

A little voice has told **Michael Coveney** that Alison Steadman may be creating a comic monster with the part of man-eating boozier Mari Hoff

# Life is getting sweeter for Steadman

FOUR years ago, and quite by chance, I went on holiday with Alison Steadman. I was checking in at Gatwick for a flight to Sardinia with my family and there she was, just ahead of us in the queue, with her husband, film and stage director Mike Leigh, and their two sons.

We were all going to the same place. A potentially disastrous juxtaposition of a brilliant creative couple and a curmudgeonly critic in leisure was salvaged by pleasant climates and social decency, though I have always half-dreaded a Mike Leigh holiday movie in which beach fobbles and grim fashion points were all too recognisable.

We survived chiefly due to the sunny disposition and general good-eggedness of Alison Steadman. She was, it transpired, a fair tennis player, an impressively considerate mother and a woman of no pretension or 'side' whatsoever. In short, and in shorts, a sweetie.

A far cry from most of the characters she plays, though there are always shafts of tenderness in the basest of her creations. And they come no braver than the sound of Mari Hoff in Jim Cartwright's new play, *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice*.

This is her first stage appearance since 1988, when she played the 'respectable' mother of the hideous, fat little brood of 'no-necks' in the National's *Car On a Hot Tin Roof*. Steadman may well be composing a comic monster worthy to sit beside Beverly in *Abigail's Party* (1977), the role for which she remains best known.

Mari is a Boltonian widow, a man-eating boozier whose Jack-the-lad boyfriend sets out to exploit her agoraphobic daughter's gift for mimicry. Over sandwiches and a glass of beer between rehearsals, the unfused actress confessed it felt 'like a race' to get the play on. The script was changing all the time, but we knew that she thrives on creative tension. After the demanding, laboratory style of working with Mike Leigh, anything thrown at her by RNT wunderkind director Sam Mendes must be a doddle, like going from Grotowski to Frith Banbury.



Steadman: She deserves the best that comic writers can throw at her. (Photograph: Richard Middenhall)

Mike Leigh is about to go into purdah for his next film. He sees off Steadman each morning from their Muswell Hill home with a cheery, semi-sarcastic cry of 'Have a good day, at the Royal National Theatre, dear.' A few weeks ago, at David Edgar's Birmingham University theatre conference, Leigh and Leigh said that there was a gap of 15 years between *Abigail's*

work at the RNT, after commandeering an entire session to explain his working methods while Steadman sat silently on the same platform. She eventually piped up, speaking sensibly. But she is not given to theory or to brash statements. She reminds me that she has only appeared in six pieces of work directed by Leigh and that there was a gap of 15 years between *Abigail's*

*Party* and the next joint project. 'I would rather work on a stage than anywhere else. And I like the idea of being the first person to have a go at a play. I'm the first to play Mari, and I get a buzz from seeing my name on the first cast list.' She was born in Liverpool 45 years ago, the youngest of three daughters. Father was a clerical worker. Aged 14, she joined the Liverpool Youth

Theatre and went to London to join the drama school attached to Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop. Leigh came along to do an improvised play. He said we should have a chat, but we never did, and I went off to work in rep for four years.

They met again in the Ken Loach and Tony Garnett RSC production of *Tommy* (1975). Leigh directed Steadman's television breakthrough in the BBC film *Nazi In May*. She played Candice-Marie, a pacifist vegetarian camper with inconspicuously refined aspirations. In this imperishable classic, of stark and accumulative characterisation, she forged her public persona as a peerless comedienne in contemporary, lower middle-class regional and Cockney drama.

As she admits, you simply do not get that depth and vibrant vulgarity except with Mike Leigh. In their latest film together, *Life Is Sweet*, she played Wendy (successfully 'Wend', then 'Wen'), an Enfield suburban charlene plagued by a hopelessly morose husband (the brilliant Jim Broadbent, a regular colleague) by a grotesque, recession-hit restaurateur played by Timothy Spall in full slosh-brixy garb; and by twin daughters, one an apprentice plumber, the other a vomiting anorexic sex fiend.

This thin twin was played by Jane Horrocks, with whom Steadman is maternally teamed once more in *Little Voice*. Their final scene of confessional reconciliation in *Life Is Sweet* was one of the most moving in the British cinema of late. The rock solid centre of Wendy's well-intentioned soul was beamed through Steadman's steady, green-eyed gaze, and in the dignified serenity she evinces among all the kidding and joshing and strangled catchphrases, of which 'Stop jokin' me' is the favourite.

These qualities have hardly been tapped in the London theatre. Her single West End appearance was in Alan Ayckbourn's bleak *Joking Apart* (1979), opposite Christopher

Cazenove, but the play did not run. She good one of Shared Experience's finest casts in *A Handful of Dust* (1982), sidling threateningly through a cloud of musk as Waugh's Princess Jenny. And she was briefly at the RSC as the object of Antony Sher's impish attentions in *Tartuffe*, and in David Edgar's *Moynihan* (1983).

In Richard Eyre's Royal Court production of Alan Bennett's *Kafka's Dick* (1986), Steadman played a gloriously perfunctory nurse married to an insurance clerk who is compiling a learned article on the Czech Chekhov, the Prague Proast. Pining the revived Kafka to the sofa, she blithely sympathised with his sexual under-endowment, noting en passant that Scott Fitzgerald had the same paranoia, that

W. H. Auden never wore underpants and that E. M. Forster's 'Mr Right' was an Egyptian truckdriver. Like Maggie Smith and Julie Walters, whose star cinematic turns she has modestly supported in *A Private Function* and *Shirley Valentine*, she deserves the best that comic writers can throw at her.

Steadman's instinctive, prevalent huffiness and her perfect timing and vocal technique more than qualify her for the great Restoration roles in Congreve and Wycherley. They are the test of her cutting edge, of her undoubted ability to transcend the slight slang of girl-next-door amiability. Is she too nice too often, too pleasantly adaptable? Another danger is that indisputable stardom will be

lost in the endless recycling of leftovers from *Abigail's Party* in such mendacious mediocrity as the television series *Come to the Dogs*, six more episodes of which she starts filming with Warren Clarke in September. In this she plays Lauren Patterson, a good-time Essex girl who oozes revenge on her vile entrepreneurial greyhound-trainer hubby (Clarke) by reverting to boring filial niceness.

The bleaching-out process of great acting, and Steadman spends most of her time being serious and natural. She is good at this, but who cares? We want to see her in full frantic flight, grabbing a part by the throat and the audience by its shorts and curls. She does this in the Mike Leigh dissolutions, don't bet against it at the National this week.

*The Rise and Fall of Little Voice* opens at the Royal National Theatre's Cottesloe auditorium this Tuesday and continues in repertory.

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## Michael Coveney Preview's Little Voice

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Sat, Feb 29, 2020