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Debauchery Next Door: The Boundaries of Shame in *Abigail's Party*

MIKITA BROTTMAN

The play that became *Abigail's Party* began life as an experiment devised by director Mike Leigh with five actors—including his then-wife, Alison Steadman—at the Hampstead Theater in London. Given basic character outlines and six weeks for rehearsal, these five actors partly improvised the original production that was later used as the basis of Mike Leigh's script for the BBC's *Play for Today*, first screened on November 5, 1977. Although incidental details of time and place initially seem vital elements of *Abigail's Party*, by most accounts the play has dated well, and there have been regular revivals, including a highly-acclaimed recent performance at the play's original venue, the Hampstead Theater. Whether or not the audience is familiar with the specifics of class and culture that mark the setting of the play—an intimate get-together involving three sets of neighbors—it's impossible not to get a sense of the horrible tensions generated between hostess and guests at 13 Richmond Rd., North London, and for this reason the play remains relevant, horrible social tensions being, of course, common to every class, period and culture.

Still, not everybody likes *Abigail's Party*. As with most of Mike Leigh's work, there are those critics and reviewers who have expressed an ethical ambivalence about the kinds of emotions the play provokes in its audience, specifically about whether or not Leigh is deliberately satirizing the aspiring lower middle classes, poking fun at their pathetic ambitions, bad taste and marital conflicts. The case against *Abigail's Party* was made most forcefully by Dennis Potter in his review of the BBC production, published in *The Sunday Times* (London), November 6, 1977:

This play was based on nothing more edifying than rancid disdain, for it was a prolonged jeer, twitching with genuine hatred, about the dreadful suburban tastes of the dreadful lower middle classes... it sank under its immense condescension. The force of the yelping derision became a single note of contempt, amplified into a relentless screech. As so often in the minefields of English class-consciousness, more was revealed of the snobbery of the observers rather than of the observed (35).

Since “the minefields of English class consciousness” are so central to Mike Leigh's work, the best analysis of his films, like that of Ray Carney (2000) and Michael Coveney (1996) attends mainly to ideological issues. In this brief paper, however, I plan to take a

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different approach. Remaining aware that, in the work of Mike Leigh, the boundary between the personal and the ideological has always already been crossed, I'd like to look at some of the psychological dimensions of *Abigail's Party*, in order to consider what it is about these particular characters and this particular situation that provokes such an anxious response, both in hostile critics like Potter, as well as those people—like myself—who find the play morbidly compelling, mostly *because* its makes me feel so uncomfortable. In fact, though many—including Leigh himself—might find my approach peripheral or irrelevant, I think it actually makes more sense than first impressions might suggest, as there is something akin to free association in dialogue that is (or at least was originally) partly improvised, and there is something not unlike group therapy in this nightmarish circus of hatred, in which the social facade is lifted, and we are shown the snobbery, bullying, and humiliation that lie beneath.

I need to start, of course, with Beverly (Alison Steadman in the original production), because, in a psychological sense, Beverly is the only character in *Abigail's Party*. Each of her guests exists only in so far as they relate to Beverly, and in so far as they willingly allow her to swallow them up, like Angela, or struggle to resist, like Sue. So voracious is Beverly that she immediately colonizes everyone with whom she comes into contact, subsuming them within the boundaries of her monstrous ego.

No one and nothing exists separately from Beverly. The very set of the play is a representation of her inner world; ironically (since Beverly is a beautician), everything is loud, fake and clashing in the most garish 70s style. The curtains and wallpaper have a nasty pattern of huge brown-and-orange swirls; there's a sunburst clock above the fake coal-effect fire (so obviously plastic). The suite is padded leather ("not leatherette," insists Beverly—a perfect example of what Freud describes as "the narcissism of small differences" [45]). According to Leigh's set directions, "Above the settee is a room-divider shelf unit, on which are a telephone, a stereo system, an ornamental fibre-light, a fold-down desk and, prominently, a bar" (1). The shelves display a set of leather-bound book-club volumes; in the center of the room is a sheepskin rug lying next to a marble-topped table. Most significant of all, the house contains—as Beverly proudly announces to her guests—a downstairs toilet. Having two toilets, as everyone knows, was the consummate ideal of the aspiring middle classes in the 1970s, when the chasm between the classes, some felt, could be bridged by the luxury of an extra loo.

