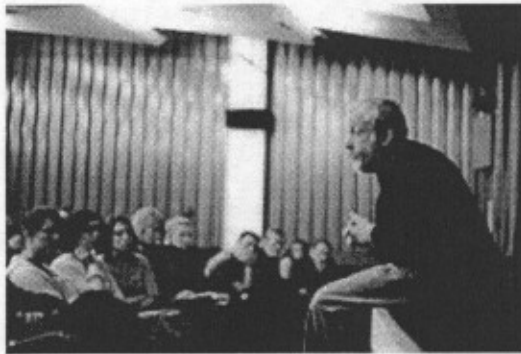


MIKE LEIGH - DIRECTORS ON ACTORS & ACTORS ON DIRECTORS



Mike Leigh

WORKING WITH ACTORS

Mike Leigh: I know that what I am on the whole mostly expected to talk about here is the whole thing of working with actors creatively, and how I work with actors, how I direct actors. I take it that most people are aware that what I do is to work with actors in a completely creative way and to make the characters with the actors in order to make the film.

But it's impossible for me to talk about the business of working with actors, of directing actors, in isolation from the whole matter of making the film. In other words, all the ways that I've developed over the years, to work with actors can't really be understood – are in fact meaningless – if you don't look at them in the context of the actual total film-making process. I cannot – and there is no need to – isolate the process of

working with the actors (although that is primarily what I'm going to talk about), without constantly remembering that what motivates the process – the processes that I use – are the needs of the organic whole of the film, and, in fact, of the film-making itself.

In other words, the conception of the film, what in conventional terms would be the writing of the film, the devising of the whole thing, the structure of the film, all the cinematic elements of the film, the dramatic shape and meaning of the film and indeed the requirements of shooting a film are all inextricably interrelated to the organic process of working with actors to create the characters. These things are not separate; they're part of the whole.

What I have to make clear (again, in order for you to understand a bit about how I work with actors) is that for me personally the distinction between writing and directing, between the two disciplines of writing and directing, does not exist. I must stress that what I do and the way I work with actors is very idiosyncratic and personal and, on the whole, eccentric and fairly zany, really, (but you may take from anything I might talk about things that may be useful to apply to the various kinds of work that you all do. For me, the barrier between writing and directing is non-existent. There should be one phrase for it: it's making films.

How I make films demands certain basic starting premises, certain basic conditions. The first condition is that the script (if you insist on calling it a script), that is to say, what happens in the film, the structure of the film and in detail who says what and all the rest of it, and indeed the shots of the film and everything else, that the script grows. It's something we arrive at organically through a long process of preparation. In short, for me, taking alongside me actors and everybody else involved in the project, the actual making of the film is a journey of discovery in which we find out what the film is.

That means that sometimes I start off with very, very loose and vague notions and sometimes they're more specific, depending on the film. But the fact is that the film we finally make is a film that doesn't in any actual manifest way exist until we've made it.

You may say, "What's new about that? That's what film-making is." And if you say that, then I absolutely agree with you. However, what everybody in this room knows only too well is that in conventional film-making, the idea is that a film exists in its script form and all you have to do is make it – and hey presto, there's the film. But the fact of the matter is that no film exists in its script form; all that exists is a script. And, as you all know, from your greater or lesser painful experiences, it's entirely possible for the existence of the script to be an inhibiting factor in the discovery of the film.

So what I managed to start to do way back in the sixties, was to return to the old, basic, raw conventions of film-making that existed when film began, long before the talkies came in. Which is that a film is something that you go out and create, that you make. The fact is, nobody needs to know precisely what it's going to be. You don't need to. I don't need to know exactly what it's going to be. I need to be driven by a particular preoccupation, a particular feeling, a particular idea – something I feel I want to say, or, indeed, a number of elements that interrelate. Or at least I need to be driven by a sense of what those things might be.

Sometimes, if you were to say to me at various stages of the development of the film, right through the whole process, right through into post-production, actually, "Exactly what is it that you are saying?" quite often I don't know the answer. As we all know – I'm not saying anything that's new, really – the creative process applied to a medium as complex, as sophisticated as the cinema, is a combination – must be a combination – of your intuitive and your intellectual, your objective, your political motivation, your sense of things, all kinds of stuff, which is not necessarily easily pinned down in a totally rational and logical way at each stage of the game. It's a creative, investigative thing.

