



MIKE LEIGH

Vera Drake

Mike Leigh on 'Vera Drake'

The film's feeling for 1950 is very vivid. What is your attitude to that period?

I was seven in 1950 so my recollections are there in the spirit of what you see. The film obviously had to be set before the 1967 Abortion Act but there's also a sense of togetherness, a wholesomeness, a positive kind of innocence that are characteristic of the period, though that's not to say that 1950 was an entirely uncynical world. I feel no nostalgia for the austerities of that time – the only moment I felt nostalgic was when they wheeled in the cars. But the focus of the Drake family is very much about 'getting on with it', not having a lot of choices and making the most of what you have.

How did you approach recreating the period?

What I've done, as ever, is to create a heightened realism, to distil the essence of the time. In reality, for instance, the Drakes would have had the wireless on all the time, but that would have slowed us down to a naturalistic pace and made the scenes literal – not to mention the fact that we could barely afford copyright for anything; even the movies Vera and Stan watch are a concoction. The same distillation is there in the colours too: there are a lot of greens and greys that are non-naturalistic but suggest the functional, utilitarian spirit of the period.

Did any films from the 1950s influence the way you shot the movie?

No. It must be disappointing for *Sight & Sound*, but there are no conscious film references. But DoP Dick Pope suggested Bill Brandt and we looked at some *Picture Post* stuff, which was quite useful.

I was especially taken with the opening scene when the Drakes are preparing evening tea.

If you're familiar with my films, you'll see I like the discipline of this kind of set-up. I love looking through doorways, that kind of thing. And in that early scene when they're all coming and going we managed to say a lot in a totally cinematic way.

Was it hard to find parts of London that could convincingly pass for 1950?

That was a slight problem. But more of a problem was making a period film with no money – we had a ridiculously tight budget and we shot it all on Super 16. In any case, the issue was more how to avoid shooting the 2003 real world, which is why there are so few street scenes. At first we had some flats lined up in Grays Inn Road but there was trouble with squatters so we moved to Stepney. A lot of the film was shot in a decommissioned hospital in Crouch End: we used it as a rehearsal space for six months, then for the hospital scenes, and then shot other scenes in the outbuildings. It was an environment we could control.

How did the actors get into a 1950 mindset?

During rehearsals we did all the usual things I get people to do, which include creating their characters and defining their relationships to one another as well as a massive amount of research. Everyone takes part in this. We talked to people who had memories of that time, we read a lot, we looked at movies

and newsreels, we listened to radio programmes, we consulted a couple of guys at the Imperial War Museum to piece together the characters' journeys through World War II. Having done *Topsy-Turvy*, which is set at the turn of the last century and was in many respects a taller order, I know both periods are accessible. Don't ask me how I'd make a film set in the 12th century – you could research it until you were blue in the face but you still wouldn't know what reality to create. But the sense of what things Victorian and later looked like, smelled like and sounded like is part of our received notions. And given the right time and space to absorb it, it gets into your bloodstream.

I think Imelda Staunton and Phil Davis, who play Vera and her husband Stan, were born after 1950. But though I was born in 1943, I can 'remember' the 1930s through my parents, my grandparents, all sorts of things. And the right kind of actors – which is to say intelligent, creative actors – can assimilate the period. Somebody said the other day that the film won't mean much to younger people. But that's just daft – even within the context of unwanted pregnancies it can resonate with young adults today.

The film will be thought of as an 'issue film', the issue being abortion. But it's far from black and white. I read in another interview that you're more interested in asking questions than in supplying answers.

In this particular case the job was to confront the audience with a moral dilemma. People have to make their own decisions about how they see it. But having said that, it's also implicit in the film that backstreet abortionists cannot be a good thing.

I was struck by Vera's reference to her single-parent background; her mother may have chosen to abort her had she had access to the facilities.

