



Happy-Go-Lucky

Sally Hawkins, Eddie Marsan, and Alexis Zegerman star in a film written and directed by Mike Leigh.

By Josef Woodard

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Mike Leigh's latest mild-mannered wower of a film, *Happy-Go-Lucky*, mostly lives up to its title. Except when it doesn't. Dark clouds of angst and adulthood do periodically drift into the otherwise giddy, free-spirited existence of our kindergarten teacher heroine named Poppy (Sally Hawkins). Think of Poppy as a working-class Brit variation on Amélie, but with more booze and apprehensions about crossing the age line into her thirties without a romantic anchor or family plan. "How's your love life?" her friend asks. "Not a sausage," comes the glum reply, but with no excessive dourness. Her internal mantra is along the lines of "things will work out."

How do we know, or think we know, what's ticking inside the head of this bubbly, joke-intensive protagonist? In part, it has to do with Leigh's particular artistic genius, what makes him one of the most prized directors on the planet currently. In Leigh's best films, the naturalism is such that we're drawn directly into the characters' lives, as if we've already known them. We root for them, or spite them, or pity them, depending. In this tale, Hawkins's character is inserted into a tangled narrative web of teachers, including a flamenco teacher and an angry-at-the-world driving teacher (the scary-good Eddie Marsan), who delivers a reality check, and casts a dark cloud in the otherwise lazy summer's day skies of the story.

Acting tends to fly at a conspicuously high (but never overstated) level in Leigh's films. This time around, Hawkins's performance truly is winsome, stunning, and Oscar-worthy, much like Imelda Staunton was in Leigh's 2004 film, *Vera Drake* (playing an entirely different, cheerful but steadfast character).

With the deceptively light-feeling *Happy-Go-Lucky*, we once again recognize that if improvisation is part of the Leigh process, the finished product is always, well, taut and finished. Between cinematographer Dick Pope's impressively sharp visual plan and the lovely, lyrical chamber music score by Gary Yershon, the sheer multisensory filmic experience enfolds us even as we sort out the battle of dark against light in the story. Reassuringly for cinema fans, Leigh strikes again.

For showtimes, check the Independent's movie listings, [here](#).