One of the things that's essential for me to be able to achieve the conditions in which to work with actors is to be able to make the film without any stated commitment as to what it will eventually become. In other words, the ideal investors give us the money and say, "Go away and make the film. When you've made the film, we'll find out what it is."

You may say, "Hang on a minute. That's pretty difficult." And of course it is. I have made seventeen full-length films but there are so many projects that didn't happen. Because... "No-one would give us the money?" is the first candidate.

Later I'll come back to what I'm suggesting is a very important thing that I've had to lay out first, which is that film-making is not just a matter of the director and the actor. Everything must relate in some way to the overall conception of the film, the sense of the feel, the spirit, the style of the film, the nature of the narrative that you're going to create, etc.

I'll talk now about the actual business of working with the actors.

There are actors and actors, as everybody here knows. You could say, well, there are good actors and bad actors, and that's also true. But also there are different kinds of actors. On the whole what I do only works with intelligent actors (and we all know there are a lot of stupid actors around in the

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world). It really does only work with people who are bright, but also, more particularly, it really only actually works with actors who are, in a general sense, what I would call "character actors". In other words, people who are not just able to play themselves, but who can go beyond themselves and indeed are motivated to do so because they have an interest, a compulsion to look at the world and explore and create and reflect different kinds of people and various sections of society. There are actors around who can do that and that's what it's all about, and on the whole those are the sort of actors that I look for.

How do I audition actors? How do I look for actors? How does it work? Especially if I don't know how the film's going to develop. Well, as to not knowing what it's going to be like, it may be that I actually have got a very open brief for myself and I'm really not at all sure what the film is but I've just got a feeling or a sense of it. It may be, in certain cases – the most extreme and obvious example is a film I made a few years ago called *Topsy-Turvy*, which was a historical film about the theatre and where there were very specific issues that we knew we were going to deal with. But I may have some kind of notion about the development of a film. For example, I may think it's going to focus on a family in some way? So I may have the idea of including an older person, or a brother and sister. Or I may have a notion that it needs a particular kind of guy in a certain sort of area. Those notions will be going on when I'm meeting and talking to actors, considering them for roles.

Often I'll be meeting new actors who I haven't come across before, and it may just be that somebody special comes in. I talk to them, I find out about them, I get them to just chat in a private way, and then I bring them back and do a little bit of work with them. It may be that an actor or an actress comes along and I just think, there are all sorts of possibilities for creating an interesting character with this particular person. Immediately that starts to happen, I make some kind of provisional discovery, which will be something in the film that I haven't previously thought of, just on the basis of meeting a particular actor and seeing the potential sort of character that actor may be able to create with me.

It's the same thing, way down the line of the process of film-making, as responding to a location, of going to a location and thinking, "Wow! It'll be great to do something in here!" And then seeing it, linking it up with the idea that you've got on the go. That really is in the nature of the whole creative process of film-making.

ASSEMBLING THE CAST

So I get together a cast of actors. When there are a lot of actors, I arrange it so they don't all start at once, because it's a waste of time. But I arrange it so that they join in gradually during the process and it slowly grows. And I really organise that on the basis of a series of notions as to who might be more likely to be central characters. They would start earlier and other people would join in later. But it doesn't preclude those people who join later from having a large part of the thing if it grows that way.

From a practical point of view, what happens is this: We decide when we're going to shoot the picture and for how long. "Hang on!?" you may exclaim. "If there's no script and you don't know what the film's going to be, how do you know what the budget's going to be?" That's an obvious question. Well, the budget on the whole is defined by getting as much as anyone will give us, given that there's no script. And that, funny enough, creates its own market value, because there is a fixed amount... My producer and I have been in situations often where he'll talk to people controlling the money and tell me, "Well, there's no problem about there being no script, but what about Nicole Kidman?"

Then I say, "Well, forget about it. I don't want to know, basically." Because obviously, what's important, apart from anything else, is to get together – not only should they be actors that I want to work with anyway and that are there for a good reason, but also you need to assemble a group of actors who can work together in a really democratic, ensemble spirit.

We establish that there is going to be a shoot that will run over a certain number of weeks. We then set up a long rehearsal period preceding the shoot that these days is usually about six months. That's a full-time, continuous, hard-working process. It isn't what some people call "work-shopping," it isn't a get-together three evenings a week, it's a proper, fully contracted, lengthy process. I've done lots of films in the past where the time frame was much shorter than that – you cut your cloth according to its length – but the fact of the matter is, nowadays it's about six months. It's however long a period of time that you need.