That's all there for you to ponder. I put in that information in a way that leaves you to work with it rather than laying it on the line. If you sit in a tube train and listen to a conversation you can glean a great deal even if you have no background information. I don't think film storytelling should be quite so serendipitous, but on the other hand I always work on the assumption that the audience is at least as intelligent as I am, if not more so, so I don't have to super-explain. And it's important that the audience leaves with stuff to take away.

Are you ever surprised by audiences' interpretations?

In the earlier part of the film people laugh uproariously at moments I don't think are particularly funny. But overall such a film must be open to different interpretations, short of anybody totally misreading it and thinking it's concerned with Egyptology or something similar.

I believe the funding came through at the last minute.

The UK Film Council was in place. And I will simply say that StudioCanal were less than enthusiastic because their previous film with me, *All or Nothing*, though critically reasonably well respected, was on the whole a box-office flop. So they were reluctant to take part, though they did put up money in the end.

Do you feel pressure to make films that will do well at the box-office?

I've always thought it a good thing if you can make a film that works commercially. I'm not concerned to make films that are consigned to arthouse obscurity; in fact, I get very pissed off when people talk about my films as arthouse. But I would be incapable of yielding to manifest pressure to do

something I didn’t believe in. My most successful film commercially was *Secrets & Lies*, and there’s no doubt that was to do with the subject matter – adoption – which has an obvious hook. *All or Nothing* hasn’t got a hook: it’s about love and redemption, which are not as palpable as adoption or, hopefully, abortion. *Topsy-Turvy* had the potential to be either a commercial proposition or something that would be rejected as esoteric; it found its own level, which I’m happy with. I’m motivated to do things that talk to audiences. There’s no compromise.

It’s rare to see a film about such a singularly good person as Vera that remains engaging.

For me that was the biggest challenge. I’m quite good at characters who are quirky and complicated, though I’ve dealt with characters who are good people too – for instance, Maurice in *Secrets & Lies* is a precursor to Vera. Though Vera is an organic creation, her character is driven by the morality of the film: this is a good person whom society casts in the role of a criminal.

Interview by Edward Lawrenson, *Sight & Sound*, January 2005

VERA DRAKE

Director: Mike Leigh
©: Untitled 03 Limited, Les Films Alain Sarde
©/*Presented by:* UK Film Council
Production Companies: Thin Man Films, Les Films Alain Sarde
For: Inside Track 1 LLP
Production Company: Inside Track
Made with the support of: National Lottery through UK Film Council, UK Film Council Premiere Fund
Presented by: Fine Line Features, Alain Sarde
International Sales: StudioCanal
Executive Producers: Robert Jones, Gail Egan, Duncan Reid, Christine Gozlan
Produced by: Simon Channing Williams
Producer: Alain Sarde
Co-producer: Georgina Lowe
Unit Manager: Steve Mason
Production Manager: Danielle Brandon
Production Co-ordinator: Sarah McBryde
Production Accountant: Will Tyler
Location Managers: Neil Lee, Henry Woolley
Post-production Supervisor: Steve Harrow
Researcher: Lucy Whitton
1st Assistant Director: Josh Robertson
Script Supervisor: Heather Storr
Casting: Nina Gold
Written by: Mike Leigh
Cinematography: Dick Pope
Camera Operator: Dick Pope
Focus Puller: Gordon Segrove
Clapper Loader: James Scott
Grip: Colin Strachan
Stills Photographer: Simon Mein
Graphic Designer: Andrew Grant
Film Editor: Jim Clark
Production Designer: Eve Stewart
Art Director: Ed Walsh
Set Decorator: John Bush
Property Master: Richard Mills
Costume Design: Jacqueline Durran
Wardrobe Supervisor: Charlotte Finlay
Make-up/Hair Designer: Christine Blundell
Make-up Artists: Lesa Warrener, Kerry Scourfield
Title Design: Chris Allies
Digital Cinema: VTR
Colourist: Tom Russell
Music Composer: Andrew Dickson
Choir: Nunc Dimittis
Viola: Rosemary Warren-Green
Double Bass: Stacey Watton
Bass Flute: Helen Keen
Harp: Lucy Wakeford
Conductor: Nick Bicât
Music Supervisor: Step Parikian
Vocal Co-ordinator: Ben Bevan

