

The “Good Woman” of North London

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11 November 2004

Vera Drake, written and directed by Mike Leigh

London 1950 is the setting for Mike Leigh’s remarkable new film, *Vera Drake*. The Second World War and the London blitz in particular weigh heavily on the collective consciousness of the population. It is a period of rationing and black marketeering—as well as illegal abortions.

Winner of the prestigious Golden Lion prize at the Venice film festival, Leigh’s film is a portrait of the title character, a middle-aged, working class woman who lives in a small flat with her husband and two grown children. Without her family’s knowledge, Vera also performs abortions, an illegal act at that time.

Vera (Imelda Staunton) ministers to the aged and sick in a poor North London neighborhood. Employed as a house cleaner for the well-to-do, she is a being in perpetual motion. At day’s end, she scurries off to make a cup of tea and provide a bit of cheer for a few housebound unfortunates—all the while making the existence of her own family as comfortable as possible.

Postwar hardship for the lower classes dominates. Vera’s son Sid (Daniel Mays), who was stationed in Germany immediately after the war, is now a tailor attempting to participate in the urban life of the young. He remarks at the film’s opening, “They got it worse over there [in Germany].” Sid represents a new generation of energetic workers on the rise, harbingers of a boom still in its embryonic stage.

Daughter Ethel (Alex Kelly) is a deeply withdrawn light-bulb factory worker. She eventually pairs off with Reg (Eddie Marsan), an equally withdrawn and awkward neighbor—a lonely stray whom Vera brings home to the family.

Stan (Phil Davis), Vera’s loyal and adoring husband, works for his brother as an auto mechanic. The latter’s social-climbing, self-absorbed wife (becoming pregnant is a card she plays to get a new kitchen appliance) is the antithesis of the good-hearted, selfless Vera.

As Vera’s sister-in-law gloats over her pregnancy, Vera surreptitiously performs abortions set up by her mercenary childhood friend Lily (Ruth Sheen). The implements of Vera’s illegal trade are a syringe, carbolic soap, a cheese

grater and some disinfectant. The abortionist and her primitive tools provide the only recourse for poor girls “in trouble.” The girls are clearly lucky to have Vera.

Leigh contrasts Vera’s home abortions with the ability of the wealthy to access medical professionals who oversee the procedure in comfortable, sterilized surroundings for a few hundred pounds.

Vera has apparently performed countless abortions spanning over 20 years. She has escaped scrutiny until one girl develops septicemia, which results in Vera’s arrest. She is taken into custody, blurting out, “You call it abortion, but I help them [the girls] out.” Vera’s family, particularly the upwardly mobile Sid, is shocked and humiliated. Voicing the most sympathetic understanding of Vera’s misdeeds is the repressed Reg. He explains movingly that he grew up one of six in two cramped rooms: “If you can’t feed them, you can’t love them.”

For *Vera Drake*’s heroine there is no Azdak—the people’s judge in Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle*—only a court system that coldly enforces anti-abortion strictures.

Available to an international audience in the wake of the Bush reelection, Leigh’s film serves as a powerful counterpunch to the right-wing opponents of abortion rights. The director takes aim at the 1950s. He speaks of “the terrible respectability and the great repressions of the postwar period. A period which I’ve come to realize meant everything to our parents, who were trying to put the world back together.” (Leigh dedicated his movie to his parents, a doctor and a midwife, whose practice largely consisted of working class patients.)

Leigh states: “I deliberately and without any affectation made *Vera Drake* to pose a moral dilemma that has no slick or easy answers. We live in an overpopulated world. There is no question that to bring an unwanted and unloved child into this chaos is deeply irresponsible. There is no question that you destroy life when you terminate a pregnancy. But there is also no question that choice ought to exist. Those are my personal views. The film can only work if the audience takes the moral and emotional debate away with them.”

Great care is taken in establishing the film’s time frame. The family scenes are meticulously constructed. Leigh’s

concern for the fate of his often repressed and damaged characters is genuine and rare. He makes films about human problems and provides a certain social-class context for those problems. Again, this is rare.

The filmmaker says, “Vera is a total, unreconstituted, 100 percent guilt-edged, good person who selflessly helps out women in trouble for no money at all. But in the context of her society she is a criminal and it devastates her family.”

Of course, this only proves the rottenness of the society, which makes it impossible for working class families to support their children and illegalizes the medical procedures to which they resort as a way out of their problems.

Is Vera’s goodness entirely convincing? Although actress Staunton is very affecting, her character occasionally teeters on the edge of caricature and sentimentality (a phenomenon that recurs in Leigh’s films). And because she carries most of the film, a ramping down of her guilt-edged goodness to the range of 70 or 80 percent might have strengthened the film and made it all the more convincing.

Vera’s psychological collapse, resulting from the realization that she has nearly killed someone, as well as her public disgrace, is perhaps surprising given the nature of the known risks, both legal and medical, involved in her efforts. There is never any indication that she has reflected on what might happen if she were to get caught. It may be as well that her unadulterated cheeriness and naiveté are somewhat at odds with the type of will necessary to defy society in such an extreme manner. Even performing the abortion act demands a hardness seemingly absent in Vera.

Granted, Leigh is trying to gather momentum by counterposing a pure, selfless human being against an unjust, elitist social order. But when Vera is caught, she crumbles in a heap—without a fight or even a whimper of protest. Vera the abortionist—in the anti-abortion climate of London of the 1950s—is essentially as unconscious a victim as the poor pregnant women she helps out. This leads to a denouement devoid of contradictions. The film does not so much reach a climax as simply come to a halt.

Leigh is a conscientious and precise social observer in many ways. However, there are aspects of social dynamics that escape him. He tends to organize character and social life into somewhat frozen categories. Certain personality types populate his films: the working class young person stifled almost beyond recognition, the good and endlessly sympathetic caregiver (generally a woman), the social climber, the selfish petty bourgeois, etc. He works seriously enough with his actors that the types usually avoid caricature. But not always. And his upper-class characters are among the most cartoonish.

His films rarely look at the dynamics of development, but provide a snapshot of a particular milieu on a given day and

time. For this reason his characters almost never experience a genuine transformation. (Sid in this film is a rare and somewhat refreshing exception.) They develop in quantity, becoming more or less of what they already are, but not in quality.

Clearly, this is bound up with a certain social view. Leigh is capable of great empathy for the suffering of the oppressed, but one knows without pressing the point that he would reject the idea that those for whom he feels compassion are capable of resisting the existing social order, much less overturning it.

Nothing in *Vera Drake* would suggest that Leigh envisions the fight against a return to the days of back-street abortions as a collective, political effort. And such an approach would not have been unthinkable in Britain in 1950; after all, the Labour Party had swept to power in 1945, and many hoped that a social transformation was in the offing. His notion of the “terrible respectability” of the postwar period may reflect his own situation and that of his family. It ignores, however, the strand of militant, working class socialist opposition to capitalism that also was a significant factor in British life.

Vera Drake goes on for too long and yet feels a bit truncated, arriving at a point when the broader social questions begin to make their presence felt. The viewer is left with images of Vera’s dejected shuffle in prison and the closing shot of her traumatized husband and children. Leigh’s inability to come up with a convincing conclusion hints at some of the underlying problems.

Despite these shortcomings, *Vera Drake*, like Leigh’s best work, is a deeply committed piece. On the whole, the film attempts a serious exploration, laying bare the inner and outer lives of its characters as it evolves in a class environment. Leigh is a genuine and honest artist who, unlike many contemporary filmmakers, does not utilize the plight of the downtrodden as a device for evoking the sneers and titillation of middle class audiences.



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