

John Plotz: Hello and welcome to Recall This Book. This is John Plotz, today your solo host traveling the globe, at least as far as southern Ohio, to bring you an interview with the filmmaker, Mike Leigh, a seven-time Oscar nominee, winner of various BAFTA Awards, born Manchester in 1943, and making remarkable films for almost half a century now.

So who's your favorite Mike Leigh? Is it the sly comic genius who condenses ordinary life into unforgettable vignettes? That would be something like *Life Is Sweet* or *High Hopes* or *Naked*. Or do you go instead for the grit, the squalor, and awkwardness of what it means to be stuck in class-based social misery, or to try to fake your way out of it? That would be films like *Abigail's Party*, *Nuts in May*, *Meantime*, *Hard Labour*. Or how about his more recent "period films"? He calls them that in contrast to what he calls the "chocolate box style" of history film making. Those would be films like *Topsy-Turvy* and *Mr. Turner*, which reveal that even such lauded 19th century types as Gilbert and Sullivan had ordinary lives worth depicting in their banality.

John Plotz: If you're still drawing a blank, google him and I'll bet you find a film that you want to watch right away. I'll wait. Well, no, actually, I won't wait, but you do have something to look forward to after this interview. So when he and I sat down to talk (at a Victorianist convention in Columbus, Ohio no less) our conversation ranged from method acting to movies I've never seen but should've, to improvisation and John Cassavetes to when you can say "fuck" on British TV (turns out to be after 9:00 PM)--and that's only the first 20 minutes. He also talked about James Thurber and effortlessly shot down my feeble question about close-ups. His point, which I thought was actually very compelling, was that he's more interested in making a world for the viewer than he is making a series of well-composed shots. So the way he put it is, It's neither slice of life, nor is it just a shot confection. Instead, it's something in between. But our conversation began with his mourning the absence of ordinary sound of working-class voices from the 19th century. Why only famous people?

Mike Leigh: What fascinates me about this is, of course, that they never--this is really interesting, which came up in research for various historical things--it's that they recorded famous people, and it really took ages for anyone to spot that it would be good to record ordinary people. So the archive, there are all these very early recordings of famous people sort of rather formally saying things or reading things or whatever.

John Plotz: Yeah. I like the [Robert] Browning because he forgets the words in the middle, so it becomes informal.

Mike Leigh: Yeah, there you go. But actually, when you start digging around for *vox pop.*, it's actually, and really, even the BBC up till World War II was still, if they made documentaries on the radio about ordinary people, they'd write down speeches for them to read out.

John Plotz: I didn't know that.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. Although, there are recordings in the National Sound Archive. When we were researching *Mr. Turner*, Marian Bailey (who plays Mrs. Booth) found these recordings, (because she obviously was the one from Kent) found these recordings of very old guys recorded in the 1920s talking this Kentish dialect, which she found very useful, which we built into some of how she talks and what she says.

John Plotz: When you say that, I remember there used to be these BBC accent records.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. But it's fascinating that those very early late 19th century recordings only recorded famous people. It never occurred to anyone to go into the street and pick up *vox pop.*

John Plotz: Did you see that Peter Jackson movie about World War I?

Mike Leigh: Oh, yeah.

John Plotz: It's amazing, isn't it, what he does?

Mike Leigh: Very good. Really good.

John Plotz: Yeah. But he doesn't have the voices. He just has the lip-readers.

Mike Leigh: Of course, of course. But lovely job, actually.

John Plotz: Yeah, but it's crazy to think about that you would have accurate visual capture of people, but you wouldn't have their actual voices.

Mike Leigh: It never occurred to anyone. It's extraordinary. And the amount of footage of ordinary people doing ordinary things on film...

John Plotz: Right. People leaving a factory. Yes, the *actualities*.

Mike Leigh: Everything. When we sat down to do *Topsy-Turvy*, the BFI gave us two hours of footage shot in and around London between 1896 and 1901, and there was two hours of it. It's a massive amount. The thing was only invented in 1896, and within minutes it seemed people had cameras all over.

John Plotz: I went and looked at that same footage. I was writing a book about crowds in the 19th century.

Mike Leigh: Oh, there you go.

John Plotz: I looked to the BFI. I saw some of that. It's amazing.

Mike Leigh: There's massive amounts of it.

John Plotz: Totally.

Mike Leigh: They filmed everything, and it never occurred to anyone to record. It's extraordinary isn't it, really?

John Plotz: Yeah. Actually, that leads into one question I wanted to ask you, Mike, which is about, for you, the differences between your TV films and your films. Were the TV films ... Does that category make sense, things like *Nuts in May*?

Mike Leigh: What's the question?

John Plotz: Well, the question is, formally, was that different? It wasn't tape versus film or anything like that?

Mike Leigh: No. The only things I did on tape were those studio productions, *Abigail's Party* and *The Permissive Society*, which were five camera studio jobs. But everything else was on film, so they were films. We didn't obviously make them to the same motion-picture standards that we would with a 35mm feature film, of course.

John Plotz: Does that mean you were using 16mm?

Mike Leigh: Oh, on 16mm. Yeah. But then even *Vera Drake* was shot on Super 16, believe it or not, because of the quality we could get. No, they were films, and I regard them as films.