Cast

Imelda Staunton (*Vera Drake*)
Phil Davis (*Stan Drake*)
Peter Wight (*Detective Inspector Webster*)
Alex Kelly (*Ethel Drake*)
Daniel Mays (*Sid Drake*)
Adrian Scarborough (*Frank*)
Heather Craney (*Joyce*)
Eddie Marsan (*Reg*)
Ruth Sheen (*Lily*)
Sally Hawkins (*Susan Wells*)
Fenella Woolgar (*Susan’s confidante*)
Lesley Sharp (*Jessie Barnes*)
Anthony O’Donnell (*Mr Walsh*)
Helen Coker (*WPC Best*)
Martin Savage (*Detective Sergeant Vickers*)
Allan Corduner (*psychiatrist*)
Nicky Henson (*private doctor*)
Lesley Manville (*Mrs Wells*)
Wendy Nottingham (*Ivy*)
Paul Jesson (*magistrate*)
Sandra Voe (*Vera’s mother*)
Leo Bill (*Ronny*)
Gerard Monaco (*Kenny*)
Chris O’Dowd (*Sid’s customer*)
Sam Troughton (*David*)
Elizabeth Berrington (*cynical lady*)
Sinead Matthews (*very young woman*)
Rosie Cavaliero (*married woman*)
Vnette Robinson (*Jamaican girl*)
Tilly Vosburgh (*mother of seven*)
Liz White (*Pamela Barnes*)
Jim Broadbent (*judge*)
Richard Graham (*George*)
Anna Keaveney (*Nellie*)
Simon Chandler (*Mr Wells*)
Marion Bailey (*Mrs Fowler*)
Sid Mitchell (*very young man*)
Alan Williams (*sick husband*)
Heather Cameron, Billie Cook, Billy Seymour (*children*)
Nina Fry, Lauren Holden (*dance hall girls*)
Emma Amos (*cynical lady*)
Joanna Griffiths (*Peggy*)
Angie Wallis (*Nurse Willoughby*)
Judith Scott (*Sister Beech*)
Lucy Pleasence (*Sister Coombes*)
Tracey O’Flaherty (*nurse*)
Tom Ellis (*police constable*)
Robert Putt (*station sergeant*)
Craig Conway (*station constable*)
Jake Wood (*ruffian*)
Vincent Franklin (*Mr Lewis*)
Michael Gunn (*gaoler*)
Paul Raffield (*magistrate’s clerk*)
Philip Childs (*clerk*)

Choreography: Francesca Jaynes
Sound Recordist: Tim Fraser
Sound Maintenance: Loveday Harding
Sound Assistant: Tom Barrow
Boom Operator: Denise Yarde
Re-recording Mixers: Adrian Rhodes, Chris Burdon
Supervising Sound Editor: Nigel Stone
Sound Editor: John Warhurst *
Sound Effects Editor: Zane Hayward
ADR Mixers: Peter Gleaves, Paul Carr
Foley Walkers: Pete Burgess, Andi Derrick
Foley Mixer: Robert Farr
Medical History Adviser: Jonathan Evans
Legal History Adviser: Jeffrey Gordon
Police History Adviser: Ray Seal
World War II Adviser: Terry Charman
Motor Car Adviser: Clive Loveless
Publicity (McDonald & Rutter): Jonathan Rutter

Jeffrey Wickham (*prosecution barrister*)
Nicholas Jones (*defence barrister*)
Stephan Dunbar (*usher*)
Angela Curran, Jane Wood (*prisoners*)
Eileen Davies (*prison officer*)

UK/France/USA 2004©
125 mins

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at **bfi.org.uk/join**

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on **player.bfi.org.uk**

Join the BFI mailing list for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at **www.bfi.org.uk/signup**

BFI SOUTHBANK

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We’re also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.