

Some things are clearer than others

Topsy-Turvy, written and directed by Mike Leigh

David Walsh
10 February 2000

British filmmaker Mike Leigh is a significant figure. In the 1970s and 1980s he took a sharp but personal look at social and political life in a series of television films (*Bleak Moments*, 1971; *Hard Labour*, 1973; *Nuts in May*, 1976; *Abigail's Party*, 1977; *Four Days in July*, 1984).

His *Life is Sweet* (1990) and *Naked* (1993) were two of the most troubling English-language films of the last decade. The first was a deeply sympathetic portrait of a suburban working class family. One remembers in particular the self-despising teenage daughter and her mother's desperate, futile efforts to ease her pain. *Naked* dealt with a group of traumatized individuals, the walking wounded of Thatcher's Britain. The shattering of elementary social ties and obligations had reduced them to an almost animal existence.

After the darkness of *Naked*, it appeared that Leigh wanted to enter into the light. *Secrets and Lies* (1996), the story of a white mother and the daughter, by a black man, she had given up for adoption, had many remarkable moments, but ended quite falsely, with a general and contrived reconciliation. One had the sense that Leigh, responding to the criticisms of others about the "hopeless" tone of *Naked* or perhaps his own misgivings, wanted to offer some comfort or encouragement to his audience. He seemed, however, to be taking too much of a shortcut. The spectator was not likely to be convinced that the heartbreaking difficulties the filmmaker had addressed in *Life is Sweet* and *Naked* could possibly be overcome merely by individual acts of honesty and generosity.

Career Girls (1997) took up the situation of some of those who had survived the previous decade, their mode of survival and its cost, as well as those who had been morally or psychically destroyed. The film revisited certain themes and social situations Leigh had treated in other works. It seemed like something of a holding operation. Where would Leigh go from there?

It is not entirely unheard of for a filmmaker to turn to an historical piece as a means of finding his or her way out of an impasse. However, no one, I suspect, could have predicted, on the basis of his previous work, that Leigh would choose to treat the collaboration of W. S. Gilbert (1836-1911) and Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900), creators of 14 comic operas.

Topsy-Turvy begins with the hectic opening night in London of *Princess Ida*, the eighth Gilbert and Sullivan production, in January 1884. The piece is met with mixed reviews. There is a feeling in some quarters that the pair is stagnating. A critic, somewhat condescendingly, labels Gilbert "the King of Topsy-Turvydom." Sullivan announces his plan to write no more light operas with Gilbert and to devote himself to "serious" music. He goes off to Paris for rest and recuperation, where he consorts with prostitutes.

Months later a heat wave is cutting into the theater trade. Richard D'Oyly Carte, the impresario of the Savoy Theatre, plans to replace *Princess Ida* with a revival of a previous success, *The Sorcerer*. Sullivan remains adamant about his decision, even—or perhaps especially—after Gilbert reads him his new proposed libretto, a flimsy story set in Sicily

and involving a magic potion. A meeting of the two with Carte and his assistant, Helen Lenoir, goes nowhere.

Kitty, Gilbert's wife, suggests a visit to a Japanese exhibition currently in London. Gilbert rejects the idea, but ends up going. He watches with fascination a spinner, a calligrapher, a female dancer accompanied by a girl playing a traditional stringed instrument and a theater performance. Gilbert is inspired by the visit to write a piece with a Japanese theme, *The Mikado*. Sullivan greets the new libretto with enthusiasm and sets to work writing the music.

The remainder of *Topsy-Turvy* is devoted to the first production of *The Mikado*. On the eve of rehearsals in February 1885, several actors discuss the significance of the killing of Britain's General Gordon in Sudan, engaged in the scramble for Africa. In subsequent scenes performers ask for raises, discuss their personal woes, bicker with costumers. Gilbert directs the performers in one extended scene. In another, he brings in three Japanese women to show his actresses how he would like them to carry themselves. Sullivan rehearses singers and musicians. The decision to remove a particular number leads to a successful protest by the entire cast.

The new operetta is a great success. Gilbert and his neglected wife, Sullivan and his pregnant mistress, discuss what it all means to them. Gilbert notes that there is something inherently disappointing about success. The last moment is left to one of the actresses, who recites a soliloquy from *The Mikado* about being lovely and a child of nature. She sings "The Sun Whose Rays" from the same piece.

There are many remarkable aspects of the work. Leigh's methods are well-known by now. He asks his actors to devote a good deal of time—six months or more—to each project. Beginning with an overall concept, Leigh works out the characterization and story with the actors through discussion, improvisation and research. He then writes a loosely structured scenario. The individual sequences are subsequently rehearsed and finally scripted on location prior to shooting.

For his latest film Leigh established a research department that operated for a full year before shooting began. Various aspects of late Victorian life were carefully examined. A musical director and choreographer worked with Leigh and a 90-strong cast throughout the rehearsals. All those who sing or play in the film can really do so.

