

- 24 Angelique Chrisafis, 'Leigh Grateful as New Film Leaves Art House Ghetto', *The Guardian*, 16 August 2002
 25 Interview at the National Film Theatre, 7 October 2002
 26 *Ibid.*
 27 *Ibid.*
 28 Interview with the author, 5 April 2002
 29 Director's commentary, *All or Nothing* DVD

'Out of the kindness of her heart': Vera Drake

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Leigh's second cinematic venture into period drama was in a sense closer to home than *Topsy-Turvy*, being set within living memory for a substantial proportion of a 2004 audience; and dealing with a subject about which it is virtually impossible to remain neutral. In its way, it was clearly as personal a project as the earlier film, too: its dedication reads, 'In loving memory of my parents, a doctor and a midwife'.

The setting is London in 1950, when the Second World War still resonated in people's memories, and the continuing privations of the post-war period created a black market for commodities of all kinds. It is against this background that Vera Drake (Imelda Staunton) goes cheerfully on her way, cleaning for the upper classes, looking after her family, friends and neighbours – and helping young women to end unwanted pregnancies. The opening scenes show Vera cheery, chatty and with a permanent smile on her face as she bustles round the neighbourhood, helping people out. She visits a sick man in an adjacent tenement block, and makes him a cup of tea, something she is prone to do for anyone at the drop of a hat. On her way home she meets another neighbour, a young man named Reg (Eddie Marsan) and, on learning that he is planning to have 'a bit of bread and dripping' for his evening meal, she invites him round for supper the following night. She sings happily to herself as she arrives home, puts the kettle on and prepares the evening meal for her family.

The family – her husband Stan (Phil Davis) and their grown-up children Sid (Daniel Mays) and Ethel (Alex Kelly) – are cheerful and considerate as they return home from work and assemble around the dinner table. They ask each other how their day has been, chat, laugh and tease one another good-naturedly. Their life is clearly modest – they live in a small but well-kept tenement flat – but they are a happy and cohesive unit. The movement of the narrative will be the opposite of that in Leigh's last film. In *All or Nothing* a fractured, dysfunctional family was brought

to crisis point and by the end the characters were *perhaps* (although we couldn't be sure) beginning to learn how to love and support each other. In *Vera Drake*, an already happy, mutually supportive family group will reach a different kind of crisis point, and the family unit we see at the beginning of the film will have been irrevocably changed and *perhaps* (although we can't be sure) left on the verge of disintegration.

The recreation of the 1950s goes way beyond just the period detail, although that is as meticulous as one would expect. The whole post-war setting is vital. Memories of the war and its shared experiences hang over all the characters; as Vera says, 'we all had it bad', and in discussing the hardships and the friends and colleagues they lost, the overwhelming feeling is one of gratitude for having survived it and for what they now have. But whereas Sid and his mates jokingly barter cigarettes and nylons in the pub, for Vera's friend Lily (Ruth Sheen), abortion is just one more commodity to be traded in this difficult environment, along with her black market sugar, sardines and boiled sweets.

It is Lily who puts Vera in touch with her clients, and from her first appearance in the film, complaining about the stairs as she arrives at Vera's flat, it is clear that she is a sour, hard-hearted woman – she could scarcely be more different from Sheen's last role for Leigh, as one of the few warm and cheerful souls in *All or Nothing* – and is certainly not motivated by compassion or fellow-feeling. 'Poor woman', says Vera as she learns that her next client already has seven children and cannot support any more. 'Serves her right', replies Lily. Later, we see her with another client (Rosie Cavaliero), and Lily is unsympathetic and abrasive, demanding immediate payment ('Well, I don't want paying next week, do I?') and snapping, 'Mind your own bleeding business' when the woman enquires how long Lily has been arranging abortions in this way. One thing becomes clear from this conversation: Vera does not realise that Lily is accepting money for arranging her services, and Lily carefully instructs her client to conceal the fact ('That's between me and you'). This woman's husband is away in Korea, and the baby she is expecting is the result of an affair; when Vera hears this she does not approve, but reasons, 'Still, got to help 'em out, haven't you?'