What goes on in that period, in broad terms, is that there comes into existence the whole world of the film, the whole three-dimensional world out of which my job ultimately is to distil, to carve, to create the film. But what gets created in that rehearsal period cannot be a random world. My job is to build it so that implicit in that world are the foundations of the film. The dramatic dynamics of the elements within that combination of characters and conflicts and relationships and everything else – that has to be implicitly the premise of the film.

One of the main practical ways of making everything function for the actors is this: I ask an actor to take part in the film and I say, "I will never tell you what the film is about. I can't tell you what your character is, we're going to create that in the rehearsals, in the process of making the film. And it's absolutely vital that you agree to enter into the spirit of a game, which is that you will never know anything about any of the other characters except what your character would know – at any stage of the proceedings." That is an absolutely fundamental principle.

I'd stress emphatically that there is nothing in that arrangement that involves being elusive, or enigmatic, or mystical, or mysterious, or about power, or control, or tricking anybody, or any of those things. It's nothing to do with any of that, it is practical. Because the substance of the material grows out of elaborate and extensive improvisations, it's utterly essential that in an improvisation the actor playing a character only knows what his or her character would actually know. That's fundamental, so that real, truthful tensions and relationships are engendered by the improvisations.

In order to organise the practicalities of everybody only being aware of what their character would know, we do have to go to enormous lengths sometimes to protect people from information, to make sure that certain people are in different places at different times and all the rest of it. It's quite complicated, but it's essential, and it works. Because it means that you really do have this organic, truthful foundation for the material that grows as you build the film.

That principle applies all the way through the process, as long as it needs to, right into the shooting. One of the myths is that at the end of the rehearsal period we've got the script and then we shoot. In fact, the creative process continues all the way through, so that I can, when it comes to the shooting stage, go on being investigative and creative and discovering the film.

It's important to tell you about that because what happens at the beginning of the working process, is that I work privately and individually with each actor. In other words, there are only the two of us in the session for a long while to start with, at the beginning of the process for each actor.

GETTING INTO CHARACTER

What happens? As I've already said, this is all about actors not playing themselves. You could easily get together some actors and declare, "Okay, well, you're lovers, you two, so improvise...", but that's not what it's about. As you will understand, what I'm concerned with is actually creating a microcosm, a picture of the world, which really is rooted in the way society is in all its detail.

One of the principles that underpins and motivates the way that I approach what I do and the way I view the function of an actor, the potential of an actor, is that I regard actors as creative artists, and that lies at the centre of the whole thing. An actor, to me, is not simply an idiot whose job is to learn the lines and not fall over the furniture and generally pretend to be somebody else's idea. That's not what it's all about. It is saying to actors, "Come and be a collaborative artist in your own right."

I start off by saying to each actor, "Make a list of as many people as you can think of who are so and so..." I give each actor a different specification depending on what I'm doing. On *Naked*, I just said to David Thewlis, whose character you will be familiar with, "Make a list of guys." And he made a list of 120 people that he knew.

We have long sessions lasting two hours, four hours each day, the actor and myself. And then I alternate with the other actors, people come and go, and it's very private because each actor only knows what he or she is doing. To start with, I get the actor merely to talk about each person, each real person that he or she knows in turn. After a while (sometimes a long while and sometimes quite quickly), depending on the actor and the character and where we're up to in the film and so forth, I choose somebody on their list and ask them to use that as a basis for a character. Quite frequently I might choose more than one person, sometimes three people, and we might build a character drawn from the sources.

What is going on during that preliminary process? First of all, I'm doing what I've already referred to a few times, which is, I'm already on my journey of discovery. I might have a notion floating around in my head. The actor talks about this person and that person, and they mention so-and-so and it resonates with something in my head, or it shifts something in my head, or it suddenly relates to something that one of the other characters is doing. In other words, I'm starting to see possibilities, because the job at the outset is to find somebody the actor knows that can serve as the starting point for the character.

You may say, "What use is it if the actor knows the person?" How useful is that from my point of view? The truth of the matter is that (a) as I say, the actor is a collaborating artist, (b) you have to remember – and this applies to all films, and every film you have or will make yourselves – that the script is the script, the idea is the idea, but what is on the screen is what is on the screen. Even if you write the greatest and most perfect script in the world, you're still going to get an actor whose characterisation will be the flesh and blood reality that exists in front of the camera when the camera turns over. In other words, there is a distinction, speaking scientifically about it, between the character – which is the idea of the character – and the characterisation, in other words, what the actor actually does.