Ray Carney (2000) has pointed out that the unsettling nature of Beverly's performance relates to the fact that she is neither being deceitful, nor trying to cover anything up; as Carney puts it, "there is no reality lurking in the depths; *everything* is fake. Beverly's ideas and emotions are no different from her jewelry: both are equally cheap knock-offs. Her most private, inner experiences are as cliched as her expressions" (101). Carney makes the case that "there is something artificial, imitated, derivative or inauthentic about virtually every line of dialogue that Beverly utters. It all feels "scripted"" (100–101). So while in one respect Beverly is the only character in *Abigail's Party*, in another respect Beverly herself does not actually exist: her character is completely synthetic; she is all artifice.

The power relations in Beverly's home are clear, and her attempts to exercise this power over each vulnerable guest results in some kind of distortion in their personality. The guests, in turn, lose not so much their power, but significant aspects of themselves—initiative, individuality, inquiry, and self-determination. They lose their active personalities, to a certain extent, as Beverly attempts to strip each of them of their identity, and incorporates the spoils into her own character, as additional dimensions of her egotism. In other words, like the witch in the fairy-tale, she threatens to eat them all up.

Mike Leigh's political leanings are well-known, and while I don't believe that Beverly is based in any conscious or deliberate way on the figure of Margaret Thatcher, she does, it is fair to say, share some of Thatcher's less appealing qualities—her theatrical voice, her matriarchal bossiness, her crass, opinionated championing of middle-class values, her primed hair and powdered complexion. Thatcher did not become Prime Minister until 1979, but by 1977 she was firmly established as leader of the Conservative Party and was already an intimidating figure in British politics. Most of all, I think, Beverly resembles Mrs. Thatcher in the way—part nanny, part bully—she colonizes her guests, a process which causes varying degrees of conflict, depending on how much each victim has invested in their independent sense of self.

Beverly's husband Lawrence, for example, reminds me of those fawning "little men" who flocked and fawned around Mrs. Thatcher in the Tory Cabinet, insinuating civil servants, who treated her like a terrifying headmistress to be flattered and obeyed, then snickered at the moment she is out of sight (in fact, these men—Michael Heseltine, Jim Prior, Peter Walker—were the first to abandon Thatcher after she lost the 1990 election).

Laurence is a henpecked, obsequious estate agent who speaks mainly in clichés ("Yes, Mrs. Cushing," we overhear him saying to a client on the phone, "we have run him to ground, and you'll be happy to know I'm in the throes of retrieving the key!...I'm at your service, Mrs. Cushing, he who pays the piper calls the tune. You name the hour, and I shall appear!"). Laurence is almost hysterical with stress, unable to relax at all in the company of his monstrous wife. The couple has only been married three years, but they have nothing in common and are already sick to death of each other. Laurence has been ground down into a pitiful wreck of a man with a huge chip on his shoulder, reduced to the miserable pleasures of cheap pedantry and petty one-upmanship. He likes to correct others, complains—while glaring rudely at his neighbors—that the "neighborhood is going downhill," the "class of people" and the "tone of the area" have changed, and it's become "mixed, more cosmopolitan." He boasts that he buys a new car every year, even though it's always a Mini: "I find the Mini economical, efficient and reliable," he proclaims, "and the most suited to my purposes." His philosophy is "Life is a fight—people always seem to be against you." His feeble attempts at self-assertion involve pitting his bourgeois ideals against his wife's lower-class tastes: she likes Demis Roussos, he likes "light classical" (Beethoven's ninth); she likes "erotic art," he likes Lowry and Van Gogh (which he pronounces with a 'h' so hard that he almost chokes on it).

In essence, however, Beverly and Laurence have much in common: Laurence's idea of "culture" is just as spurious and second-hand as Beverly's idea of "taste". His leather-bound collections of Shakespeare and Dickens, which he shows off proudly to Sue, are just for show ("Part of our heritage," he boasts, adding, "of course, it's not something you can actually READ"). Like Beverly, Laurence is trapped by his narcissistic defenses into taking on the trappings of a role he needs to play—a role that included marrying a woman who is only interested in his money. "If I want anything—makeup, new hairdo, new dress, he's very generous, the money's there," says Beverly when asked about her marriage, "but other than that, it's just boring."