And that is Vera's rationale for doing what she does. While performing the terminations – an operation that involves filling the womb with soapy water and disinfectant via a rubber syringe – she is chatty, smiling, matter of fact and, above all, compassionate. She does not question the morality of what she does, but simply regards it as something that needs to be done. Abortion is available more or less on demand for the wealthy; as we will see, the procedure may be coldly commercial, controlled by men and calculatedly duplicitous, but it exists nonetheless. The less

well off have no such recourse, and without Vera and others like her – even given all the health risks that such illicit practices entail – they would have nowhere to turn. Leigh 'thought it important to contrast these two cultures, given that anybody could accidentally fall pregnant, irrespective of class,'¹ and the period setting is thus used to mobilise a tremendous anger, which underpins the narrative and the characters throughout the entire film.

A scene of Vera and Stan snuggling up in bed together establishes, in the Leigh tradition, their togetherness as a happy couple (perhaps all the more important to them, since we learn from a later bedtime conversation that Vera never knew who her father was and Stan's mother died when he was young), and also incidentally reinforces the companionship they are both tragically to lose. From this we cut to Susan Wells (Sally Hawkins), the daughter of one of the upper-class families that Vera cleans for, being seduced by David (Sam Troughton), a well-dressed, well-spoken young man who has taken her out for the evening. The scene is typical of Leigh, with David deliberately wrong-footing Susan by making jokes that she cannot be expected to understand: 'I do apologise ... I haven't got a gramophone', he says while trying to force her to dance, and laughs, a little manically; 'That's not funny', she replies uncomprehendingly, and he mocks this response before forcing her down onto the bed.

Susan becomes pregnant as a result of the rape, and seeks advice from an older friend (Fenella Woolgar). 'I have this ... friend, who ... she needs some help', she begins, and then starts to cry. Her confidante is not fooled for a moment – 'You've got yourself into trouble, haven't you?' – but she knows exactly what course of action to take, including advising Susan to 'make up a fearful fib about some potty aunt or other'. This refers to the legal loophole whereby 'a termination could be allowed if it could be demonstrated that the woman was in physical danger because of her psychological state'.² As Leigh points out, 'of course, a working-class girl wouldn't know that, and wouldn't have access to such an expensive and discreet system'.³ For someone of Susan's background, the available procedures are smooth and well organised, although commercially driven and male-dominated: in another telling cut, the scene in which Susan first visits a private doctor (Nicky Henson) is immediately preceded by one in which a sick mother whose employers make no allowance for illness complains that 'They don't understand nothing, men. Bastards'. The doctor wastes little time before raising 'the delicate matter of money' and stipulating one hundred guineas 'in advance, in cash'; and the psychiatrist (Allan Corduner) whom she must subsequently visit is, while compassionate, thoroughly complicit in the

pretence that her abortion is for the good of her mental stability; as advised, Susan invents a fictitious aunt as evidence of a family history of suicide.

From the obviously scared Susan in her well-appointed room at the clinic, with its open fire, we cut to an even more terrified Jamaican girl (Vinette Robinson), another of Vera's clients, in a sparsely furnished, rundown flat. It even appears that the bowl Vera has used as a container for her soapy water and disinfectant doubles as the chamber pot – our first reminder that the methods she uses, with the best will in the world, may frequently, subject to the vagaries of the various environments she operates in, be medically unsafe; something that Susan, no matter how scared she may be, need at least not worry about. Having gone through the usual procedures, Vera reassures the girl as best she can, and heads for the kitchen: 'What you need now is a nice hot cup of tea'. Again we are likely to smile at the cliché, since Vera's tea-making has already been established as something like a reflex action. A split second later, however, Leigh and Staunton turn the moment on a sixpence, as Vera glances back at the frightened girl with a heart-stabbing look of concern, compassion and pain. (She later recounts the girl's fear to Lily; 'What're they doing over here anyway?' grumbles Lily. 'They should stay where they are'.)