John Plotz: As films.

Mike Leigh: Nothing about them fundamentally was any different from making a movie, really.

John Plotz: And were you caught up in any TV constraints? Like, in America it goes hour by hour, but I guess in Britain, like the TV slots... They didn't tell you it has to be 92 minutes exactly or anything like that?

Mike Leigh: No, they did, but they were very, very fluid about it actually. So I mean, like, *Four Days in July*, which was my film about Northern Ireland, was supposed to be, I think, 75 minutes, and it was actually 96 minutes. They made a fuss for about two seconds, but the fact was unlike ITV where they had commercial breaks and all of that, like here, it didn't really matter. It was actually flexible and fluid, and the only constraint of a sensorial nature was that you couldn't say "fuck."

John Plotz: Mm-hmm. But you could show abortions, for example? That was all right?

Mike Leigh: I never ...

John Plotz: Oh, I mean ... Sorry.

Mike Leigh: No, I'm talking about my television films in the early days.

John Plotz: Yeah, but in *Hard Labour*, I just mean, sorry, you don't show an abortion, but the fact.

Mike Leigh: In *Hard Labour* there isn't--what abortion?

John Plotz: Oh, what am I thinking?

Mike Leigh: Well, they talk about it.

John Plotz: Sorry, yeah.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. No, no. But you couldn't say "fuck." The first film I made where anybody said "fuck" was *Mean Time*, which was made for Channel 4. We calculated. We knew what time it would go out, and therefore by what stage in the film after the 9:00. It was the 9:00 threshold.

John Plotz: 9:00 hour, mm-hmm.

Mike Leigh: But of course now you can say whatever you want, basically.

John Plotz: Yeah. I was going to ask you about *Meantime*. It's such an unbelievable cast in there. Was that Tim Roth's first film?

Mike Leigh: Second.

John Plotz: Second, wow. Did you do his first as well, or?

Mike Leigh: No, no, no, no. He was in a film that Alan Clarke made called *Made in Britain* just before that. That's really how I found him. Alan Clarke said, "This kid's good." Yeah, no, there were actors like Gary Oldman. The question is did we know, like Gary Oldman, We didn't know they were going to become mega-stars.

John Plotz: Yeah. But I guess the more general question is how do you think you got ... There's some people you have worked with for film after film, and then others just a couple of films.

Mike Leigh: And sometimes one.

John Plotz: Yeah. Was that always the idea, or did you--?

Mike Leigh: No, it's not an idea. It's not a project. That's not a policy. It's just the way it starts to happen. You work with someone and they're really good and you click. They are versatile, and because they're all character actors that I work with, so you go for it again. In some cases, again and again and again. But there's no construct in it, and there are people that I've worked with and want to work with again, and every time I'm doing something, they're not available and so on and so forth. There isn't a film where you don't see somebody that I've never worked with before being brilliant, not least young actors. There's no policy in it at all, actually. People talk about the *ensemble*. It's all rubbish, basically. People come and go.

John Plotz: Because I know a young filmmaker from Argentina who, I think inspired partly by you, has just an ensemble that he works with.

Mike Leigh: Well, I understand that. A *family form*. There's a kind of--

John Plotz: Yeah. That's what it feels like with his films.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. There is a sort of, there's obviously ... It isn't for me to talk about, but there is a sort of, I suppose, an inner sanctum of people who have worked with Mike Leigh, because we do stuff that doesn't happen on any other kind of film. They're very in the nature of the thing: It's sustained and long, people really have to do it as they're messing about with it. But not only do I resist the notion of an ensemble, but actually I resist it only because it simply isn't accurate. If some force or authority said, "Okay, here are these 10 actors, and you can only ever make films with these 10 actors," I would regard it as remarkably constraining actually. It has no inherent virtue at all. I can understand theater companies of certain kinds, for whom that has a kind of a logic, but in the nature of what I do, it just doesn't make any sense because it depends what you want to make a film about, really.

John Plotz: Well, has it ever been the case that something happened during one film that then triggered on to the next film and you're like, "Oh, right. We can't explore this in this film, but then--"

Mike Leigh: No. In terms of the content and the ideas, no. And in fact, you can see by looking at the films that, whilst they're all tarred with the same brush, they all are pretty different from each other in all sorts of ways. No, that simply doesn't occur because, again, that's the same thing really.

John Plotz: That's the family.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. Each film is a new proposition, really. All sorts of considerations arise when you have the freedom to have a blank canvas afresh each time, because then you can sort of ... You see, in the end--I think this is one of the underlying points of what we're talking about-- is I'm not concerned in the first analysis with the nature of the ensemble, I'm concerned with the subject matter. I'm concerned with the world out there, so when I look in that direction, there's that film. When I look in this direction, there's another film. To be constrained by either trying to relate that film with this one or trying to keep the same actors or whatever, those would be distractions and a red herring really.

John Plotz: So in terms of the world-

Mike Leigh: Just one other thing about the actors thing, apart from anything else, we are blessed in the UK with an incredible resource of actors. There are too many actors to get round to. That's the truth of it. There's several hundred more each year from the drama school, so the idea of sort of confining it to just a few actors in an exclusive way would be eccentric.