Angela, the hapless nurse with jamjar glasses, is too passive and ignorant to put up any kind of resistance to hurricane Beverly; in fact, she is grateful just to have someone to talk to. She lets Beverly patronize her and flirt with her brooding husband, blithely twittering away even during the play's most awkward moments, not because she's trying to soothe the tension, but because she simply hasn't noticed it. Angela is the kind of working-class woman who has come to take her husband's angry contempt for granted ("he's not violent, he's just a bit nasty," she tells Beverly. "Like, the other day, he said to

me, he'd like to cellotape my mouth. And that's not very nice, is it?"). She openly expresses her feelings of inferiority to Beverly, neatly caught in her admiration of her neighbor's new suite. "We've just bought a new three-piece suite, but ours isn't real leather, like this—it's 'leather look,'" she tells Beverly, who replies condescendingly, "Oh, the Leather Look? Great." So harebrained is Angela that she thinks the mock-Tudor houses in the street are actually Tudor, much to Laurence's disdain; later, she confesses dopily to Beverly that "I never thought I'd get married or live in a house."

Tony, on the other hand, is more guarded than his wife, and doesn't submit to Beverly without a struggle. A former Crystal Palace Player, Tony is now a computer operator who works "shifts" and remains proud of his working class roots, asking for Pale Ale rather than gin. Bored by the party and hateful toward his wife, Tony spends most of the evening sitting seething in the corner, always, it seems, right on the edge of violence, despite Angela's blithe assurances. Both emotionally and literally inarticulate, he responds to Beverly's inane questions with monosyllabic grunts. He is willing to feel her up when they dance but not to talk to her, although, like Laurence, he lets her order him around when there's "men's work" to be done (moving the sofa, going next-door to check on the party, push-starting Laurence's car). We can see why Beverly has no use for "Women's Lib"; she's so obviously the boss.

The final guest, Sue, is by far the most unsettled by Beverly's narcissistic attempts to subsume her identity, partly because by the time she arrives the tension is already palpable (and she is already anxious about the party next door), and partly because she is the polar opposite of Beverly. Beverly speaks in a nasal whine; Sue has a low, quiet voice that is hard to hear. Beverly wears a low-cut red dress while Sue is dressed in a conservative blouse, skirt and sensible shoes; she brings a bottle of Beaujolais to the party, and sits with her handbag at her feet like a talisman of decency. From Beverly's pushy questions, we learn that Sue is divorced, with two children, one of whom, Abigail, is a punk with a pink streak in her hair (very up-to-date for 1977). Nervous and rigid, mortified by Beverly's intrusive crassness and sexual innuendo, Sue does her best to be polite, but in the end is forced to take the only option available—she escapes to the bathroom (thank goodness for that downstairs loo).

In her role as so-called "hostess," Beverly systematically bullies, belittles and abuses her guests, stuffing them unappetizing "nibbles" such as olives, which she herself describes as "horrible," encouraging Tony and Angela to smoke even though they have just given up, insisting they all dance when nobody wants to but her, and forcing Sue to drink gin until she vomits. Before long, Beverly's little get-together has descended into a kind of group therapy, or more appropriately perhaps (since nothing is being resolved), a kind of shared madness or mass hysteria, in which the various personalities in the room struggle to resist Beverly's domination, working together and against each other, forming and breaking alliances, projecting their own anxieties and insecurities on to each other. Each individual is bound up affectively with the others, linked to them emotionally, whether through acceptance or resistance.

The two marriages we see in *Abigail's Party* are, like many marriages, situations in which both parties have agreed to a kind of *folie à deux*, a collusive, mutual repression of the real conditions of their marriage. This reality then emerges in a situation that, in the guise of a socially sanctioned "get-together," allows them to indulge in binge-drinking, marital humiliation, escalating hostility, and sexual overtures. In Beverly's world, the dominant values are those of egotism, pride, competitiveness, and the will to mastery. Thatcher's version of leadership, like Beverly's, espoused the virtues of privatization, stretching the boundaries of individual power to see who could subsume the most. Notoriously, Mrs.