It is a stroke of bad luck and an unguarded moment that lead to Vera's arrest. She is performing an abortion on a girl named Pamela Barnes (Liz White); 'I know your face from somewhere', she says to Pamela's mother Jessie (Lesley Sharp), who is present, and Jessie recognises her as a pre-war colleague from the Sunlight Laundry, even remembering her name. It is this that will be Vera's downfall, making it possible for the police to trace her when this particular termination goes badly wrong.

Following this scene, shots of Vera contentedly stitching and drinking tea at home, and having a drink in the pub with Stan, are intercut with scenes of Pamela becoming gravely ill. When she is taken to hospital, her examination by a surgeon named Walsh (Anthony O'Donnell) confirms to us that what Vera is doing is not medically safe. 'Mrs Barnes, these people must be stopped', Walsh tells Jessie. He may well be right. But, even at this stage, we cannot honestly judge Vera as morally wrong. We have already seen that the procedures available to the wealthy and privileged are not open to the less well off; as Reg says later, after Vera's secret has been revealed, 'It's all right if you're rich, but if you can't feed 'em, you can't love 'em, can you?'

Reg and Ethel have by this time become engaged, much to the family's delight. Stan invites his younger brother Frank (Adrian Scar-

borough) and his wife Joyce (Heather Craney) round for Sunday tea to celebrate, and when they arrive they announce some good news of their own: Joyce is expecting a baby. 'This is a double celebration, ain't it?' exclaims Stan, unaware that the family's world is about to come crashing down around them.

The crucial sequence in which their Sunday tea is interrupted by the police arriving at the flat to arrest Vera is a good example of how Leigh's work evolves through improvisation in rehearsal. Imelda Staunton had no idea that actors playing policemen were going to turn up, the other members of her 'family' were not aware of her secret; and the 'police' themselves did not know that they would be interrupting a family celebration. Staunton has recalled her reaction when Phil Davis announced, 'It's the police': 'I got a pain in my chest, I thought I was going to have a heart attack ... we didn't film that until eight weeks later, but of course you had all that to draw on when you came to do it'.⁴ She spoke to Leigh about how she had felt during the rehearsal, and 'he let that happen on screen';⁵ her dominant memory was of not hearing what was going on around her due to the shock, and Leigh accurately reproduces the effect by cutting to a shot that holds Vera in the front of the frame, with other members of the family visible behind her. Her face immediately freezes, her smile vanishing and her eyes suddenly seeming not to see what is around her, alone with her thoughts and her fears.

From this moment in the film, Vera changes. Her contented smile never returns, and nor does her tendency to sing to herself; and in contrast to her previous bustling about, she becomes gradually more and more immobile. When she does move, she is stooped and shuffling, as though she were a much older woman. The day of her arrest is clearly one that she has always half-dreaded; the subsequent crumbling of her indefatigable chirpiness is truly tragic to behold, and Staunton makes her descent into tearful, anguished semi-articulate painfully moving.

The chief investigating officer is Detective Inspector Webster (Peter Wight), who takes Vera away from the rest of her family, into her bedroom. 'I know why you're here', she says, and when pressed tells them that 'I help young girls out'. Webster puts it to her that she performs abortions. 'That's not what I do', she insists. 'That's what you call it – but they need help. Who else are they going to turn to?' She admits to 'helping' Pamela Barnes, and is horrified when Webster tells her that 'she nearly died'. It is at this point that he formally arrests her. They ask to see the equipment that she uses, and at this moment of truth, as Vera moves to retrieve her cloth bag from its hiding place in a cupboard above the wardrobe, we see her reflected in the bedroom dressing-table mirror. It is a cinematic convention that a mirror symbol-

ises a secret identity or alter ego, and here, for a moment, we see four Veras – the real one and three reflections – hinting that there are at least that many ways of seeing and responding to her. She is the selfless neighbour and devoted family woman; the performer of a social service not available elsewhere to the girls she ‘helps’; the misguided backstreet abortionist who conscientiously takes every precaution but does not seem to acknowledge that her procedures may still be fatally unsafe; the unworldly innocent who is being unwittingly exploited by a woman she regards as a friend. The story’s social context is evoked in fastidious detail and with a piercing clarity, yet passing definitive moral judgement on Vera herself is virtually impossible.