John Plotz: Did you intend to be an actor when you started at RADA?

Mike Leigh: No.

John Plotz: No.

Mike Leigh: I wanted to know about stuff.

John Plotz: I see. So even at 17 or 18, you knew it wasn't for you?

Mike Leigh: Well, yes insofar as one can report that “at 17 or 18 I knew exactly.” My journey to RADA at the age of 17 with amazingly a scholarship actually, was as much as anything to *escape* home and escape Manchester and get to London and do all that, and to escape the pressure that was put on to be academic. It was the one thing you could do where you didn't need academic qualifications. You just had to pass the audition, and I'd been in plays, I'd put on shows, I'd written stuff. I'd edited, by that time, two different magazines. I drew cartoons. I did all of that.

John Plotz: Were you aware of the *angry young men* and all that stuff?

Mike Leigh: Well, yes. Yes. I remember drawing a caricature of an Angry Young Man to advertise the school, literally a debating society, but I was 13 when *Look Back in Anger*, so you kind of knew it was happening, but you weren't *on it* completely.

John Plotz: Was it all London, or did it have a northern life as well?

Mike Leigh: It did, but again, things filtered through. You read the paper or whatever...But anyhow, the main thing was ... But I knew it was all about making things up and writing about it. I suppose if I think about it, I don't know that I ruled out being an actor. But within minutes of being at RADA, I knew that it was about directing, not least because RADA was rubbish at that time. It was. It was old-fashioned, stale. You did plays, you didn't discuss the plays, you learnt the lines, you learnt the moves. You didn't fall over the furniture. You never discussed *what is this?* There was no discussion about backstory. There were no improvisation and all of that, and it took minutes to start to react against that. It was immensely useful for that point of view. Also, I hit town in September, 1960. Well, the zeitgeist was about to erupt. *Shadows* was playing as I arrived. The *Nouvelle Vague* was on the go. Peter Brook was starting to do his thing.

John Plotz: Oh, Peter Brook. Right.

Mike Leigh: Yeah, and then there were, of course, before too long, there were *happenings* and all the rest of that stuff going on, and it was all happening in art. I remember arriving in London and within a

week, in the first week, going to the great Picasso exhibition at The Tate, which was a mind-blower. Here's the other thing, which is really important. Up to that point in time in Manchester, and I went to the movies all the time as much as possible from the earliest age, and I saw-

John Plotz: And that being mostly Hollywood?

Mike Leigh: All Hollywood or British movies. I never saw a film that wasn't in English, and within a week of being in London, somebody said, "Oh, they're showing a film at this arts festival." It was an extraordinary film about this knight playing chess with ...

John Plotz: Oh, so you saw *The Seventh Seal*..?

Mike Leigh: Yeah.

John Plotz: Was there a voiceover or something, or how did they do it? Or subtitles?

Mike Leigh: Subtitles. Yeah, but the point was we're in London. Of course, I discovered world cinema, the whole thing. The issue of directing and making stuff was there to be...was obvious. By the time I left the thing, I'd put on a production of *The Caretaker* by Pinter, which I also designed. That's what it was about, and then I went on and I acted a bit. I very usefully found myself in a movie, a feature film.

John Plotz: I saw that on your Wikipedia page.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. *Two Left Feet*, and what was great, I had a very minor role, but I used to go every day. They used to say, "We haven't called you. You're not in this." I said, "I'm just here to watch," and it was fantastic. It was an old-fashioned studio movie directed by Roy Ward Baker, who famously directed *Titanic*, and it was simply ... Well, then I went to Camberwell Art School on the foundation course for a year, I did a year in the theater design school of the Central School of Art, and I went to the London Film School at nighttime. So I did all that, then I started to make plays.

John Plotz: Was there snobbery in the theater world, like “we wouldn't touch film with a ten-foot pole” kind of thing? Or were people always looking to get into film? Was there a fluid boundary between theater and film or a stick there?

Mike Leigh: Yeah, I would say so. Of course, you have to reflect on what we made. No, there was, because in fact, we're talking about the early '60s, therefore we're talking about the period of the British New Wave. Lindsay Anderson, Carol Rice, Tony Richardson, John Schlesinger, etc. Those guys, first of all, all of those films--and this is incidentally why I never felt completely personally at one with what they were...What was great is they were looking at working-class life. However, the case was that all of those films, without exception, were adaptations of either plays from the Royal Court Theatre or novels. There were no, whereas ... So whilst looking at those and digesting those, one was also looking at, for example, *À bout de souffle*, which of course is, as it were, painted on the canvas. It's raw. It's film, so a lot to think about.

Mike Leigh: But as to the fluidity between theater and film, no. The Royal Court Theatre and Woodfall Films, who made all those films, were the same guys, really. So there was--I don't think there was a snobbery particularly. There might have been with some very old fashioned people who would have taught us at the academy, but even the oldest of them, movies had been around as long as they had. We were taught in the first term by a woman called Nell Carter. She was a little old bird who-

John Plotz: This is RADA now?

Mike Leigh: RADA.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Mike Leigh: Who had played Juliet in Henry Irving's last season at The Lyceum in 1899.