Thatcher rewarded narcissism, rejecting public corporations in favor of American-style competition, placing proud emphasis on the notion of a coherent and autonomous private identity, both on the personal and the national stage. Outsiders—those of a different class or race—were experienced as contemptible and hateful, as are those, like Laurence, who oppose Beverly with their own sense of self. Beverly cannot understand the needs of other people. She exhibits no altruism, no sympathy or compassion except when based on narcissistic identification.

In this light, *Abigail's Party* is certainly not a satire. What these characters evoke, emotionally, is not mockery, but pity. Desperate to express their uniqueness in a society whose only acceptable means of expression is commodity fetishism, Beverly and her guests are reduced to affirming their existence through their taste in mass produced furniture, popular music and “erotic art.” If we cringe, like Potter, at her bad taste and monstrous narcissism, it is because we are feeling on her behalf an emotion Beverly does not seem to know: shame.

What is shame? Shame is the sense we have of our own human failings, our incompetence, ugliness, and loss of self-control. Shame regulates the tension between the private and public aspects of self. “In different cultures,” according to Levy and Rozaldo (1983), “there are to be found differences in the nature of what is private and what is public in the self concept, emotions and relationship, and therefore there will be different experiences of shame” (131). In shame, we withdraw from the gaze of the other who is experienced as more worthy. According to Malcolm Pines (1987), this “may be the unconscious implicit other, or may be an actual real other with whom we are engaged at that moment, but who also reactivates earlier representations of shaming persons” (20).

Essentially, shame is a state in which we are made aware of our bodily experiences, allowing us to recognize a sense of deficiency in the self. When this happens, the sense of self suddenly moves from background to foreground awareness, and the person is caught up in a state of subjective self-consciousness, experienced as a painful intrusion into a previously quiet, smoothly operating sense of self as background, context, or framework for experience. Speigel (1959) has called this the “fly-wheel” background sense of self, that always operates smoothly until it is disrupted, and we then become suddenly and painfully self-conscious. Bursten (1973) has written that:

Shame experiences disrupt the silent and automatic functioning of the sense of self, and shame is considered to be the basic form of unpleasure in disturbances of narcissism. The grandiose self is viewed as evolving compensatory formations instigated in large parts by primitive shame experiences (287–300).

In other words, most of us, as children, become acutely aware of our smallness, weakness, and relative incompetence in the larger scheme of things, and so we develop a proportionate sense of shame. In the case of a narcissist like Beverly, however, the sense of shame is so great and so deeply repressed that, were it to come to consciousness, it would cause the sense of self to collapse and deflate so completely that it must be consistently defended against with ever-expanding fantasies of grandiosity.

In one sense, what allows Beverly to dominate her party guests so ferociously is her total absence of shame. Shame is linked to self-esteem, to feelings of inferiority and failure, and hence to narcissism. The pain of shame is linked to the failure of that which we are and that which we would wish to be, either for ourselves, or for others. In psychoanalytic terms, this is expressed as the ego ideal contrasted to the ego, the ideal self contrasted to

the actual self, or the grandiose self as related to the central self. All these are concerned with some notion of ratio, a measurement of one against the other” (Pines, 21).

Apart from Beverly, the characters in *Abigail's Party* are distinguished by the various degrees of shame they manifest. In fact, they display a whole range of shades and nuances of shame, along with less subtle dimensions of the feeling. Beverly humiliates Laurence, in both senses of the word; Angela is socially awkward; Tony is deeply embarrassed by his wife, and simultaneously self-conscious and proud of his working-class origins; Sue is so mortified by the situation that she can hardly move.

