

**E**arly in the second scene of Mike Leigh's *Goose-Pimples*, the audience feels the first quiver of unease about the characters they're watching. During a dinner party, the host, Vernon (Sam Rockwell), suddenly grabs at the breasts of Frankie (Gillian Foss), the wife of his best friend and co-worker, Irving (Max Baker). In that instant, we grasp that Vernon is conducting a clandestine affair with Frankie right under her husband's nose, and we sense he doesn't treat her very nicely either. This revealing moment, a distinguishing feature of Leigh's work, is the kind of behavioral detail director Scott Elliott illuminates with great expertise. "You feel like you're watching something private, something that you shouldn't be watching," says Elliott, his eyes gleaming as he talks enthusiastically about the

play now running at the Judith Anderson Theater.

Directing *Goose-Pimples* for The New Group, his own off-Broadway company, marks a return to roots for the 35-year-old, Long Island-born Elliott. Two years ago, he mounted a production of Leigh's *Ecstasy*, a bleak but humorous slice-of-life portrait of working class lives in northwest London. It proved a perfect match for the American director and the British playwright/filmmaker best known for *Secrets and Lies*, a 1996 Best Picture nominee. For the "seamless" integration of "subtle direction, skillful design, [and] extraordinary acting," Elliott and his company received a 1995 OBIE Award for *Ecstasy*, which put The New Group firmly on the New York theater map and turned Elliott into one of the most sought-after directors in the city.

Elliott followed *Ecstasy* with *Curtains*, a mordant British comedy by Stephen Bill, an unflinching portrayal of the mercy killing of a wheelchair-bound 86-year-old woman. He then took the helm of two high-profile Broadway productions — Noël Coward's *Present Laughter*, starring Frank Langella, and an all-star production of Chekhov's *The Three Sisters* at the Roundabout Theatre — as well as the American premiere of Arthur Miller's *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan* and a revised version of Jon Robin Baitz's *The End of the Day* at Williamstown. But he continued to present new plays at The New Group, sharing producing duties with executive producer Claudia Catania, and scored a huge critical hit last season with Kenneth Lonergan's popular Gen-X comedy, *This Is Our Youth*, directed by Mark Brokaw.

# Scott Elliott Re-Groups

The director returns to his roots with the New Group and a new Mike Leigh play.

By Gerard Raymond



Gillian Foss, Sam Rockwell, Adam Alexi-Malle, and Caroline Seymour in *Goose-Pimples*.



"New Group is my baby, and in no way would I separate from it," exclaims Elliott, who says he's tried to channel his personal success back into the company. He had become tired of climbing the barricades day in, day out as a chorus boy in *Les Miz*, and gave up acting to put himself through film school (next spring he will direct his first movie — Peter Hedges' screen adaptation of Jane Hamilton's novel *Map of the World*); he used the balance of his earnings to start The New Group to create a venue where he could direct. "Claudia and I raised \$5,000 to produce *Ecstasy* in 1995, and now we are actually able to pay people weekly salaries!" he says proudly.

After *Ecstasy*, Elliott struck up a friendship with Leigh. The Englishman had previously been very protective about allowing his work to be performed in America, but the two of them were eager for an opportunity to collaborate again. "We see eye-to-eye on a lot of things, and I've been influenced by Mike's work because I sought out his films in my formative years," Elliott explains. "Mike's a fun person, a very smart guy — not pretentious — and he has very strong social and political beliefs."

Leigh, for his part, doesn't stint on returning the compliment. "I don't know all the theater companies in New York, but if there's one more committed, more creative, or more intelligent than the New Group, I'll eat my hat!" he writes via fax, when contacted for a comment. As for his American interpreter, Leigh adds, "Scott Elliott, with his wonderful, unique compassion and insight and his great sense of humor, is the ideal director for my plays, and I'm

extremely lucky that he found me."

