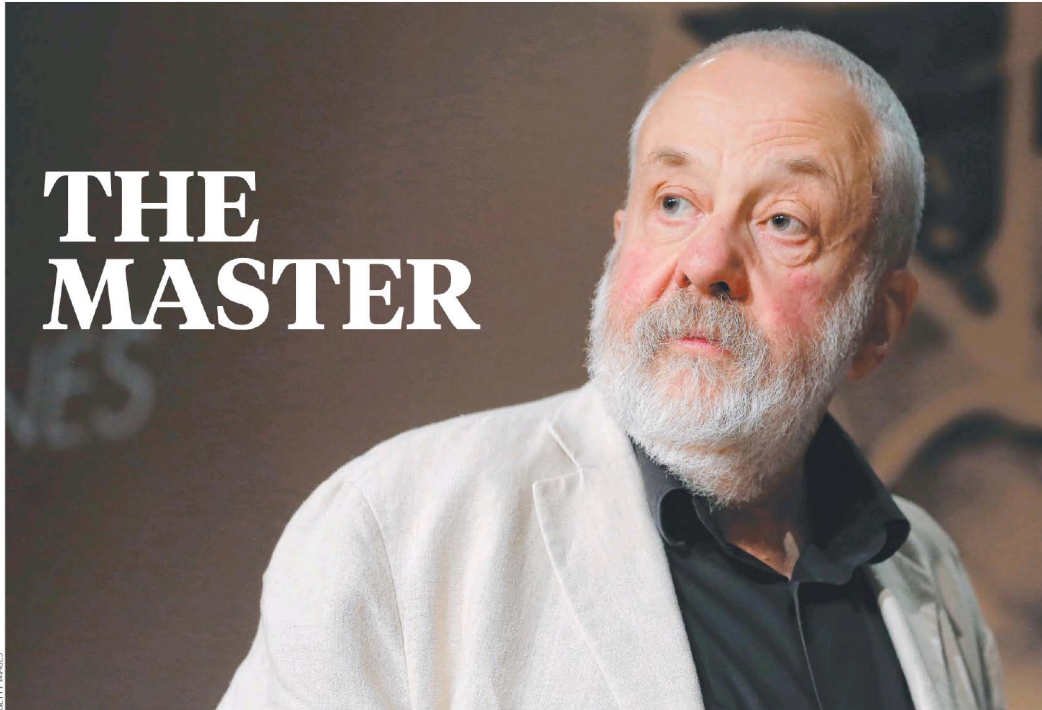


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Mike Leigh paints a personal portrait of a great artist in *Mr Turner*, as he tells **Jane Cornwell**

IT'S a rainy morning in Soho, central London, and upstairs in the offices of a film agency I'm shown into a small dark room with two white chairs and told to wait for Mike Leigh. "We've been recording a TV interview," says an assistant, and my eyes are still adjusting to the gloom when he's back again. The room next door is free, and lighter; 71-year-old Leigh, probably the most gifted living writer-director in British cinema, would prefer to meet in there.

There are standout scenes aplenty in Leigh's latest film, *Mr Turner*, a glorious biopic of the great English painter Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851) that brought Timothy Spall the best actor gong at this year's Cannes International Film Festival. But the scene that springs to mind right now is the one in which Turner welcomes prospective buyers into a candlelit antechamber before sending them to his viewing room, so that his vivid canvases would appear extra brilliant.

"It's completely true," says Leigh, sitting by a window next to a pale grey sky and looking even more beady-eyed and gnome-like than usual. "Turner built his gallery at the side of the house and people had to stand in the dark before looking at his paintings, and he spied on them through a peephole in the wall." He stares at me levelly. "I don't think I could have made any of that up."

Basing a movie on a historical character is a departure for the seven-time Oscar nominee, whose cross-genre films tend to be concerned with instantly recognisable reality, with modern, warts-and-all British life. Leigh famously begins his projects without written scripts, kicking them off with an idea or simply a feeling. Ensemble casts then develop their characters — braying yuppies and weary single mothers, mixed-up drifters and monstrous suburban divas — through discussion, research and a shedload of improvisation.

"What I do is what other artists do, painters, novelists, people who make music, poets, sculptors, you name it," he has said. "For me making a film is a journey of discovery as to what that



Mike Leigh, main picture, and with Timothy Spall on the set of *Mr Turner*, above

film is." His work is issues-based, sometimes bleak and bracing, often heartwarming and funny. From the middle-class twits of the 1977 television play *Abigail's Party* (from which the Australian TV sitcom *Kath & Kim* arguably took inspiration) to *Life is Sweet*, his 1990 portrait of a working-class London family; from 1996's *Secrets & Lies*, about an adopted black woman's search for her birth mother, to 2010's *Another Year*, a paean to the trials and pleasures of growing old, Leigh explores social relationships and skewers their nuances. He makes the ordinary seem fascinating.

"[Leigh's] area is the glory of everyday nothingness, which he elevates into great drama," says Spall, who spent two years learning to paint in preparation for his role as Turner, a revolutionary artist whose ability to capture light, colour and atmosphere made him one of the best landscape painters. That Turner also happened to be gruff, eccentric, passionate, conflicted and at worst an asshole meant he was ripe for portrayal in a Leigh movie.

"I felt there was scope for a film that examined the tension between this very mortal, flawed individual and the spiritual way he had of distilling the world," Leigh says.

Turner bequeathed the contents of his studio, a cache numbering in the tens of thousands, to the British nation. (Last year more than 100 of these works featured in an exhibition at the

wives, mistresses, estranged daughters, bad Purcell arias and teary visits to brothels. Here, too, are sea journeys (Turner is strapped to the mast of a ship in a storm to soak up the atmosphere) and great marshy landscapes.

It's no wonder, really, why *Mr Turner* is being hailed as Leigh's magnum opus. The director is having none of it: "This film, like any film I make, is the fruits of the collaboration of a lot of extremely talented people on both sides of the camera."

People such as Spall, who has appeared in four other Leigh films including *Topsy-Turvy*, the upbeat 1999 musical drama about operatic composers WS Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, and Leigh's only other departure from fiction. Wheezing, grunting and harrumphing, Spall's portly, mutton-chopped Turner attacks his canvases with brutish gusto. Colours are mixed with spit, sweat and gobs of phlegm. Snuff is blown on to canvases. Fingers and claws work as well as brushes.

Another memorable scene takes us to the Royal Academy exhibition on varnishing day, a kind of unofficial private view where artists give their paintings a final going over. Turner puts a red blob on to his Dutch seascape *Helvoetsluis* as if he is vandalising his own work, before returning to transform it into a bobbing buoy, in the process insulting a nearby John Constable (James Fleet), who has been applying flecks of vermilion to his painting of Waterloo Bridge.

"Everybody knows that this incident really happened," says Leigh with a shrug. "So you research, study and absorb and assimilate the background, and then you get out and make the piece."

He nonetheless relied on his usual method of allowing actors to improvise without a script. Fixed plot points such as Turner's final, tender relationship with the widowed Mrs Booth (Marion Bailey, Leigh's real-life partner), his landlady in coastal Margate, had plenty of wiggle room. Only very occasionally were facts bent; the idea that Turner's relationship with his long-suffering, long-term housekeeper Hannah Danby (Dorothy Atkinson) was sexual — Turner paws at her oafishly, reflexively — grew organically out of rehearsal.

Actors prepared by reading and researching and taking guidance from art experts. They perused the Turner archive at the Tate Britain, whose stunning exhibition *Late Turner: Painting Set Free* coincided with the film's British release at the start of November. After that it was business as usual, with droll humour replacing biting satire — although a comical portrayal of the