Shame as repressed grandiosity, and grandiosity as repressed shame: these could be the English national emotions. Where other nations seem to have no problem expressing their pride in and love for their country, for the English, any expression of patriotism, from the Union Jack to the national anthem, evokes the specter of a shameful colonial past, when the English, as popularly conceived, divided the world into themselves and “Johnny Foreigner.” These days, the English, like the Germans, have great difficulty expressing their national pride. That proverbial self-deprecation so beloved in such British actors as the repugnant Hugh Grant more commonly turns up as a deep rooted sense of self-loathing and cynicism; after all, as Daniel Defoe wrote in his 1701 essay “The True Born Englishman,” we are all descendants of an “amphibious ill-born mob.” English culture today has almost an entirely negative identity, at least among the English, partly a by-product of Thatcher’s privatization of national resources, and her privileging of the individual over the masses—the basis of her famous claim that “there’s no such thing as society.”

According to Freud, “shame, disgust and morality are like Watchmen who maintain repressions (45)”, yet as Freud also says elsewhere, whatever is repressed will strive to return. It returns in the form of dream, desire and fantasy—in this case, in the form of *Abigail's Party*, the off-stage, unseen, “Other” party that exists only in the characters’ imaginations, and the odd glimpses of activity reported back by those who are sent next door to serve as real watchmen.

We don’t know what is happening at *Abigail's* house; we know that only that *Abigail* is 15, with a pink streak in her hair. We know she wears “jeans with patches on, and safety-pins right down the side, and scruffy bottoms;” we know she sometimes wears “plumber’s overalls,” and rides on the back of her friend’s motorbike. We know that this is her first unsupervised party. We also know that her parents are divorced, which Beverly feels is usually the result of “permissiveness, and all this wife-swapping business” and the bad influence of film stars (“I mean, to a film star, getting divorced is like going to the lavatory, if you’ll pardon my French,” she says to Sue).

The first time Laurence and Tony are sent next door, they return with a report that “two colored chaps and a girl roared up in a Ford Capri”; the second time, Beverly goes with them, and comes back with the news that “it’s all happening at your place, Sue.” She excitedly describes a “fat bloke wedged in your bay window” with a thin girl “draped round him.. and they’re snogging away—”). Laurence also mentions “a couple down the side of the house,” and “a few in the porch.” This is enough, on the part of Beverly and her guests, to evoke fantasies of lust and violence, dangerous and anti-social acts, the unrepressed impulses of oversexed teenagers uninhibited by the imperatives of middle-class shame and guilt.

Beverly herself refers to the party as “a bit of a rave-up” and a “freak-out,” imagining there will be plenty of “spirits” and “older boys.” “I’m not saying there’ll be any trouble,” she warns, “but, with teenagers, they have a drink, and they get over excited . . .—then they find their way to the bedrooms.” When Tony fails to reappear, Beverly jokes to Angela that “He’s probably being raped by a load of fifteen-year-old schoolgirls!” “Ang, I can just

see it, right, the music's thumping away and your Tone's lying on the floor, and there's all these girls, right, you know, piling on top of him. . .". She expresses a particularly gleeful pleasure at these fantasies, taunting the faint-hearted Sue with voyeuristic images of adolescent mayhem, indulging her own exhibitionist impulses and sexual fantasies. "They don't want Mum sitting there, casting a beady eye on all the goings-on, do they?" she says to Sue, lasciviously. This, after all, is where Beverly is leading her own guests—inviting them to join her in obliterating the shame that restrains them from acting out their own forbidden wishes, compensating for their own pathetic and inadequate lives (Angela says Tony "turns over and goes to sleep when I leap on him," and when Laurence describes Beverly's "erotic picture" as "cheap, pornographic trash!" she retaliates "Yeah, well, you're dead from the waist down anyway, let's face it!")

The title of the play is appropriate, then. Abigail's party is the focus of the drama in that it weasels its way into the imagination of Beverly and her guests, teasing them, conjuring up phantoms of lascivious mayhem, sexual freedom, a frightening and exciting place without the stifling charade of social etiquette: cocktail napkins, pineapple chunks, and party sausages on sticks, "nibbles" and "little fillups." For Laurence, the external stresses of his job, combined with the pressure from his hostile, domineering wife finally take their toll. Nothing happens at Beverly's party—and that's exactly the point. The orgy of sex and violence conjured up by Beverly makes her own get-together seem suffocatingly strait-laced—so suffocating, in fact, that it actually proves lethal.

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