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- ▼ [the card](#)

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- ▼ [jobs](#)
- ▼ [finance](#)

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spare time

- ▼ [travel](#)
- ▼ [staying in](#)
- ▼ [going out](#)
- ▼ [film](#)
- ▼ [rag](#)

study

- ▼ [re:search](#)
- ▼ [academic links](#)
- ▼ [welfare](#)
- ▼ [feedback](#)



film

What's the name and where do they come from?

Mike Leigh, born in Salford in 1943.

And how would one pronounce that, then?

In a Brummie accent, generally provided by Leigh veteran Timothy Spall - the name might not ring a bell, but you'll recognise him from countless sitcoms.

What key films of theirs can I casually drop into conversation?

'Secrets and Lies', 'Topsy Turvy', 'Life is Sweet'. All acknowledged Brit-classics. His last film, about Gilbert and Sullivan, was something of a departure from his earlier work, which mainly involved peering through the net curtains of middle and working class families. He manages to avoid the 'gritty' tag associated with many Brit-flicks, though by including plenty of - often black - humour into proceedings. 'Secrets and Lies' is his best film, featuring all the usual suspects in the ultimate dysfunctional family. The film puts the 'Simpsons' to shame, examines racism, sexism and many other isms, but still manages to be funny and heartwarming.

Leigh made his first films for television, but are now available on VHS and are well worth a look. He moved into the mainstream with 'Mean Time', featuring stars on the rise Alfred Molina, Gary Oldman and Tim Roth, as well as Phil Daniels - four men seemingly in every British film of the '80s.

Any awards or other notable information?

He's been Oscar-nominated three times, once for 'Topsy-Turvy' (Best Original Screenplay) and twice for 'Secrets and Lies' (Best Director and Best Original Screenplay). 'Secrets and Lies', 'Mean Time' and 'Life is Sweet' have also been nominated for and won numerous prizes around the world, including plenty of BAFTAs, particularly for 'Secrets and Lies'.

Mike Leigh's talent is in improvisation. He improvises scenes with his actors, working from a minimal script, if any at all. He became known as a kitchen sink director, for his stark portraits of English life. Like his kitchen sink-mate Alan Clarke, he tends to work with actors he knows, such as the aforementioned Timothy Spall, Jim Broadbent and Brenda Blethyn.

And is he still alive?

He's still around. He was married to actress Alison Steadman, but the couple later divorced. Nobody seems to know what he's up to at the moment, but presumably it involves film in some way... After the career turn of 'Topsy-Turvy' no-one wants to make any predictions, so watch out in future...

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