

## Peterloo

Esteemed English director Mike Leigh has made 18 feature films since 1988, mostly closely observed slices of British lower or middle-class life, brimming with naturalistic performances from some of England's best actors. He has done this with modest budgets and eschewing big-money Hollywood enticements. He has also practiced a singular directing technique, offering his casts no scripts, but instead urging them, in character, to improvise their lines over time before final shooting.

Well into his career, in 1999, Leigh directed his first period piece, "Topsy-Turvy," an inventive biography of theater greats Gilbert and Sullivan creating one of their greatest operettas. Fifteen years later, he found his second historical subject with "Mr. Turner" (2014), a look at the later life of the great 19<sup>th</sup> C. English artist. (The director, in an interview—see below—noted that he has also made a fourth "historical" film, "Vera Drake" in 2004, about a kindly woman who performed illegal abortions in England in the 1950's.)

Now, he has again taken to an historical subject, this one on an epic scale: "Peterloo," a depiction of an infamous crushing of a people's assembly 200 years ago. The subject is unfamiliar to American audiences, and the picture is lengthy and at times quite sedate, but for history buffs, Anglophiles, and especially, Mike Leigh fans, it is a fascinating addition to his singular filmography.

After a brief opening featuring the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, the film sets the stage in Manchester during August 1819, focusing on a family of six, headed by Joshua and Nellie (Pearce Quigley and Maxine Peake), who are manual laborers in a cotton mill. In a time of economic depression, the family is sympathetic to the then-radical campaigns for equal civil and political rights for all free men. Joshua and his sons attend political meetings where local agitators, such as Samuel Bamford (Neil Bell), speak out for reform. Meanwhile, the local city magistrates spy on the radical movement, looking for an excuse to arrest its leaders. When a disgruntled rebel smashes the window of the coach of the effete Prince Regent (Tim McInnerny) in London, the Home Secretary (Karl Johnson) uses this as a pretext for suspending *habeas corpus*.

Bamford and a friend travel to London to hear the famous radical [Henry "Orator" Hunt](#) (Rory Kinnear) speak and recruit him to address a mass meeting at St Peter's Field in Manchester, where he stays at the home of reformer Joseph Johnson. ("Peter's Field" was combined by journalists of the day with Waterloo to produce the event's infamous name.) With intelligence from undercover Home Office agents, the magistrates plan to suppress Hunt's meeting by employing the local mounted militia and a regular army detachment.

On August 16, 1819, tens of thousands of people dressed in their best march into Manchester from surrounding towns, including Joshua and Nellie and their family. Bamford leads a procession from Middleton. Once Hunt begins to speak, a Reverend Ethelston reads the Riot Act to the crowd, demanding it to disperse. Yeomanry cavalry assault the peaceful assembly with sabers drawn, and arrest Hunt and Johnson. In an attempt to clear St Peter's Field, utter mayhem results in some 15 dead but that will also undergird the cause of reform in England.

“Peterloo,” perhaps because it carefully follows history and incorporates some real texts, does feel less improvised and more structured than Leigh’s usual work, and it does not skimp on historical detail. Also, for a director who favors open ended stories and avoids obvious moral judgements, he has identified clearly a set of villains, i.e., the hoary British aristocracy (the Prince Regent at the time is shown as a preening fop) and its local handmaidens, the Manchester magistrates.

From a man favoring the laboring class, “Peterloo” ends badly for that class—as its members lie bloodied in the square—while yet presaging a positive turning point in their fate. The British restrictions on the people’s voice would never be the same after Peterloo.

## **A Chat with Mike Leigh**

Greeting Mike Leigh, you find a bright-eyed, somewhat grizzled fellow in his mid-70’s, with a sneaky wit and a quiet pride in his methods and his unique career. The interview began with a question about why, after his long-running catalogue of pictures of contemporary life, he turned to history and, specifically, to the subject of the Peterloo massacre. He admitted it was a “break from tradition” with him but also because the event interested him and “it had never been filmed before.” Conveniently, too, 2019 was the bicentenary of the massacre. He also favored it because, like all of his films, it was a “film about real people.”

Asked about the actual texts from speeches and contemporary accounts of the time, Leigh concurred that he did, indeed, base some dialogue on real texts from real contemporary figures, but he incorporated these excerpts into his own script, which again used his improvisational method. He noted that he had used real texts before. For example, in “Topsy-Turvy,” there is a pivotal scene where Gilbert and Sullivan are sitting on a sofa when Sullivan announces that he wanted to stop writing operettas and devote himself to classical music. “What they say in the scene comes directly from the letters the two exchanged at the time,” Leigh said.

In an historical film like “Peterloo,” Leigh remarked that “to get historical context where it is appropriate, I go back to the source, though one must distill that into dialogue,” such as the speeches by Henry Hunt. “Hunt was a narcissistic character,” added Leigh. The fact that, upon arrival at the field, Hunt wanted to change the venue of his speech “shows his ego.”

He added: “I am a dramatist, not an historian. I mix real and fictitious characters.” He offered an example: “There was a real (Joseph) Johnson, but I invented his wife—and her maid-- to fill out those scenes. No one knows anything about her.” He concluded: “In the end, the only real difference between my earlier (domestic) films and my historical films is displaying details that actually happened, otherwise you just stay true to the human element.”

A director can take other liberties, too. Leigh mentioned one time sequence that he “hoped no one will notice.” The film opens with a grim staging of the battle of Waterloo in 1815 then quickly finesses several years in Manchester until the events of 1819. Thus, for example, the young nephew of the family featured in “Peterloo” doesn’t age at all in four years, and “nobody noticed.” By the way, “not one frame was shot in

Manchester.” The main location was in Tillbury, southeast of London. The cotton mill in the film was shot in Kent, an historic one built during the reign of Henry VIII.

The film’s climatic attack scene was unlike anything Leigh had ever done before. When I remarked that it was his first real battle scene in his films, or expression of serious violence, Leigh interrupted, “except for those with two or three people on a staircase in the domestic dramas.” The “Peterloo” fight scene was achieved with “no drone or helicopter shots,” Leigh noted, “but just by keeping the camera to the ground.” He added: “No film score accompanied the slaughter. It was all rehearsed very carefully... Horses were trained horses, and we used a military historian to make sure the scenes were right.”

Leigh confirmed that he always works with a group of actors he has worked with before. Among the members of the Leigh “stock company,” he mentioned that “the record holder is Lesley Manville” who has worked with him on seven pictures (though not in this one). “I seek out good character actors, those who are versatile and don’t just play themselves...those who are not ‘actorish.’”

Financing his distinct films has always been difficult for the director, but “Peterloo,” his most expensive film to date, was financed amply by Amazon Studios—the first time they had worked with him. “They came through with the money we wanted, and they never interfered at all. It was lovely.”

Already released in Great Britain, the film did decent box office. But Leigh noted, irascibly, that “the right-wing press condemned the movie wholesale, as they have for years, dismissing it as too long and full of long, boring speeches.”