These painstaking efforts have paid off in many respects. *Topsy-Turvy* is a strongly appealing and authentic work, that conveys a genuine feeling for the time and for its protagonists. Many commercial filmmakers, equipped with substantial amounts of cash and aided by talented set designers and decorators, are capable of reproducing the external features of a given historical period. Leigh, with limited resources, has done that and considerably more. The rough, unfamiliar texture of virtually every scene suggests historical vision at work. Leigh can imagine relationships between people, both in the musical theater and outside it, quite distinct from the present ones and finds the dramatic means to express them. The film is something of a tour de force.

Not least of *Topsy-Turvy's* accomplishments is its reminder that Gilbert

and Sullivan produced some remarkable work. The sequences from *The Mikado* in particular impress one with their wit, their biting satire and their musicality. These were very gifted figures.

The piece is also intelligently performed. Jim Broadbent, the stubborn, obsessive Gilbert, whose entire face seems to open wide and then snap shut as he carries on a conversation, confirms his status as one of the finest film actors of the day. Lesley Manville as Gilbert's long-suffering wife is also memorable. Indeed the entire cast is excellent—Allan Corduner (Sullivan), Timothy Spall (Richard Temple), Ron Cook (Carte), Eleanor David (Fanny Ronalds), Shirley Henderson (Leonora Braham), and others.

Topsy-turvy means “upside down,” or “in a disorderly or muddled state.” Leigh has never been a kitchen-sink realist. He searches with his actors for a means of manifesting his characters' internal dilemmas by heightening certain features of their speech, gesture and movement. There has always been a fantastical, sometimes grotesque side to his work (which occasionally descends into caricature). He appears relatively at ease treating Gilbert and Sullivan—whose field was musical caricature—and the late Victorian age—whose ornamentation, manners and general spirit seem so absurdly outsized and exaggerated.

The contradictions of Victorian society, including the immense effort to repress the elementary needs of the body, seemed to encourage a certain “topsy-turvydom” in art: Lewis Carroll's Alice adventures, Edward Lear's nonsense poetry, the sexual double entendre and delirium of Oscar Wilde (a figure lampooned by Gilbert in *Patience*). The solid structure of late nineteenth century English life is haunted by various specters in Leigh's film. In a drawing room in the middle of the day Gilbert's father is visited by terrifying hallucinations. Sequences from *The Sorcerer* suggest some of Gilbert's nightmares. One actor in *The Mikado* relies on morphine, another on alcohol. On the opera's opening night, in a filthy alleyway, a poor, mad Irish woman insults Gilbert and tells him that God made the world. In the closing moments of the film, Kitty proposes a surreal new work in which hundreds of nannies would push empty baby carriages around on the sand, while the heroine's oppressive husband strangles her with her own umbilical cord every time she tries to be born!

Our perceptions too of Gilbert and Sullivan are turned upside down, or perhaps right side up. It first seems that the film will focus on Sullivan, the more “serious” of the two, and his “tragedy”—as a composer of light music, chained to the contrarian Gilbert (who says, for example, “I won't go to the dentist,” “I won't attend the Japanese exhibit,” “I won't write a new libretto,” and then does all three.) The film transforms itself, unexpectedly, into an appreciation of Gilbert's remarkable skill, wit, tenacity. Sullivan, for all his semi-bohemian lack of inhibition, seems the less substantial figure.

One is left with the impression that *Topsy-Turvy*, from one point of view at least, is the story of how Sullivan and Gilbert (as their names are printed on an old advertising poster) became *Gilbert and Sullivan*. Presumably Leigh is making a point here, that he admires the unpretentious but not uninspired—a sort of *workmanlike brilliance*—in an artist or in art. Kitty suggests, in the final scenes, that it would be wonderful if ordinary people received applause at the end of each day.

The film's strength lies in its richness, its expansiveness, its refusal to follow a recipe of any kind. The number of filmmakers who work at this level of seriousness is very small. Yet, once one has paid tribute to *Topsy-Turvy*'s many genuinely admirable qualities, certain nagging questions and doubts remain.

The film touches upon many things. Too many? It seems to tease the spectator by raising and then not pursuing a series of problems.

There is the matter of General Gordon in Khartoum in January 1885. Two of Gilbert and Sullivan's actors bemoan Gordon's death and express a racist “White Man's Burden” view of Africa. The issue is never referred to again. The opening up of Japan allows Gilbert access to its culture. Are there elements of “imperialist appropriation” (as well as trivialization and

condescension) in *The Mikado*? Or is Leigh suggesting that such “borrowing” in the field of culture has a more benign character? Or is there no connection whatsoever between Gordon's death and the subject of the new opera?

The film is so evenhanded at times that it loses definite shape. Sullivan wants to write grand opera. Gilbert plows ahead doggedly with his comic scripts. Sullivan is entirely won over by *The Mikado*. Why? Does the new work represent some kind of radical departure for the two? There's no conclusive evidence that it does. After Gilbert reads her one of his new songs, Kitty observes with heavy irony—in close-up—how “rich in human emotion and probability” it all is. There is no leap into the unknown in *The Mikado*, it seems, but rather the perfection of an already developed and somewhat limited form. (Is there a parallel, incidentally, between Leigh's decision, apparently out of the blue, to make a film about comic opera in the 1880s and Gilbert's unanticipated choice of Japan as subject matter?)

