Algonquin the restaurant layout is such that everybody sits side by side!' He laughed. But again, if you're worrying about that, you're worrying about the wrong thing.

Actually, in terms of my approach to these things, when the girls started improvising they instinctively sat opposite one another. I asked them to sit side by side instead; they both felt it was OK, and that's good enough for me. The bottom line is that you can't make scenes like that work without very brilliant actors. And both were nominated for Oscars.

Would it be fair to say that Cynthia and Hortense are almost having a love affair? Cynthia is suddenly blooming, dressing up, taking pride in her appearance; they are discovering each other in a way you never get a chance to do with the parents who brought you up.

Yes, absolutely it's a love affair in that sense. And Roxanne's reading of it is that her mum's got a bloke.

The film is obviously about identity, discovering who we are and where we're from. It's about the need to share our thoughts and fears. Would you say there's a fundamental message in the film: we're better off telling the truth?

Of course the film is about identity. There's the whole thing about

the identity of Hortense and Roxanne, but also the individual identities of all the people Maurice takes portraits of, people who are momentarily being corralled into an idealised version of themselves. So there's a conventionally beautiful woman who's had her face mutilated. Then there's a man who believes he still has rights that have long since ceased to be his – the guy who used to own Maurice's shop. And, of course, Hortense is in the business of seeing. So it resonates throughout the film, this whole thing of what we are, what we really are, how we appear to other people, how other people perceive us. As with so many of my films, it's all about the done thing. *Topsy-Turvy* is about mirrors and masks. Specifically, this really is a film about secrets and lies.

It's also a film about a black daughter discovering her white mother, yet race isn't a central issue in the film.

It is an issue but it's dealt with by its implicit absence as an issue. The criticism that I've had from some quarters about the film's failure to deal with race is ridiculous, because it deals with it head on – by not making it an issue, as I say. There are black people and white people in the film, and they get on with it. It's a modern film.

There was also criticism somewhere along the line that the film marginalises black people. 'Why don't you see her family?' came the question. 'You only see her family at the funeral or in a long shot in the house.' The answer to that is simple: that's not what the film was about. And, in fact, those actors were wheeled in at short notice to sketch those characters in. It's very definitely not a film about an adoptive family. As I've said, I felt the real adoption issues are the problems of the adoptee and of the mother who gives her baby away.

Hortense is entering her blood family's lives rather than them entering hers.

Exactly. That's what it's about. The other thing that's widely debated, not least amongst black people, is whether Hortense ought not to look more mixed-race. I was initially concerned, but Marianne knew loads of examples of very dark black people with mixed parents. But it still comes up in discussion now and again.

When Hortense turns up for the barbecue, Monica is initially surprised to see her. Some critics decided that Monica's response brands her a racist.

People either get what's happening at that moment or they don't. Monica thinks Hortense is a Jehovah's Witness, a God botherer. She's certainly not expecting the likes of her to turn up at the house. It doesn't mean she's racist. To borrow from the name of Mikhail Romm's film *Ordinary Fascism*, this is ordinary racism. Which is to say that Monica is simply not expecting a smartly dressed black woman to show up. She doesn't open the door and say, 'Oh hi, come in!' She knows Cynthia's friend is due, but she's not expecting her to be black. Which doesn't make her a racist.

As an aside, I went to Tokyo with *Secrets & Lies*. Marianne Jean-Baptiste had toured Japan with the RSC and she'd found it hard work walking down the street in Tokyo as a black woman. She tells it like it is. I was apprehensive. The film is obviously about a white woman with a black kid. When I got there I said very gently that I was worried about the response; they said there was absolutely nothing to worry about; it's the most Japanese story, secrets and lies. Japanese society is all about face . . . It did very well there.

Let's talk about the mise-en-scène of the barbecue scene.

Sure. One question I get asked a lot is about the static shot around the garden table. People want to know why it's like that. Actually, we'd seen the rushes of the scene in the cafe and had a sense that we'd probably hold that single two-shot. The garden-table scene was conceived and shot as a single static shot. If you look at it, it's obvious that it's been scripted and choreographed simultaneously, which is what I do anyway.

From a *mise-en-scène* point of view, the reason I felt it proper to have that static shot – which is preceded by a wide, subtle tracking shot looking down at them when Hortense arrives – is because I knew that when they all moved inside once it's started to rain and finally the shit hits the fan, there would be lots of cuts and the action would become very heightened and intense. In editing terms, fireworks would be going off all over the place. Because I knew the audience would be waiting for everyone to find out who

Hortense really is, I thought if you had it all going on in one frame, it would leave you as the audience to do all the work and the wondering.

There are all sorts of undercurrents on all kinds of levels, but everyone is just getting on with the event really. In practical terms, it took a massive amount of rehearsal to define it. So, for example, Maurice doesn't come and sit in the downstage position, as he'd block our view. Instead, he leans on the wall for a while, which seems very right for his character. Apart from anything else, although actors can learn their lines, food and drink don't always behave predictably . . .