John Plotz: Oh, god. Wow. Yeah, talk about Victorian connections. Yeah, that's amazing. Wow.

Mike Leigh: And of course, she was no radical director. It was very, very square. But movies wouldn't have been a novelty to her. They were happening when she was little.

John Plotz: Right. Yeah. So can I ask about the British New Wave? I've read about the Cassavetes connection for you, but I was wondering, like, yeah.

Mike Leigh: Well, just in passing, just around that.... I mean, the fact of *Shadows* particularly, at the moment one discovered it, the fact was it had been "improvised." That was a radical and remarkable thing. In passing though, it's not in the drift of what we obviously want to talk about, but in passing, whilst things like *The Murder of a Chinese Bookie*, for example (Is that what it's called?)

John Plotz: Yeah, I can't-

Mike Leigh: You don't know it. I've got a lot of respect for Cassavetes, but on the other hand not always, because quite a lot of the time what you are looking at are actors playing themselves and improvising on camera and letting their own shit hang out, as opposed to really depicting the world. Although it's got its own kind of dynamic quality, I sort of part company with it, considering what you said, because what I'm concerned with is not raw acting revealing its innards, improvising in front of the camera. It's about distilling the world and making it feel very precise, which isn't about actors. It's about the world.

John Plotz: Can I ask, I sort of had an inchoate question about it. It seems like looking at your education that there was a period of Method acting training, right? Was it the East 15 School?

Mike Leigh: No.

John Plotz: No?

Mike Leigh: No, I didn't train. I taught there.

John Plotz: Oh, you taught there.

Mike Leigh: Some people have written that I've trained there. That's rubbish. I taught there.

John Plotz: I'm glad you said that. Well, I'll correct Wikipedia then. Yeah.

Mike Leigh: There's such a lot of rubbish in Wikipedia.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Mike Leigh: I don't know who puts it in there. By the time I went, that school came out of Joan Littlewood's staff, and I went and taught there and made a play there, I think, as well. By that time it was 1968. I'd already been an assistant director at the ...No, no.

John Plotz: So Method and you have nothing in common, really? You don't have a-

Mike Leigh: No, of course one thought about it and knows about it, but if you want to talk about that, it's very straightforward. The idea of the actor finding the character within himself or herself.

John Plotz: Yeah, Marlon-Brando style.

Mike Leigh: Well, that's what they all do, and then sort of living and becoming the character and all that. It's as far down the other end of the spectrum from what I do with actors as you can get, because what I'm concerned in is that they are people very much able to play all sorts of different people, and when they play somebody, they totally are able to go into character, be in character, but they are able, with a discipline, to come out of character so they can be objective about it and then work with the material. Also, it's bad for you to sort of, particularly if it's a character who's traumatized, to become the character. It's rubbish basically. That makes no sense. So in that sense, I absolutely, whilst I respect the integrity and the intentions and the spirit of the Actor Studio, I completely, on a practical and philosophical level, part company from it.

John Plotz: Yeah. This feels related to me. You might not think it's related, but can I ask you, one of the things that I love about all your films but especially those early ones is the power of close-ups, the way you

use close-ups to just kind of sit with someone's face while they're experiencing something. Do you think of that as..?

Mike Leigh: No. Again, there's no kind of aesthetic or dramatic or cinematic agenda about it. When it needs to be in a close-up, it's a close-up. If it needs to be a long shot, it's a long shot. If it needs to track, it tracks. If it doesn't, there's no reason for the camera to move. It stays still. That's all there is to be said about it. I have no *philosophy of the close-up*. I don't think, with respect, I don't think it's especially accurate or true to talk about the earlier films in relation to the close-ups, which implies that we don't have close-ups in the later films.

John Plotz: No, no, I....

Mike Leigh: If you think about the opening shot of *Another Year*, for example, on Imelda Staunton, that's a massive close-up without anything preceding it, and you're thrown into this woman's crisis, and you're misled into thinking this is a film about this woman, and you hardly see her again.

John Plotz: Yes.

Mike Leigh: No, no. I have no ... It's the language of film, and it's there. It's like, in a similar way, *Russian Ark* notwithstanding, which has got its own logic, apparently, it would seem that Sam Mendes, produced by Steven Spielberg, which he's just finished, called *1917* about the First World War, and it's all in one shot.

John Plotz: Jesus.

Mike Leigh: Now, you think, "Oh, wow. How cinematic." Now, I've been-

John Plotz: Have you seen *Russian Ark*? I've never seen it.

Mike Leigh: Oh, yeah. You've never seen it?

John Plotz: No. Is it worth-

Mike Leigh: Well, when you do see it, it's worth getting hold of it and the documentary about making it. It's essential viewing. It's mad, but it's..

John Plotz: It's just so mad, yeah.

Mike Leigh: No, no, but anyway, here's the thing. This is related to this question of a fetish about close-ups.

John Plotz: And that's your word, not mine.

