

Secret Agent

Brenda Blethyn Fulfills Her High Hopes

BY GERARD
RAYMOND

I defy any actor to turn Mike Leigh down," says British actress Brenda Blethyn. "It's such a rewarding experience, because you get to create a complete character." Blethyn's faith in her director paid off handsomely with Cannes's Best Actress award for her *Secrets & Lies* portrait of Cynthia, a downtrodden single mother reunited with the child she had given away for adoption.

"I've had a healthy career and now they're saying, 'Who's this girl?'" says Blethyn, unpretentiously thrilled about her newfound fame. Indeed, for the past 20 years she's worked steadily in both British theater (classical as well as contemporary roles) and in television (*The Buddha of Suburbia*). Her 1991 Off-Broadway debut, in an Alan Ayck-born play, led to her first feature film role—playing Brad Pitt's mother in *A River Runs Through It*.

Secrets & Lies may represent Blethyn's most demanding work to date. Having worked with Leigh on his 1980 BBC television drama, *Grown Ups*, she knew what to expect: A six-

month commitment to a nebulous role before a word of the script was written. Says Blethyn: "Mike says he doesn't know what the film is going to be about, but I think he's got some idea in his head." In one-on-one sessions with Leigh, the actors settle on the character they'll play and create a back story for that character. "Mike will ask questions—like, 'can you remember the smells in the house when you were a child?' or 'what toys did you have?'—down to the tiniest detail. But he doesn't impose anything on the actor; it has to be organic."

Leigh then throws the actors into various improvised situations that set the plot in motion. "I didn't have the faintest idea she would call," says Blethyn, recalling the day they first improvised the scene in which Cynthia re-

ceives a phone call from her long-lost daughter. "But because the research is so thorough, you simply react as that character would." Leigh fashions the shooting script from these improvisations. The director takes sole screenwriting credit, but Blethyn doesn't seem to mind. "Mike's a genius. He'll ask us to keep improvising scenes until he gets what he wants. When we shoot the scene the next day, it's miraculously down to three minutes, and it's still organic."

Blethyn says she never had to worry about how to say a line or make the right gesture. "It made me realize how lazy I'd been as an actor, relying on just the text on the page to give you all the clues. [In *Secrets & Lies*] I knew precisely when a particular thought was coming into Cynthia's head. There was no interpreting; there was just no other way of doing it." At Cannes, savoring her accolades, Blethyn says she found herself wondering what poor Cynthia would make of it all. "All I could manage was, 'This is living, ain't it sweetheart?'" she says laughing. ♦