Behind the fence at the back of the garden is a main road. When we did a recce we thought the house was great, apart from the traffic noise from this road. The location guy said it would be fine: we'd clear it with the cops, who would allow us to stop the traffic. But when it came to it the cops didn't want to know. Both the scene when Hortense comes out into the garden as they're having drinks and that very complicated barbecue scene are completely post-synched, also known as additional dialogue recording (ADR).

Way back, I'd never have touched ADR. I was an absolute purist. But when I finally had to do it for various scenes and learned how to do it, I discovered that because the dialogue in my films is so organic and so thorough, even three or four months later when the cast have to come back and do the odd line they are absolutely plugged into it. So there is quite a lot of post-synch stuff in my films, though only when necessary.

The important thing is the relation in this scene between the conception of the shot and what is happening dramatically and narratively at that point. The audience has to make decisions about where to look and who to worry about. It adds to the 'Oh my God, what's going to happen next?' aspect of it. Once you get inside, each moment is a clear progression dramatically and narratively.

So, you get the textural contrast between the wide, static shot and lots of close-up intercutting.

As you say, the audience is anticipating so much by the time they all move inside everyone's position becomes vital; had they sat in different places the dynamics would have changed, however subtly.

Well, of course, that's right. Sometimes things happen in improvisations, and then I reorganise it so it's more conducive to what needs to happen. Which is all any director would do. This is characteristic of all my films, but this film and that location are as good an example as any. As in *Grown-Ups*, the details of the event are informed by the characteristics of the location. For example, when Hortense goes to the loo, the loo happens to be in a certain place – adjacent to the dining room. If there had been no downstairs loo and she'd had to go upstairs, the dynamics – the scene itself – would have been different. The narrative, given time jumps, would still have worked, but the fact is that she could go straight in. I had her going in and sitting on the closed loo seat, but when it came to shooting Dick suggested she lean on the door instead. Therefore, when the door is open, you see everyone in soft focus behind her. In the same massive improvisation, Claire Rushbrook as Roxanne cleared off out of the house completely with her boyfriend. We had to go and find them.

I assume that's because she was upset in character rather than thinking she ought to be upset.

Totally. There could be no other reason; those are the rules of engagement. Although there was a ten-hour improvisation, it never got to the final revelations you see in the film because she'd bugged off. When I structured the dramatic action, it was essential to bring her back into the house. Now, there was a bus stop literally where you see it near the house, and I suggested she'd get a bus. She agreed. So we did another improvisation in which she and Paul went and waited at the bus stop. Maurice went over but couldn't persuade her to come back. We did several improvisations investigating the situation, between which Claire and I discussed Roxanne's motivation rigorously. She very properly insisted there was no way Roxanne was going back. Finally, we discovered that if Paul suggested she return to the house, she would give in. She was impressed by him taking some initiative for once, which was also great for me because it ended his character's journey, gave him a dramatic function. Once we got them back inside, we could tease out the rest of the revelations. Which is just what happened.

Everyone comes out of the barbecue and house scene pretty well, considering what's just been revealed.

They certainly come out of it changed.

Even the audience feels a palpable sense of relief.

Totally.

Career Girls (1997)

Annie (Lynda Steadman) travels from Wakefield to London to stay with Hannah (Katrin Cartlidge), a college flatmate she hasn't seen for six years. They are both smart, single, professional women. Flashbacks to their time as students in London in the late 1980s show what they were once like. Annie is a psychology student, a pretty straightforward young woman prone to eczema and low-level anxiety. Hannah, meanwhile, is the English major with a caustic wit who likes to introduce herself as 'Han-nah'. She is disillusioned and angry; she rages about her alcoholic mother, whom she calls a 'fuckin' bitch'.

They are unlikely friends – Annie is initially sensitive to Hannah's constant teasing and verbal jousting – who over time grow close. They bond over The Cure and discover their fathers left when they were both eight years old. Annie has been crying ever since, while Hannah hasn't cried since she was nine. They move into a flat above a Chinese takeaway when they have grown bored of sharing a flat with Claire (Kate Byers).

Meeting up again at thirty, it quickly becomes clear that Hannah may be a successful retail executive but she has lost nothing of her blunt manner. Showing Annie round her flat, she says, 'Er – there's the bathroom, if you want to have a crap.' Hannah tells Annie she's thinking of buying a flat. Annie is impressed; not brave enough to live alone, she is still at home with her mother. Hannah has suggested they have a look at some overpriced flats for the hell of it.

A flashback shows Ricky (Mark Benton) – a kind, fat, dishevelled psychology student addicted to takeaways – temporarily sleeping on Hannah and Annie's sofa. He soon declares his love for