Her acceptance of her arrest and imprisonment seems as much to do with her instinctive capitulation to the forces of social authority as with an awareness that what she has done is ‘wrong’ in anything other than the legal sense. She is, in her way, defiant (because she cannot accept that she was committing any moral crime), without actually seeming at all resilient or in any way fighting back. As Peter Bradshaw puts it, ‘she is as hapless and hopeless as her victim-patients, with no way of defending or explaining herself. Her only response is mutely to absorb unimaginable quantities of shame’.⁶

Taken to the police station, Vera is treated compassionately but firmly. There is some exquisite acting involved here, even by the standards of a film in which every performance looks little short of faultless. WPC Best (Helen Coker), who is sympathetic but must follow procedures and take away Vera’s stockings and even her wedding ring, is a character conceived and played with subtle excellence. Peter Wight likewise turns in a meticulous performance as Webster, perfectly blending compassion and world-weariness. Some fine touches are easy to miss: for example, later in the film, when Webster takes the oath before giving evidence in court, Wight manages to suggest a man who has said these words a hundred times before but still believes that they – and the truth – matter. At the station, he attempts to interrogate Vera, who is too distressed to respond, and his impatience shows. He asks her how long she has been performing terminations. ‘I don’t know, dear ... a long time’, she says, unable to concentrate or to speak coherently. He asks her, ‘How did you start ... did it happen to you when you were a girl?’ – and she simply breaks down, sobbing uncontrollably. They continue to question her as gently as is possible, and she says that, as far as she knows, no other girls she has attended to have ever become ill or died, and that she always uses a rubber syringe, never metal objects in performing the abortions; ‘I wouldn’t do that’, she insists. She is even more shocked at the suggestion that she receives payment for her services: ‘I don’t take

money ... they need help’. Told that Lily does take payment from her clients, she cries out ‘No!’ partly in distress, partly in denial of such an unpalatable revelation.

Webster considerably brings through Stan, who has been waiting outside, so that Vera can tell him herself why she has been arrested and charged. (We never hear exactly what she says, as she is only capable of speaking to him in a whisper.) However, she must stay in a cell overnight, until bail can be requested for her release. As she is locked away, the heart-breaking sadness of the moment is reinforced when she is offered a cup of tea, and refuses. The inversion of what previously has been an amusing detail – her constant tea-making – speaks unexpected volumes about the disintegration of her life. As Ryan Gilbey says in his *Sight and Sound* review: ‘The mention of a hot beverage has never sounded so cruel as when it is made by a WPC unaware that she has assumed Vera’s defining function as bluntly as she has confiscated her wedding ring’.⁷

Back home, Stan breaks the news to the rest of the family that Vera has been detained overnight, although at this stage he does not tell anyone except Frank the reason. They are all worried and alarmed by the news – with the exception of Joyce, who has merely been irritated that the arrest has delayed her and Frank’s departure; ‘Thank God for that’, she says, as Stan returns from the police station to find the rest of the family worried sick and her merely impatient to leave.

