

## Hard Truths [12A]

2024 UK/Spain 97 mins

UK released **31 January 2025**

Director **Mike Leigh**

Screenplay **Mike Leigh**

Cinematography **Dick Pope**

Music **Gary Yershon**

Cast **Marianne Jean-Baptiste** (Pansy Deacon); **Michele Austin** (Chantelle); **David Webber** (Curtley Deacon); **Tuwaine Barrett** (Moses Deacon); **Ani Nelson** (Kayla); **Sophia Brown** (Aleisha); **Jonathan Livingstone** (Virgil)

The singular consistency of Mike Leigh's 50-year-plus career making films for both big and small screen could be expressed simply by their titles. From the instructive moniker of his 1971 debut *Bleak Moments* onwards, year after another year, Leigh's intensive explorations of everyday people strips them naked emotionally, revealing their high hopes and dreams, their secrets and lies. The ties, familial and otherwise, that can either offer a lifeline or a noose; all or nothing. Life is sweet, but also bitter. Leigh and his astonishing casts only deal in hard – and hard-won – truths.

Here, Leigh focuses for the first time exclusively on Afro-Caribbean British families, chiefly two middle-aged sisters Pansy (Marianne Jean-Baptiste) and Chantelle (Michele Austin), their young adult children and Pansy's husband Curtley (David Webber). The idea of a white male director centring Black British female lives might make some wary; but Leigh's immersive, collaborative process empowers actors to embody and own their creations. *Hard Truths* is Jean-Baptiste's first Leigh role since her Oscar-nominated breakout in *Secrets and Lies* (1996). Pansy is a shocking contrast to her character in that film, the patient, empathetic Hortense. She spews vitriol at all comers, seeing only the worst in everyone and everything.

Chantelle, by contrast, is a cheerful, vivacious hairdresser who runs her own salon and is close to her two vibrant daughters, Aleisha (Sophia Brown) and Kayla (Ani Nelson). Their cramped, colourful high-rise flat marks them clearly

not as financially well-off as Pansy in her antiseptic modern house – but theirs is a shared, loving home, whereas Pansy is like a dragon guarding the prisoners inside her spick-and-span but soulless castle.

Because this is a Mike Leigh film, though, little by little the drawbridge is lowered, allowing us to see the desperate, frightened woman trapped inside. But not even Pansy can pinpoint the causes of her malaise. “Why can’t you be happy?” Chantelle pleads. Her sister’s despairing answer: “I don’t know!” It isn’t completely morose: Leigh’s trademark tragicomic blend is most present in the outrageous insults Pansy unleashes, no less funny for the hostility of Jean-Baptiste’s delivery. It’s a fearless performance, perhaps encapsulated by a marvellous moment when she somehow laughs and cries at the same time. She’s matched step for step by Austin – another Leigh veteran, their scenes together, haunted by a shared, unresolved past, are the film’s high points.

Elsewhere, habitual collaborators deliver familiar pleasures – Gary Yershon’s elegiac score, unobtrusive yet precise framing by the late and much-mourned cinematographer Dick Pope – and the blocking and staging of a crucial Mother’s Day gathering is expertly done. It’s easy to take Leigh’s work for granted, even minor-key projects such as this, but the hardest truth of all is how irreplaceable he still is in British cinema. Very few other contemporary filmmakers in this country are so prepared to confront with care and dignity people who others would cross the road to avoid, and to unpick the wayward threads of their fragile lives. Meantime, Leigh’s work continues.

**Leigh Singer**, *Sight and Sound*, 30 January 2025 (abridged)

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