Mike Leigh: It is. No, it is. No, but I refer to it as something that you may have been inadvertently accusing me of.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Mike Leigh: If you say--and I've fallen into this trap on a few occasions--if you say, "I know what would be great. If we make all this work in a single tracking shot." You think, "Ah, that's great." That takes you there, so he moves there, and, "Oh, it's great. We can make that in it." There's a line, a danger-line that you cross where you suddenly know that what you're now doing is to justify the shot.

John Plotz: The shot, right. I see. You're letting the shot drive. I see.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. In no time, you realize that what you're putting together is bullshit basically, because actually if you simply create the action and then decide how to shoot it, that's what it's all about. I talk about that in the same breath as the idea that there is a thing about close-ups.

John Plotz: I hear what you're saying.

Mike Leigh: You could argue "wouldn't it be great to make a film where everything is in a long shot?" What does that mean? Some things are in long shot and some things you need to get in there and show.

John Plotz: Yeah. No, I hear you. That makes sense. Hey, can I say, my friend that you had dinner with last night, Ivan, told me that you were going to go visit the Thurber House.

Mike Leigh: Yeah.

John Plotz: Are you a Thurber fan?

Mike Leigh: Have been all my life.

John Plotz: Me too. Yeah.

Mike Leigh: All my life.

John Plotz: Yeah. Drawings and stories?

Mike Leigh: Oh, yeah.

John Plotz: Yeah. Okay.

Mike Leigh: Oh, yeah. When I was told that there's apparently a statue of a unicorn outside in the garden, well, that's great. I love that cartoon that they made in the 1950s of the unicorn in the garden.

John Plotz: I don't think I've seen it. No.

Mike Leigh: Oh, it's online. You'll find it. Find it.

John Plotz: I will, yeah.

Mike Leigh: They've animated it. It's a famous animation, but that simply was done in the style of his drawings. It's fantastic.

John Plotz: Oh, that's fantastic. Because I think the movie of *Secret Life of Walter Mitty* is good, but it doesn't feel like Thurber at all.

Mike Leigh: No, no. It's not. Why would it be? Why should it be and how could it be? Thurber exists on the page.

John Plotz: On the page, yeah.

Mike Leigh: Of course. But everything including *The 13 Clocks* and *The Wonderful World* and all that stuff.

John Plotz: Yeah. Those are childhood memories for me.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. In fact, my cousin, long since dead, sadly, adapted *The 13 Clocks* for the BBC radio way back when he was quite young and they did it. But yeah, and the cartoons. The great achievement of a man who was half blind and couldn't draw. There's these fantastic drawings.

John Plotz: Absolutely. That's kind of what I wanted to ask you, actually. I mean, the writing is unbelievable and the relationship to Mark Twain is fascinating. Yeah, but the drawing, the way the drawing comes from, yeah, more than half-blind, I think.

Mike Leigh: I know.

John Plotz: And getting blinder as he drew.

Mike Leigh: Yeah, but it's the actual...it's his *world* that really one resonates with.

John Plotz: Yeah. Right...

Mike Leigh: "What have you done with Dr. Millmoss?"

John Plotz: Exactly. That would be the first Mrs. Whatever sitting up on the...

Mike Leigh: Oh, yeah. I love that. "What do you mean, you heard a seal bark?"

John Plotz: Yeah. But they work well. My dad used to read them out loud to me as a kid.

Mike Leigh: Really?

John Plotz: The work. They don't just work on the page. They work as a voice as well.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. No, good. I look forward to that.

John Plotz: So another question I had for you was kind of other artforms you think about. You do drawing yourself, right, and have always done?

Mike Leigh: Well, I'm very lazy about it. I guess when I went to art school, I can draw.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Mike Leigh: I actually, in a parallel universe, I probably would have been a cartoonist, actually. But that should never be misreported as being *I was a cartoonist*. I drew.

John Plotz: Right.

Mike Leigh: No, I'm very ... And my son is a very successful illustrator.

John Plotz: Oh, wow.

Mike Leigh: One of my sons. The other one is a filmmaker. Toby Leigh is the illustrator. I'm into all sorts of stuff.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Mike Leigh: I saw a documentary in the London Film Festival literally a week ago, *Miles Davis, The Birth of the Blues*, which I heartily recommend. Terrific stuff. They talk to everybody, including all his various women.

John Plotz: Oh, that's sounds great.

Mike Leigh: There's lots of recording sessions and all of that. I still love all that stuff.

John Plotz: Yeah. So does the drawing ever figure into the film? Do you ever draw for set design or anything like that?

Mike Leigh: No.

John Plotz: No.

Mike Leigh: No, I work with- Actually, interesting that you say that, because in the early period when I was developing the so-called misnamed *improvised* play ...

John Plotz: Yes. What name do you prefer then?

Mike Leigh: Well, I only say that because sometimes it was *devised*, but the real point is ... Well, this is another matter.

John Plotz: Okay, yeah.

Mike Leigh: For years, I used to put, as you know, you've probably seen, "devised and directed." I changed it to "written and..." because that is really what I do. I'm a writer, and I changed it because it's more accurate, but also to avoid confusion so people don't actually think it's just a committee job, which it isn't. However, for the first sort of number of years when I put on plays on the sort of fringe theater before I could get to making movies and before I got better scope and better projects to do and it was done very cheaply. I also designed my own shows, then I started to work with designers. I work with the designers and they do all that. I don't do that.