And what about the glimpses we're provided of the actors' offstage lives? In one scene Leonora Braham, obviously afflicted with a drinking problem, complains that her young son is an obstacle to finding the right man; only older ones are attracted to her in any case. Meanwhile Jessie Bond (Dorothy Atkinson) has the varicose vein on her leg—from years of (over)work on the stage?—bandaged by her dresser and urges Leonora to perform at late-night parties, as she does. This is as much, for all intents and purposes, as we ever learn about those two: enough to be intrigued, not enough to form the basis for any intelligent opinion. Isn't there a principle of “triangulation,” or some such, in art too, i.e., that a phenomenon has to be viewed from a number of vantage points before its features have much meaning to us?

What are we to make of the protracted scene in which Gilbert rehearses Jessie Bond, George Grossmith (Martin Savage) and Rutland Barrington (Vincent Franklin)? Gilbert instructs his performers on their movements, their line readings, their interpretations of the piece. He's patient, sarcastic, somewhat authoritarian. The stage manager is obliged to stand in for two actors who are absent without explanation. Jessie asks for and receives permission to use her cane. The sequence is a sort of set piece, presumably based on historical fact. But it seems, in the end, to be little more than an elaborate red herring. Leigh doesn't appear to be criticizing Gilbert's directorial style, so diametrically opposed to his own, nor is there any reason why he should. The scene simply sits there, on its own, a little enigmatic, but not suggestive enough to justify its length and detail.

There are numerous aspects of theater life, or artistic life, that the film brushes up against: the single-minded dedication creative work requires and its emotional costs; the almost inevitable self-centeredness of everyone involved (a case of food poisoning overshadows Gordon's debacle for Gilbert and Sullivan's company); the relations between individual and collective effort in the theater (or film); the relations between low and high, the comic and the serious, the empirical and the fantastic, in art; the specific peculiarities (enormous strengths, maddening limitations) of British culture.

It's all very tantalizing and, in the end, dissatisfying, because little of it is developed, worked out. Every significant piece is an argument for something. What is *Topsy-Turvy* arguing for?

If Leigh simply set out to recreate as richly and authentically as possible the working methods and personalities of Gilbert and Sullivan (whose music he was introduced to as a boy), that has certain implications. Then the film's argument becomes one *for* Gilbert and Sullivan as artists and the tendency they represented and *against* other artists and tendencies—for “lightness” versus “darkness,” for the “low brow” versus the “high brow,” etc.

I find it difficult to believe that this was Leigh's intent, but, by default, due to its nearly faultless “objectivity,” the film tends to take on this character. Because one has to assume that Leigh chose his subject matter

with some purpose in mind. Otherwise why not make a film about Wilde, or George Bernard Shaw, or J. M. Barrie, or Arthur Wing Pinero?

It causes some concern when one considers *Topsy-Turvy* in the light of Leigh's self-deprecating comment that he is merely a "storyteller" and an "entertainer." Perhaps the film is less about the two artists per se and more about the working out of a possible approach toward their art, and, by analogy, the problem of the contemporary audience's attitude toward Leigh's art and its expectations of him.

The filmmaker seems to be engaging in deliberate self-limitation, as though he were saying, in part, "I'm not what you took me to be, this society's conscience or something like that, I'm just like them, Gilbert and Sullivan, a song-and-dance man." If this is the unconscious message, then it's something of a problem. There's a potential danger, I think, in doing difficult, demanding work and then offering what could be interpreted as a half-apology for it.

Remarkable as Gilbert and Sullivan no doubt were, there still seems to be some kind of disproportion between the care lavished on the subject and the latter's relative slightness, so that one almost gets the odd feeling of a surplus of artistry accumulating in the film, artistry which, at times, doesn't have enough substance to occupy itself with and eddies about on the screen. (In this regard, it reminds me a little of Hou Hsiao-hsien's historical film, *Flowers of Shanghai* [1998].) If Leigh believes that Gilbert and Sullivan were great artists whose work has been insufficiently appreciated (which he apparently does believe), he should have given us more to go on.

Wouldn't a slightly different attitude have been possible? If Leigh had said, for example: here are a couple of fascinating and contradictory individuals, fully worthy of attention, through a study of whom I'm going to take up the problem of low and high in art, or the artist's public and private realms, or art and commerce, or sexuality and sublimation. Instead, it seems to me, we get so much about Gilbert and Sullivan as historical figures in the end that everything else is squeezed out toward the margins of the piece. Leigh appears to have fallen victim to that sort of obsession with empirical fact, with getting all the details right, which *can* become a means of avoiding thornier, perhaps more rewarding problems.

These criticisms may seem unfair, since *Topsy-Turvy* is intelligent, dense, praiseworthy, but Leigh himself is to blame, by creating the expectation in his audience that he would pursue the most difficult matters to the end. Perhaps he still will.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact