

Peterloo [12A] 2018|UK|154 min

UK release date **2nd November 2018**

Director **Mike Leigh**

Screenplay **Mike Leigh**

Cinematographer **Dick Pope**

Cast **Rory Kinnear** (Henry Hunt); **Maxine Peake** (Nellie); **David Moorst** (Joseph); **Karl Johnson** (Lord Sidmouth); **Robert Wilfort** (Lord Liverpool); **Tim McInnerny** (Prince Regent)

Mike Leigh brings an overwhelming simplicity and severity to this historical epic, which begins with rhetoric and ends in violence. There is force, grit and, above all, a sense of purpose; a sense that the story he has to tell is important and real, and that it needs to be heard right now.

On 16 August 1819, at what we would now call a pro-democracy demonstration in St Peter's Field, Manchester, an excitable band of cavalry and yeomanry – whose commander had airily absented himself for a day at the races – charged with sabres drawn into a crowd of 100,000 unarmed people, many of whom were unable to escape the enclosed space. The troops killed 18 and injured hundreds more.

Peterloo was eventually the seed of reform, and rooting out the political mendacity and bad faith that underpinned the massacre inspired a new wave of national journalism, giving rise to this paper's ancestor, the Manchester Guardian. The protesters were complaining about taxation without representation: it wasn't just the French Revolution the Hussars were trying to crush in St Peter's Field, but the American Revolution, which had shown that defeating the British government was possible. And these were people, in any case, maddened with hunger, because corn law tariffs had barred imports of cheap grain from the continent. In 2018, our government is planning to stockpile food (and medicines) in the event of similar restrictions on trade.

Leigh creates a huge, crowded canvas, dourly dark in the opening scenes, and then vividly colourful for the spectacular and brutal climactic crowd sequences.

No single story or character predominates, not even the conceited orator and agitator Henry Hunt, coolly played by Rory Kinnear, who has come from London to Manchester, with some condescension, to be the star turn at the fateful St Peter's Field meeting.

Hunt is, in his way, the dramatic mediator between the government and the governed, the tyrants and the tyrannised. He is the reformer, the radical, but also the wealthy liberal and man of means. Maxine Peake plays Nellie, a tough Manchester worker who is the mother to Joseph (David Moorst) a young soldier shown stumbling around dazed at Waterloo in the opening scene. Stricken with PTSD, he finally gets home to his family and is to find a terrible parallel destiny at Peterloo.

There are big, sumptuous, theatrical moments in Peterloo: particularly the Commons and Lords debates. But this is generally an austere, even dour film. It is about talk: talk, talk, and more talk in stark rooms and cheerless parlours. Political agitation was about talk; oratory was the fuel that ran the campaign, or the oxygen that would make the flame catch. Without it, the explosive action would not make dramatic or emotional sense. Leigh lets rip with the great and terrible scene of Peterloo, with all its terror, panic and strange, nauseous excitement. With this richly intelligent, passionate movie, Mike Leigh has fought a brilliant rearguard action on history's political battlefield.

After: **Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian, 1 Sep 2018**

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