Throughout the film, Joyce is presented fairly unsympathetically. She is obviously very pleased to be living in a smart semi-detached house, and is glad they moved ‘out here’, a car ride away from the kind of tenement block where Vera and Stan live. She is anxious to kit the house out with whatever post-war luxury items come onto the market; when she first tells Frank that she is pregnant, she immediately follows it up by asking, ‘Can I have my washing machine now, please?’ She is also keen to move to somewhere larger, although Frank does not agree, since their present house is big enough, and in any case they have only been there a year. Her aspirations are slightly less superficial, however, than Beverly’s in *Abigail’s Party* or Valerie’s in *High Hopes*, and up to a point we can sympathise with her over the friction caused by Frank’s deep loyalty to Stan. When Frank insists on spending Christmas Day with Stan and Vera, she says a little tearfully, ‘We ain’t never going to have a Christmas by ourselves – just you and me’, and we realise that her life has been dominated by Frank’s attachment to his family. Yet we discover early on in the narrative that Stan’s mother died when he was twelve, and that he went out to work whereas Frank, who is several years younger, went into an orphanage; we can understand why they are still

extremely protective of each other. Stan and Vera looked after Frank when he was younger – ‘paid for my apprenticeship ... all their savings’ – and we sense a certain self-consciousness on the part of both brothers that Stan, the elder of the two, should now be working for Frank: he tells Reg that ‘I work for him’, then, in a moment of small pride, corrects this to ‘... with him’.

In any case, Joyce’s attitude to Frank’s family is generally patronising and selfish. Early in the film she says of Vera: ‘She’s a little busybody, bless her. She’s going to get herself in trouble one of these days’. Of course, she is right about Vera in a way she cannot know at this stage – and as for being ‘a little busybody’, we might have noted Vera’s urging Ethel to sit next to Reg when he comes round for his evening meal, and wondered if her invitation to him was entirely altruistic after all. However, we are never in any doubt that Vera’s sympathy and concern for others, while shot through with a few human foibles, is preferable by far to Joyce’s self-centred materialism. Again it is ironic, in view of her own self-centredness, that when Joyce does find out what Vera has been arrested for her judgement is a typically harsh one: ‘stupid cow – how can she be so selfish?’

The other hostile reaction, when it is discovered that Vera has been performing illegal abortions, comes from Sid, who cannot cope with the revelations and insists that ‘she’s let us down’. As in *All or Nothing*, the characterisation is wonderfully reinforced by Daniel Mays’s boyish face, and in particular his wide, expressive eyes. Sid is an outwardly confident young man, enjoying what opportunities he can in his post-war urban life, professionally and socially. We see him smoothly dispensing the patter of his trade – he works as an apprentice tailor – and taking the lead in chatting up girls with his friends at a dance hall. Yet beneath all this is the vulnerability of the boy who was thirteen when his father went off to war, telling Sid that he must now be ‘the man of the house’, and was forced to grow up – or rather to go through the motions of growing up – too soon.

Stan, equally well portrayed by Phil Davis as a stoic, decent and fair-minded man, is more compassionate. He does not agree with what Vera has been doing, and ‘would’ve put a stop to it’, but he knows that she did it ‘out of the kindness of her heart’. Whereas Sid feels betrayed, Stan, while angry, makes the distinction that ‘she never told us, but she never lied’. He insists that Sid must forgive Vera: ‘God knows she’s going to get punished enough for what she’s done. We can’t let her down’.

Vera is released on bail and the date of her trial is settled for January. She is therefore at home for Christmas, but the traditional family get-together at their flat is inevitably a subdued and tense affair – not least

because of Joyce, who is only there at all under sufferance, perched on the edge of the sofa and scarcely making eye contact with anybody. Any sympathy we previously had for her evaporates as we see how she fails to recognise that Frank’s loyalty and support have never been more necessary than now; and her not wanting to go was finally motivated more by knee-jerk moralism than any wish to spend Christmas alone with Frank. Amid the generally strained atmosphere, Reg, who has until now seemed little more than a shy, awkward loner, suddenly emerges as the film’s most endearing character. We have previously been inclined to laugh at Reg, and at his slightly bumbling courtship of the equally shy Ethel. The claim that they ‘become engaged without apparently exchanging a whole sentence with one another’⁸ is a slight exaggeration, but it is certainly comical to see the pair of them walking in the park without holding hands, talking to, or even looking at, each other. That quaint old phrase ‘walking out together’ has never seemed more appropriate.