John Plotz: Yeah. So I was sort of wondering, in terms of there's all these films that have inspired you. Are there other sorts of artwork that inspire you?

Mike Leigh: That's what you're asking me, yeah.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Mike Leigh: Yeah.

John Plotz: You've never done an adaptation. That's not your *métier*.

Mike Leigh: No. I'm not interested.

John Plotz: You're not interested.

Mike Leigh: There's no point.

John Plotz: I really take that point about that being one of the ways you're pushing yourself off from the New Wave.

Mike Leigh: No. Other people can do that. I have to say that the number of adaptations in existence that are really, really any good is very small, I think.

John Plotz: Yeah. The best ones aren't really adaptations. They're versions or something.

Mike Leigh: Well, maybe. I suppose if I was really going to be a fascist, I would ban all adaptations.

John Plotz: Really? But then you'd kill Tarkovsky. He'd have nothing.

Mike Leigh: Well, there you go. Well, you can't win them all. Tarkovsky was very nice when we were struggling to get *Bleak Moments*, my first film, shown in Moscow. Tarkovsky was very, very helpful and constructive--just in passing.

John Plotz: No kidding? Wow.

Mike Leigh: No, I mean, about nine months ago I was in a conversation, and Philip Roth came up.

John Plotz: Oh, yeah.

Mike Leigh: I said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Philip Roth. I read *Portnoy's Complaint*." Then I thought, "I've only read ever read *Portnoy's Complaint*," so in the last number of months, I've got pretty nearly only read and getting well through all of Philip Roth.

John Plotz: Wow. That's awesome.

Mike Leigh: It's just terrific.

John Plotz: I just interviewed Zadie Smith about a month ago, and she talked about Philip Roth for about 15 minutes.

Mike Leigh: There you go.

John Plotz: She's just obsessed with him.

Mike Leigh: And she's good. I like her.

John Plotz: She is good.

Mike Leigh: I like her stuff. Yeah.

John Plotz: So I'm asking about adaptation. It's more like things that, artworks that have really spoken to you.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. I keep having trouble with this question. You sort of go blank and don't know where to start, really.

John Plotz: No, but Philip Roth is a great one to think about.

Mike Leigh: No, but I get a fantastic buzz off Hopper, for example, but you can understand that. You're familiar with this town, are you?

John Plotz: Yeah.

Mike Leigh: So I went and spent a couple of hours in the cartoon ...

John Plotz: The Billy Ireland Cartoon Museum? That's fantastic.

Mike Leigh: I was just-

John Plotz: I was going to ask you about that, actually.

Mike Leigh: Oh, yeah.

John Plotz: That's great.

Mike Leigh: What a blow of a place. It's fantastic.

John Plotz: It is fantastic, and also the way it takes cartoons back to the early 19th century too, those German books.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. When we were working on Peterloo, it was just aghast to go back to territory I already was into, which is like Gillray and Rowlandson's early, that stuff. I don't know where to start. A lot of art. Obviously, Turner played an important part in it.

John Plotz: Is that a long-standing thing for you? Have you always loved Turner paintings before you thought, "I could do a film about him."

Mike Leigh: Oh, yeah. For a long time. I never noticed or was aware of Turner as a kid growing up. On my wall as a teenager were postcards of Picasso and Toulouse Lautrec. At that early stage, you thought, "Oh, Surrealism is great." I took Salvador Dali more seriously than I would take him now.

John Plotz: The clocks, yeah. When I was in college, everyone had the clocks.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. I think probably, insofar as I have no recollection of Turner registering, but I think it wouldn't have done, because I wouldn't have been perceptive enough to distinguish Turner from boring landscape painting so to speak. Then I was at art school, and I shared a place with a few guys. One guy, who's remained a close friend, had a big reproduction of "The Fighting Temeraire" on the wall, and then we started to go into The Tate and look at Turner, and you suddenly started to tweak it and sort of think, "This isn't just any old landscape painting. This is something else."

John Plotz: Well, you're lucky to have The Tate to have that happen to you, both for Blake and Turner.

Mike Leigh: Yeah, absolutely.

John Plotz: I don't know where else that could happen.

Mike Leigh: No, no, no, of course. But the point is, whether you're talking about George Grosz and Otto Dix or you're talking about Brecht and Weill, it doesn't matter. There's so much stuff. There is cinema. Of course, Olmi didn't make *The Tree of Wooden Clogs* until 1978, by which time I was well up and running, but that film is a massive blow away as far as I'm concerned.

John Plotz: I've never seen it. Okay.

Mike Leigh: I don't believe that.

John Plotz: I'm an idiot. What can I say?

Mike Leigh: Well, I don't think you're an idiot, certainly. You certainly are missing a trick or two.

John Plotz: Yeah, that's fantastic.

Mike Leigh: It's an amazing thing. I can't say Olmi is an influence in any strict sense. It's hard to talk about influences as such. I was definitely influenced by Beckett and Pinter, but as I say ...

John Plotz: Can I just say Beckett is fascinating in that sentence, because I think of Beckett as leaving everything out, whereas everything you're describing about your ethos is to try to get in.