In any instance, in any film, you're going to tap into the actor and his or her personality and resources and experiences, so what I embrace is the fact that, since that is a reality, let's make that earn its keep, let's make that worthwhile.

If there's no script, the actor has to have somewhere to start. You can't just say, "Okay, stand up and act." Act what? There's no scene to act, there's no action to act. What shall we act? If you say, "Okay, you know somebody called X and you knew this guy or this girl way back at school or you worked in this shop or whatever it was. Now start acting that person." The actor, operating as an artist of a kind, therefore has a source to plug into at the outset – just as an artist who's going to draw something has got a particular thing to draw. It's very basic and straightforward.

But that's only a starting point. As I say, you can make characters that change by all kinds of processes. First of all they will change in the way they interact with other people. They can change through decisions we make changing their circumstances. They can change through my working with the actor to actually alter the way the character may walk or speak, the character's cultural background, all sorts of things. But the important thing is that from the point of view of the actual creative process, the actor has always got something to plug into. Although it may grow and develop, and eventually the actor's not thinking about the original source person we started with, it means that there's a track there always to follow, so the actor's always got something to go back to, to motivate and to be connected to.

The question then is: How does that work? What do I actually do?

Now, parallel to what I'm describing, which is the primary job of bringing the content of the film, the substance of the film, into existence, parallel to that something else is going on from the very start. One of the things that you may particularly appreciate in my films is the fact that the acting is very confident, it's very solid, it's very grounded.

All acting – by which I mean acting in films and on television and in the theatre and, indeed, where it happens, on the radio – is susceptible under the pressures of performance and the practicalities of the performer having to stand up and do it. If many actors are in any way nervous or neurotic or unfocused or whatever it is, it's because of a lack of security. Actors, as we know, are prone to be as vulnerable as anybody. Acting is a very vulnerable kind of business.

Quite often on my films you get guys, spark electricians or guys on the crew, and they say, "It's funny, this film. The actors are really relaxed. Nobody's throwing a wobbly and nobody's having a tantrum and nobody's crying and they always know their lines precisely." Which is true. They do. And the reason is that there's been real preparation, there are real foundations.

You may say, "Well, obviously, if you rehearse for six months, of course it's secure." But it's not merely the fact of rehearsing for six months, which is obviously true, but not everybody in each movie rehearses for six months. Some people join in at a later stage. That's not really the point. The point is that I start and I work individually and privately – and by that I mean nobody else is there but me and the actor in the session to begin with, no assistants or anybody and certainly, lest anybody asks this question, at no stage of the entire process is there ever a camera or a recording machine of any kind, or a stills camera or anything. It's all absolutely just about what happens.

Not only is that one-to-one process important from the point of view of just finding and creating individual characters, but it's also important from the point of view of the actor becoming centred and focused and grounded in what he or she is doing. Although it's clear, I hope, from what I've said, that the thing about not knowing anything except what your character would know, is that you can create the dramatic material truthfully, interestingly enough, in my

entire experience of doing this I have never encountered an actor who felt excluded or compromised by not knowing anything except what his or her character would know. Every actor I've ever worked with, right across the board – that's a lot of actors – have always found it extremely satisfying and helpful in making them feel focused and comfortable. They get into the spirit of not only not knowing but not wanting to know.

YOU ARE THE CENTRE OF YOUR WORLD

Even if it's a main role or a minor role in the film, each actor sees his or her character as the centre of the whole thing – not egocentrically, but simply as a practical perspective. Just like everybody in this room, including me, we each see ourselves as the centre of the world in which we're living at this moment. You are not sitting, any of you, in a world in which Mike Leigh is the centre. You are the centre of your world. I just happen to be one of the characters in your life at this moment. When each actor, genuinely and actually, has an instinctive natural sense of that being the perspective, when each actor is able to have the time and the space to explore the character, to discover the character, and indeed be involved in decisions about the character's life and all sorts of other things – practical things, conceptual things – then it means that way down the line, on the shoot, the actor knows who he or she is and is secure and can tackle it.

Just to make that clearer, just to leap forward a bit in the whole thing: during the entire process of preparing the film the actors start individually and we start to build characters. Then I put characters together in all sorts of combinations, gradually, logically. If you remember my film *Secrets and Lies*, for example, at the beginning of the process the first two characters I worked with together were the brother and sister (the central character and her brother, the photographer) because I started with them as children. Obviously it's logical for that relationship to be built first through the years of their life before the wife comes in or the black daughter is born or the white daughter is born. Those happened logically at different stages.