*Goose-Pimples*, like *Ecstasy*, is a slice-of-life portrait of a group of ordinary people. The current play is actually darker, and perhaps funnier. The characters in *Goose-Pimples* have better jobs, and are, consequently, more greedy and ambitious than their predecessors in *Ecstasy*. The play is set in 1981 (the year it was originally produced in England) in Dollis Hill, a London suburb, which, according to Elliott, could be compared to Long Island. In addition to Vernon's dinner party, *Goose-Pimples* also contains a parallel plot in which Vernon's room-

hallmark of Leigh's writing is his specificity, the essence of Elliott's work as director is being able to locate with precision the tiny details that reveal the truth about the characters. Often the insights come through body language and throwaway gestures, rather than actual dialogue. Take, for instance, Muhammad, whose knowledge of English is strictly limited. (The part was created by Antony Sher in London.) The character, who first appears to be a tastelessly comic racial stereotype, grows in complexity and humanity as the play progresses, but the actor (a

wonderful find in Alexi-Malle) has hardly any comprehensible lines. "The [English] characters are very uncomfortable in their bodies," Elliott observes. "When you live in a body like that, you develop a lot of rage because you are not true to who you are. So a big element of the play is about how these very uptight people get very angry when they have to let go of their stereotypes."

Leigh's plays and movies are created in workshops with the collaboration of his casts. The actors prepare detailed backgrounds for their own characters and then improvise in the various scenes

and confrontations instigated by Leigh. While Elliott's starting point is the finished script, he also encourages his actors to think about their characters down to the smallest detail. "I think you can be specific about the way the characters would live their day-to-day life," he says. "I encourage the actors to know how his or her character goes to the bathroom, because if you are that specific, you can draw on that kind of information for the performance. That also means when you are doing a run of



**Caroline Seymour, Jared Harris, Marian Quinn, and Patrick Fitzgerald starred in *Ecstasy* for the New Group.**

mate Jackie (Caroline Seymour), a casino croupier, decides to bring home Muhammad (Adam Alexi-Malle), in the mistaken notion that her non-English speaking Arab pick-up is a super-rich oil tycoon and will impress the others. "[These people] are the nouveau riche of the time, and consider themselves posh," Elliott explains.

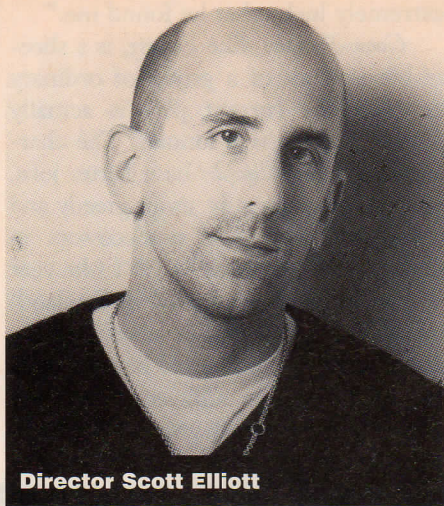
"Mike's writing is like Chekhov's in a weird way," Elliott continues. "It is very subtextually driven, and nobody ever means anything they are saying." If the



the play, you'll never stop working."

"Scott's working style is very relaxed, more about people than highfalutin concepts," says Caroline Seymour, who has worked with Elliott in *Ecstasy*, *Present Laughter*, *The Monogamist*, and now *Goose-Pimples*. "He's a great organizer of people, and tries to make sure everyone is having a good time," the English-born actress continues, "be-

Playwright Mike Leigh



Director Scott Elliott

cause even though you are playing a bunch of pigs, you have to work with each other in a collaborative way."

Explains Elliott, "You have to love everything about the characters. We've all had nasty thoughts — let's face it. The challenge of working on something like this is that you have to tap into the ugly side of yourself and learn to love that for a minute."

Cheerfully admitting that he is a bit of a "control freak," Elliott relishes the

fact that he is his own master at The New Group. In February, he will direct *Hazelwood Junior High*, a new play by novice playwright Rob Urbinati. Working on Broadway allows him to take classics like *Three Sisters* and *Present Laughter* and "interpret them in a modern way that would make them accessible to people who grew up on television and the movies," he says, "When there is a \$2 million investment to be recouped, you have to let some of your business sense take over." But his heart is on Theater Row. "[*Goose-Pimples*] is very deceptive," he says. "You really kind of like the people at the beginning and then at the end you are quite wrenched. I've been walking around with a stiff neck these past few days after rehearsals," he adds, "but I like that." ■

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