Mike Leigh: Well, it is, but then of course the job is to distill it.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Mike Leigh: You wouldn't have to bend over backwards to see Beckett's influence somewhere along the line. If you look at *Bleak Moments*, which I'm sure you've seen, it is pretty distilled.

John Plotz: Yeah. It's not *slice of life*. It's not just let the camera run.

Mike Leigh: No, it's not, and slice of life is not what I do, but also *Bleak Moments* in particular, there are longer silences in *Bleak Moments* than any production of *Endgame*.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Mike Leigh: But I don't know. It's hard. There's so many things. Apart from anything else, I spend a huge amount of time listening to classical music.

John Plotz: Yeah. But can we circle back to Philip Roth, because that's really interesting to me.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. You understand that I've only spent the last nine months reading.

John Plotz: Nine months, I know. I'm not saying it's an influence, I'm just interesting in what resonates with you, how much what his novels do. He's an ensemble writer in a way, because his same characters keep coming back.

Mike Leigh: Yes. That's his thing. That is what's interesting.

John Plotz: That is what's interesting. *Ghost* comes and then *Exit Ghost* and *Zuckerman*.

Mike Leigh: Yeah, and also to do the thing which he does, which is a whole different ballgame, which is to dramatize himself and dish himself up in different guises, but it's still him. On the whole, I'm not interested in films about films. The only exception in my work is *Topsy-Turvy*, which is a film about theater, so I read Roth and you think, "Yeah, but this is a writer writing about writing." But that's his prerogative, and the real point is what does he do? What's it about? It's about humanity. Also, I come from a Jewish background, so there are things that are in there that just sort of resonate with the world I grew up in.

John Plotz: I saw you've done a play that sort of speaks to Jewish themes.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. *Two Thousand Years*.

John Plotz: *Two Thousand Years*, yeah.

Mike Leigh: I did, in 2005 at the Royal National Theatre. But Roth, that world sometimes, quite often in fact, resonates at certain levels. I recognize some of the characters.

John Plotz: Yeah. No, but the connection I was trying to make was that you were saying, even though *Topsy-Turvy* is, in a sense, I think you could call it a period piece, but it comes out of a life that you think you know.

Mike Leigh: Yeah, totally.

John Plotz: Not just in a historical way.

Mike Leigh: No, no, and as I said last night, we were turning the camera around on what we do, we who make plays and films and take very seriously the job of entertaining other people in our trivia.

John Plotz: Yeah. You said profound trivia, which I liked.

Mike Leigh: No, I always say that.

John Plotz: What does that mean to you when you say profound?

Mike Leigh: Well, it's just cheeky. Well, there's trivia and there's profound trivia. You can work that out for yourself.

John Plotz: Yeah. Can I ask what your new projects are now?

Mike Leigh: No.

John Plotz: Okay, fair enough.

Mike Leigh: Not the least because most of my films and all of my plays. Most of them, which means all of them except *Topsy-Turvy*, *Mr. Turner*, and *Peterloo*, have all been projects where we've said nothing to anybody, including the backers. We said, "Give us the money and we'll go off and develop a film," and the film comes out of that. They've all been made like that, and the one I'm going to do next, whatever it is, will be no exception. Therefore, I'm not saying anything to anybody, but the reason I, in any case, can't precisely say, wouldn't be able to even if I wanted to. There are millions of ideas going around in my head at any given moment, but it's because I don't know how much money I'm going to have. Until I know that, I will only know the size and scale of the canvas. Then I will be able to decide which direction to go in, but there's lots of possibilities. There's no shortage of things to deal with in the world at the moment.

John Plotz: Yeah. So does that mean you want to talk about Brexit, or do you not want to talk about Brexit?

Mike Leigh: I'll talk about Brexit. At this moment.

John Plotz: I know. Right now.

Mike Leigh: Even as we speak.

John Plotz: As we speak.

Mike Leigh: No, my partner, Marion, and her daughter just sent me a picture of themselves at the rally.

John Plotz: Oh, at the rally.

Mike Leigh: Which is going on all around Parliament while it's going. By now, it's probably over I should think.

John Plotz: Yeah. I here there's some Tories speaking at the rally.

Mike Leigh: Oh, yeah. Oh, there will be. Yeah, of course. No, well, what is there to say about ...? It is a 100% gilt-edged total disaster. It should never have happened. It's a complete folly. It's a complete waste of time. It's the most destructive, dangerous disease, which will last for decades.

John Plotz: You mean whatever the result of this, it will last for decades?

Mike Leigh: Well, if it was canceled and if ...

John Plotz: Second referendum or whatever.

Mike Leigh: Ordinary relations were restored, you might be disposed to say, "Well, then everything will be back to normal," but of course it won't because they'll riot from the people that still ignorantly want to leave.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Mike Leigh: But also a massive amount of time, energy and money has been expended and wasted on the half possibility. It's completely ridiculous and irresponsible at every level.

John Plotz: Do you take it as ridiculous and just a mad folly that somehow happened, or do you take it as symptomatic of a direction that Britain or maybe Britain and America are heading now?

Mike Leigh: Well, it's a direction in which the world is heading.

