

Mike Leigh's *Happy-Go-Lucky*: A film about life and people being worth something

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Written and directed by Mike Leigh

Happy-Go-Lucky has opened in North America. The following comment was posted as part of the WSWs coverage of the Toronto film festival in September 2008. The WSWs will be posting an interview with director Mike Leigh, conducted recently by David Walsh in London, in the next few days.



Eddie Marsan and Sally Hawkins in *Happy-Go-Lucky*

In Mike Leigh's *Happy-Go-Lucky*, Poppy (Sally Hawkins) is an irrepressible personality, a teacher in London who looks for the best in people and situations. "I love my life," she says in response to criticism. "It's hard at times, but that's part of it." She has a flatmate, Zoe (Alexis Zegerman), also unmarried, also a teacher. They both care a great deal about the children they teach, including the difficult and troubled ones.

But even Zoe has her limits. "You can't make everyone happy," she complains to Poppy at one point. "There's no harm in trying that, Zoe, is there?"

When Poppy's bicycle is stolen ("I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye"), she decides to take driving lessons. Her instructor, Scott (Eddie Marsan), is a coiled spring, perpetually angry, paranoid, even racist. He constantly harps on Poppy's failings, from wearing boots with heels to her driving lessons ("vanity before safety...") to teaching and leading her life unsystematically ("You celebrate chaos!"). Her cheerfulness infuriates him—"You

will crash and you will die, laughing!"

Scott eventually mistakes Poppy's interest in him, especially her curiosity as to the source of his fury ("Were you bullied at school?"), for flirtation and attempted seduction, with unhappy results.

Poppy's optimism encounters various challenges, including a pupil who beats on his classmates, a tramp reduced to chanting nonsense, her own tense and disapproving married sister. She recognizes pain and misery in the world, and she's not naïve, but she works away at the problems around her.

Leigh has said that he intended audience members initially to be irritated with *Happy-Go-Lucky's* central figure, but he hoped they would learn "to like her, even love her." To a certain extent, this is indeed what happens.

Leigh's methods are unusual. He begins, he says, with "nothing." No script or dialogue, in any case. Over the course of months, through improvisations with his actors, research and discussion, the characters and story emerge. The result is both intense and deliberately exaggerated.

We can take Leigh's comment that he begins, more or less, with nothing with a grain of salt. In any case, he clearly does not have a worked-out subject or theme, in the form of a solid lump. Instead: certain personalities perhaps, certain attitudes toward the world and other people, the interplay of these personalities and attitudes?

He explains in an interview at www.rte.ie: "So here's a film in which the central character, Poppy, is a teacher who is positive and she doesn't let things get her down. I chuck all kinds of things at her but she is infallible, she picks herself up and gets on with it."

Leigh speaks of "this wonderful, nutty, zany but at the same time quite sensible, sussed, focused and ultimately serious young woman, who knows how to deal with life."

He told an interviewer from the *Daily Telegraph*: "It's about education: how we learn and how we teach. It's about responsibility. About trust, about men and women,

and about commitment. I felt it would be a good time to make a film that would be, in some way, anti-miserabilist. These are tough times we're in; we are destroying ourselves and the planet, but there are some people who care enough about the future to be teaching kids."

There are numerous teachers, instructors and "care-givers" in *Happy-Go-Lucky*—Poppy herself, her flatmate, her fellow teachers and headmistress of her school, her flamenco teacher; more loosely, an osteopath, a social worker, and most unhappily, Scott.

He is the most obvious example of a "bad teacher." Scott attempts to ram his views down Poppy's throat; he has a ridiculous method, for example, of teaching his students how to remember to check their mirrors, which, in fact, is impossible to follow. Worst of all, he's so fixed and frozen in his beliefs that he's incurious, impervious to the influence of other people, incapable of learning. Presumably, the film suggests that only someone terribly desirous to know is capable of teaching others.

It doesn't seem to me that this latest film, notwithstanding its bright, sunny color and the cheerful disposition of its heroine, is insubstantial in relation to Leigh's other works (*Naked, All or Nothing, Vera Drake*, and so forth). It's possible to criticize his approach or his views, but the film has a serious intent, as the director's comments indicate.

Happy-Go-Lucky sticks in the memory, as does its central character. It goes against the stream at present, to Leigh's credit, and pays tribute in particular to teachers of children, who haven't allowed the afflictions of the world, and their own personal frustrations, to make them cynical or callous.

Whether any human being can wall herself off from those afflictions and frustrations to the extent that Poppy does is a legitimate question. Again, Leigh, although he begins with real facts and relations, is not a naturalist. All his important characters are maximized, "heightened" embodiments of certain human qualities.

Nonetheless, questions about Leigh's methods and *Happy-Go-Lucky* inevitably arise. The exact nature of the rehearsal-development process is something of a "trade secret," but you do wonder whether this process, which reaches down into very personal and intimate recesses, at times runs the risk of losing the forest for the trees. Individual details and personality traits emerge quite distinctly, but sometimes at the expense of the contours of the whole society and its historical evolution.

The rather "timeless" air of the latest film is a little unsettling. The British education system has experienced

budget cuts and efforts to privatize and deregulate, along with the stupid and brutal testing of children at every stage. A 2007 UNICEF report found that the US and Britain were the worst places in the industrialized world to be a child. Could not some of those broader problems have been hinted at?

Moreover, while it is thoroughly commendable to bring Poppy's dedication to the fore, it is almost inevitable that such a character will encourage the notion that strenuous individual efforts, or even a "positive frame of mind," are adequate when confronting the harshness of the present world. Or, worse, that the little bright spot presented in the film simply turns out to be the other side of a deep pessimism: the overall prospects for humanity are hopeless, everything is going to hell, but we must nonetheless "do our bit." Then there's the risk, heaven forbid, that this will be seen as a latter-day celebration of the average Briton's ability to "muddle through."

I don't believe that any of this is Leigh's conscious intention. Poppy's encounter with the tramp certainly suggests that heroic efforts can't overcome everything, that too much damage can be inflicted. He tries to speak and merely repeats, "It's - it's - it's," and "They - they - they." And, finally, he says, "You know?" and Poppy replies, "Yeah, I do." This seems an acknowledgement of a sadder, darker world, but not one that has defeated her.

In any event, the director points out that "people might assume that my next films will be ever more gleeful and bathed in gorgeous sunlight. But that may well not be the case because there are all kinds of other things to investigate." These seem to me to be eminently reasonable and intelligent remarks.



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