Through a long period and through a great amount of discussion and improvisation the world starts to grow into existence. You deal with characters really living through years and years of their lives, moving towards what will eventually be the time present, the "Now" of the actual film. But let me remind you that of course this is about making a film. As we progress through this process, there on the horizon, getting daily nearer and nearer, is the moment when we're going to go out on location and start shooting a picture which has to have some sense of structure. We will be in designed, selected locations, and all kinds of decisions will be made on a practical film-making level.

Obviously I'm not tucked away with the actors in total isolation. While the whole thing is happening, the production designer and the costume designer, in particular, are starting to be around and to get a whiff, a smell, pick up, talk about, understand the characters. We begin to discuss the possibilities.

At a very early stage the cinematographer is present too, and he and I – it's always a guy that I happen to work with, Dick Pope – I will start sharing with him and the production designer and the costume designer and indeed the make-up designer, such ideas as are growing and nurturing. Because obviously, at the end of the day, when it comes to it, a film must be conceived in cinematic terms and not merely as a vehicle for the characters. The character and the conception, as I've already said, must be very much interrelated.

But from the point of view of the security of the actor that I was talking about a few minutes ago, it's important to observe the relationship not only between the actor and me, the director, but also the involvement in our process of the production designer and the costume designer and the make-up designer. From the earliest possible stage, the minute I say to an actor, "Okay, there's this person that we've decided we're going to base the character on. Do the person," I will ask that actor to start using some kind of costume, for example clothes that are more to do with the character than the actor, so that the actor can start to discover and be the character. The actor can start to acquire the important discipline of entering character and coming out of character. Throughout the entire process it's vital that this rule applies.

One of the myths about what I do is that it relates to some misunderstood notions of Method acting where the actor becomes the character and remains the character day and night, twenty-four hours round the clock, throughout the entire proceedings. I know actors who would be incapable of this sophisticated notion of going into character and then being that person in a completely organic way and then coming out of character and being able to be objective about what he or she did or said or felt or experienced during the improvisation, during the acting.

When I say to the actor right at the beginning, "Be the person," it's important to start to get the actor into the natural discipline of not feeling that acting is going to be about being interesting or performing consciously. Most of you will have experienced in one way or another the so-called improvisation workshops and all that kind of thing, where the object is to stand up and entertain. It's a given that actors are expected to stand up and be interesting. And indeed most acting in most films is about showing up and delivering the goods in front of the camera and making it interesting. It's essential, from the point of view of what I'm talking about, that right from the beginning, I get the actor, each actor, into the serious and proper discipline of forgetting about that.

You say, "Okay. Here is this person you've talked about, who you knew ten years ago. Here's a room." (We've got a room with chairs and a bed and a cupboard or whatever.) "Just start to be this person. Don't try and be interesting. Don't make anything happen. It's not a scene, it's just this person there in the room in real time, at the speed of real time – sixty minutes is sixty minutes and five minutes is five minutes – and I'm going to leave you alone for a while." I go away and leave him to it. This is what I do at the auditions, actually. And so the actor puts all the acting energy into being the character.

If you start with that very simple thing at the beginning of the whole process, gradually, as the character grows, and if you always, as I do, include a warm-up period so they actually can get into character, then when the actor starts to interact with other characters, the actor's in the character. The actor's got used to the idea of not having to make things happen, not having to be interesting.

THE ACTOR'S CONTRIBUTION

The cardinal rule, if you like, for making this kind of thing happen is that the actor is not being invited to be a writer. The actor is making a contribution by intuitive, spontaneous, truthful acting. The minute the actor starts to editorialise what would be interesting or what he or she thinks should happen, you're fucked, basically. Fucked from A to Z. So long as the actor is contributing through being the character, responding to whatever it is in a truthful and intelligent way, that is good news. If you've come here to ask me, "What is the key to what you do?" then this is one of the main keys to what I do.

As the whole thing develops and proceeds, a sophisticated character actor, in order to do what I've just described, to be organic and spontaneous in the situation but still hold on to the character, must be constantly making selective judgements. Not judgements, as I've already said, about what should happen or editorial or dramatic judgements but: "How would I react? How would this person react? How would he or she react?" It's a complex thing. I don't for a moment mean to suggest that the actor gets lost in a sort of total spontaneous reality.