John Plotz: Yeah. That's what I fear.

Mike Leigh: Well, it's a fact. There's no question about it. The rise of the far right.

John Plotz: The ethnopopulist or ethnonationalist.

Mike Leigh: Everywhere. We are into-

John Plotz: 1930s territory.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. Actually, it's worse because we're in this age of mass communication, to which the 30s bore no resemblance whatever. That's got a great deal to do with it, the dissemination of-

John Plotz: Right. Yeah they had *Pathe*, we have Twitter.

Mike Leigh: Yeah, and beyond Twitter. Welcome to the 21st century. Now, after nearly two decades, we find ourselves in what we now recognize is actually the 21st century.

John Plotz: Yeah, right.

Mike Leigh: Yeah, no I far from wanting to talk about Brexit, apart from not wanting to talk Brexit. I think it's a total and devastating disaster, really.

John Plotz: Yeah. Are there any lights at the end of that tunnel? Anything about the 30s analogy that makes it look ... No? Nothing helpful?

Mike Leigh: Well, you tell me.

John Plotz: I don't know. I'm asking. I'm asking everyone that. I don't know.

Mike Leigh: It's hard to see it. It's hard to see it. As to Trump and all of that, it's beyond ... Thurber has this story about "the greatest man in the world"; Remember?

John Plotz: No, I don't remember it.

Mike Leigh: It's called "The Greatest Man in the World", and they've built an aeroplane that can fly nonstop right around the world, and they're convinced it will crash, so they find a guy who's an idiot because they know it'll crash. They arrange an event to lament the fact that he's crashed in advance of it happening, and it doesn't crash, so they have this reception. Of course he's there at the reception. He behaves unbelievably badly and gropes all the women, and they think that we have to deal with this. The crowd are outside thronging to see this hero.

John Plotz: It's a Lindbergh story in a way.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. So finally they conspire, and he goes out on the balcony, and they discretely push him over the balcony and he plunges to his death. Then they have the lamentation and the memorial that they had planned. For some reason, in relation to Trump, I keep thinking about this. That idiot is projected into the chair, into the seat of power, behaves in a completely erratic and ...

John Plotz: Right. The difference is everyone around him is plunging to their death. The entire circle gets destroyed, but he doesn't get destroyed.

Mike Leigh: I don't know.

John Plotz: Do you know, there's a character, Middlemarch, who flourishes wonderfully on murdered men's brains?

Mike Leigh: Yeah.

John Plotz: That's what he is. He's the saprophyte. Yeah.

Mike Leigh: But you've got children, have you?

John Plotz: Yeah, two teenagers.

Mike Leigh: Yeah. So you've got teenagers.

John Plotz: They're furious at us.

Mike Leigh: Well, that's what I was going to say was.

John Plotz: Yeah, absolutely.

Mike Leigh: We who have raised kids would know how to deal with Trump, but somebody who doesn't deal with him.

John Plotz: Yeah.

Mike Leigh: He is an indulged brat.

John Plotz: I've got to say, though, they take the Philip Larkin line. "Don't have any kids yourself." They don't understand why we had kids. That's an unbelievable thing.

Mike Leigh: Well, they may get over it.

John Plotz: They may get over it. I understand that's something that a 16-year-old says.

Mike Leigh: It's a thing you're only starting to hear. The number of new babies during the course of the time we've been having this conversation would actually fill most of this hotel in the world. That's very depressing. On the other hand, a world in which nobody gets born is the end of the world, so it's hard to resolve this particular problem.

John Plotz: Well, I've always been a huge fan of science fiction since growing up, but I've noticed in the last five or 10 years, it's a lot more appealing to a lot more people than it used to be, and I think part of it is that notion of we just feel like humanity has fucked everything up, so maybe there's some other answer, either out there, or maybe we should just let the mold and the slime worms take over, the slime molds take over, like at the end of *The Time Machine* when the thing with claws comes out.

Mike Leigh: Yeah, no. I don't know about that.

John Plotz: Yeah. All right. Well, Mike, thank you, really, a lot.

Mike Leigh: Good to talk.

John Plotz: I appreciate your time.

Mike Leigh: No, thank you. Good talking to you.

John Plotz: *Recall This Book* is the brainchild of John Plotz and Elizabeth Ferry. The music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy. Sound editing is by Claire Ogden. Website design and social media by Matthew Schratz, and on our website as well as in the program notes on Stitcher or iTunes, you will find some footnotes to today's interview including links to a bunch of Mike Leigh films and various other works mentioned in the interview. We always want to hear from you directly with your comments, criticisms or suggestions. Finally, if you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to forward it to friends and family, and write a review or rate us on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you get your podcast. It makes a huge difference to us. We're very appreciative.

John Plotz: You may be interested in checking out past episodes, including interviews with Samuel Delaney, Chinese sci-fi great, Cixin Liu, and Zadie Smith, who needs no adjective. Upcoming episodes in our jam-packed fall include a conversation about scientific collaboration and why it's better than humanistic collaboration, with the string theorist, Albion Lawrence, and a discussion of spies and state surveillance with the anthropologist, Katherine Verdery. Thanks for listening, and we'll be back soon.