

# The ties that bind

by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [December 4, 2002](#) issue

If you knew what was going to happen to you in the morning, you'd never get out of bed," declares Phil (Timothy Spall) early in Mike Leigh's *All or Nothing*. Phil, a cabbie, does have a hard time rousing himself in the morning, so his workday is truncated. And he's always behind financially; he has to borrow money from Penny (Lesley Manville), his common-law wife, and even from his unemployed son Rory (James Corden).

*All or Nothing* focuses on the residents of a remarkably ugly London council flat. They're people whose lives have stalled, who have in various ways reached a spiritual dead end. Leigh depicts both their desperation and their clumsy, touching efforts to lift themselves and each other out of the morass.

Penny and Phil's relationship has come down to whining and sniping on her part and passivity on his, and she can't communicate with Rory, who goes into a rage at every demand, every appeal. Their daughter Rachel (Alison Garland), a kind, quiet soul, does scut work at an old folks home; overweight like her father and brother, with a premature middle-aged look, she has no romantic prospects except for a much older co-worker whose notion of courtship is to describe his own solitary existence and confide that he sleeps naked.

Penny's neighbor Maureen (Ruth Sheen), who works alongside her at a supermarket, has raised her daughter Donna (Helen Coker) solo. Donna has gotten pregnant by her bellicose boy friend (Sam Kelly), whose response to the news is to lash out at her like a cornered animal. He goes running to another girl--Samantha (Sally Hawkins), whose father (Paul Jesson) hacks for the same company as Phil and whose alcoholic mother (Marion Bailey) is so cut off from her own instincts that when Rory collapses from heart failure on the field outside their building, she can't even manage to call an ambulance.

It's hard to think of a more downbeat picture, but Leigh, who constructs his screenplays after hours of improvisation with his actors, has mastered a brand of naturalism that never feels oppressive. And he locates the humor in domestic

tangles, workplace monotonies, neighborhood eruptions. His working-class characters quibble in an argot so distinctive that it has a joyous music all its own. You can hear in it the debt he owes to Harold Pinter, but unlike Pinter (or David Mamet, Pinter's most devoted Yankee disciple), Leigh is a humanist to his bones.

*All or Nothing* is suffused with the affection Leigh feels for his characters--for Spall's lumbering, huge-eyed, soft-toned Phil, who wears his long hair like straw plastered to his football-shaped skull; for Manville's Penny, whose thin, high voice sounds like the last scrapings of a life worn to a nub by years of misery; for Maureen and Donna, whose nonstop banter is the expression of the love they turn to in relief when life seems to defeat them.

The title refers to love (and especially to family): it's the rock the characters cling to, without which they're lost. Rory's hospitalization and Donna's confession that she's pregnant coincide with an encounter Sam has with a neighbor boy (Daniel Mays) so hungry for contact with her that he carves her initial on his chest--the most extreme expression of loneliness in a movie inhabited by lonely hearts. They also coincide with Phil's more-or-less breakdown. Penny can't reach him to tell him about his son because after depositing a fare at Heathrow, he's turned off his radio and his phone and driven to the ocean, unable to keep going.

Rory's illness stirs him up, though. He vows to make enough money to take his family on a holiday, and when Penny responds with incredulity and disdain, he finally finds the energy to articulate his fear that she no longer loves him. In this climactic scene, which contains some of the finest acting in any recent movie, Leigh takes us further into these characters' anguish than we imagined we'd have the stomach for. Emotionally, the movie is like a fragment from Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, except that the lyricism isn't in the language but in the performance rhythms. When Penny and Phil come out on the other side of their agonized confrontation, the renewal of their buried love is powerful enough to make us feel hopeful for the whole human race.