So when Reg, on that painful Christmas Day, says, ‘This is the best Christmas I’ve had in a long time’, our immediate instinct is to laugh at the incongruity, not to mention at the implication of what his other, lonely Christmases must have been like. But as he goes on, ‘Thank you very much, Vera – smashing’, we are caught off-guard. Our somewhat uncharitable impulse to find him funny is blown away by the simple decency and fellow-feeling of his attempt to show his appreciation as a guest *and* to offer some small solace to poor, doomed Vera. We recall that it was also Reg who was sensitive enough to realise and articulate the social imbalance that anchors the whole film with his reflection that ‘It’s all right if you’re rich, but if you can’t feed ‘em, you can’t love ‘em, can you?’ Eddie Marsan’s finely judged performance did not go unrecognised: he deservedly won a Best Supporting Actor award in the British Independent Film Awards.

At Vera’s trial, her barrister makes the plea that she accepted no money for her services and, having been so distressed by Pamela’s near-fatal reaction, is extremely unlikely ever to re-offend. Nevertheless, the judge (Jim Broadbent) reminds her that she could well be facing the charge of murder ‘but for the timely intervention of the medical profession’, and concludes that ‘the extreme seriousness of your crime is bound to be reflected in the sentence that I am about to pass, and that must serve as a deterrent to others’. Vera is sentenced to two and a half years in prison. Her family are naturally shattered, and we are reminded of the effect of her incarceration on the extended family when Stan visits Vera’s elderly, sick mother (Sandra Voe) to tell her that Vera will not be able to come round and see her for a while.

Our last sight of Vera is in prison, talking to two other inmates (Angela Curran and Jane Wood), both abortionists who got longer sentences because their clients died. They try to reassure her, telling her, 'Cheer up, you'll only do half' and 'You'll be out before you know it' – but the realities of prison life are reinforced moments later when a prison guard tells Vera, 'Mind where you're going, Drake' as they pass on the stairs. As Ryan Gilbey noted in his review, the moment brings to a harsh conclusion the gradual stripping away of her previous identity that began in the police cell: 'Leigh gives the movie her name, but in the final line of dialogue, which hurts like a stubbed toe, a prison warden reduces her to "Drake"'.⁹

There is one final shot. Stan, Sid, Ethel and Reg sit around the dinner table over which Vera used to preside so cheerfully. In total contrast to the chatty familial banter that previously rang out, they sit silent and despairing. We remain on them for nearly half a minute, then there is a slow fade to black. The effect is devastating, both in itself and in the context of Leigh's work as a whole. We have become accustomed to his films ending on a bittersweet or quietly optimistic note. We are used to unanswered questions, but rarely such a stark one as 'What on earth are any of the characters going to do? How will they ever cope?' For most of Leigh's protagonists, a crisis that changes their lives irrevocably would look like an artificial dramatic conceit, a contrivance. In Vera's case the crisis is both profound and inevitable, and it is its inevitability that makes it so tragic.

Few viewers would deny that the overwhelming sense of tragedy derives to a considerable degree from Imelda Staunton's superlative performance as Vera. Leigh had never worked with Staunton before, but had met her and seen her work, and 'I just had an instinct, along with my long-time casting director Nina Gold, that this was the right actress for this part – and we were very, very right'.¹⁰ Although a well-known face from films like *Peter's Friends* (Kenneth Branagh, 1992), *Sense and Sensibility* (Ang Lee, 1995) and *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1998), Staunton has the quality shared by all the best character actors, and especially those exposed to the merciless scrutiny of the film camera. She makes one forget all her previous appearances and seems to inhabit the role of Vera; as Phil Davis says of her, 'you don't see the wheels turning round'.¹¹ This is all the more impressive in a part which is required to be the physical and spiritual centre of a film, and a highly complex one at that. At times we admire Vera, at times we worry about her, at times we may disapprove of her, and Staunton never loses us, even, as noted above, appearing to change physically as the narrative enters its final phase following the arrest. She spends so much of the last hour of

the film either fighting back or succumbing to anguished tears that it becomes hard to watch without one's face hurting in sympathy.

