

Another Year

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue



Mike Leigh's affecting *Another Year* takes the form of a series of encounters between a contented middle-aged couple and the friends and relatives who interrupt their lives over the course of four seasons. Gerri (Ruth Sheen), a counselor, and Tom (Jim Broadbent), a geologist, are the still center around which other, mostly deeply unsettled lives orbit.

In the summer, they receive a visit from Tom's pal Ken (Peter Wight), whose constant drinking and gluttony are desperate attempts to compensate for a life lacking emotional engagement. Ken feels that life has passed him by, and he resents the young who are still in the thick of it. Gerri and Tom's lonesome son Joe (Oliver Maltman) is a source of some concern until, in the autumn, he introduces them to his new girlfriend Katie (Karina Fernandez). In the winter, they attend Tom's sister-in-law's funeral and persuade his brother Ronnie (David Bradley), broken and confused by the loss of his wife, to stay with them for a while.

Cycling in and out of Tom and Gerri's domestic life is Mary (Lesley Manville), a secretary who works with Gerri—and an alcoholic who exists on the cusp of disaster. Self-delusional and self-pitying, Mary dwells on the failed relationships of her youth

yet presents herself as the continual object of unwanted male attention. At a summer barbecue she flirts with Joe, who gently deflects her advances. Later, when she comes over for tea the day he brings Katie over to meet his folks, Mary can't conceal her rage at this woman who's had the audacity to take hold of a man Mary covets but who has never shown the least romantic interest in her. Manville's performance is one of the most harrowing and moving depictions of lonely hearts desperation the movies have given us. Watching it, you veer between embarrassment and pity.

The movie is pared down but surpassingly elegant, like a superbly assembled piece of chamber music (Gary Yershon's score is lovely, as is Dick Pope's cinematography). But it has an unusual flaw. Because Gerri and Tom are positioned as the happy, stable couple who host and advise their messed-up friends, after a while Gerri in particular begins to seem a little smug. Sheen is an amazing camera subject, her long face graced with magnificent cheekbones and framed with tendrils that drip down from her ponytail—she looks like a British Modigliani. She's also a terrific actress. But the role doesn't serve her well. By the time Mary asks Gerri if she's angry at her, and Gerri replies that she isn't angry but just let down, she seems high-handed. Yet it's clear that Leigh doesn't intend us to see her that way—not the kind of mistake he generally makes.

But Manville's exciting performance makes *Another Year* more than worth seeing. Others contribute unforgettable scenes as well. Imelda Staunton shows up early on as an insomniac with shredded nerves whose doctor passes her on to Gerri, and though she's on screen for less than ten minutes, she provides a brilliant portrait of a woman so depressed that she can't even handle discussing what's wrong with her life. (When Gerri asks her what she thinks might improve it, her client answers, "A new life.") And when Ronnie's son Carl (Martin Savage, who plays Watson on the current British TV series *Sherlock*) arrives late for his mother's funeral, the furious exchange between father and son has the jagged edge of a scene from a Harold Pinter play, though with a humanity you won't find in Pinter.

Later Mary wanders by Gerri and Tom's, in rough shape after a champagne binge, and finds Ronnie there alone. He rolls a cigarette for her, and for a moment these two anchorless people reach across the void to each other in a suggestion of what Tennessee Williams called "broken gates between people." At his best, Leigh is a marvel.