Staunton has said that she 'never in a million years' thought that she would work with Leigh: 'I've met him over the years and I've thought, oh, I don't think I'm his type ... I'm not in that league'.¹² When he approached her, she recalls that 'all I was told by Mike was, "I am setting a film in the 50s concerning abortion". He said, "You would be very heavily involved. Is this something you can handle?"'¹³ She discussed the prospect with her husband, actor Jim Carter: 'Jim said, "Oh no, I am going to have some mad woman coming home each night." But he said, "You have to do it." I did not have any second thoughts either'.¹⁴ Once the film had been completed, Staunton looked back on the experience of working with Leigh as 'the best job of my life. It's rather like falling out of an aeroplane with no parachute. But he's right there next to you ... he always has the big picture in his mind'.¹⁵

Many of the other actors were familiar faces in Leigh's films: Phil Davis, Peter Wight and Ruth Sheen could by now be regarded as part of his repertory company; the talented young actors Daniel Mays, Sally Hawkins and Helen Coker all returned from *All or Nothing*, as did Alex Kelly and Heather Craney, who had turned up among Timothy Spall's passengers in that film. So had Martin Savage, who previously excelled as George Grossmith in *Topsy-Turvy* and appears here as one of the arresting officers; another member of Leigh's Savoy troupe, Allan Corduner, also makes a brief but effective appearance as a psychiatrist. Among the cameos, Marion Bailey, Anthony O'Donnell, Paul Jesson, Tilly Vosburgh, Emma Amos, Elizabeth Berrington and Wendy Nottingham can all be spotted, and the stature and presence of Jim Broadbent reinforces the authority of the judge who sentences Vera. (As an indication of the dedicated research to which Leigh's actors willingly submit themselves, Broadbent spent three days visiting courtrooms and speaking with a judge, all for less than ten minutes of screen time). As Mrs Wells, Lesley Manville breezes in for a handful of lines, walks off with two of the biggest laughs in a film which is quite properly sparing with its humour, and deftly sketches in a portrait of monstrous upper-class heartlessness and indifference – to her own daughter as much as to domestic staff like Vera. When Susan returns from the nursing home, Mrs Wells is completely unaware of where her daughter has been – she can hardly be bothered even to reflect on her own weekend in Norfolk: 'Bearable. Terribly sunny. Extraordinary'. There were trusted colleagues behind the camera, too, including cinematographer Dick Pope, designers Eve Stewart and Christine Blundell, and composer Andrew Dickson.

As with *Topsy-Turvy*, the possibility of a large number of exterior scenes was ruled out by what Leigh calls 'a ridiculously tight budget'.¹⁶ Fortunately he and his team, as they had for *All or Nothing*, found themselves a shooting environment that was both suitable and controllable: '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'.¹⁷ And as the budget would not stretch to the royalties for authentic songs of the 1940s on the soundtrack, Leigh had to ask Imelda Staunton to sing or hum instead – but to make sure that it was nothing recognisable.

Of the end result, Leigh has said: 'I hope I've made a film which is not crassly polemic or didactic and black and white; I made a film which invites people to take part in the debate'.¹⁸ He does not see *Vera Drake* as being a radical departure from the treatment of ordinary lives that is his customary raw material – 'Most of my films have dealt with the whole issue of parents and children – having children, not having them, wanting them, not wanting them'¹⁹ – but felt that, even more than usual, it was important for audiences to leave the film thinking about the issues raised rather than having been given an overt message: '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'.²⁰

By setting his story in 1950, Leigh highlights this moral choice at its starkest; as Robert Murphy has said, 'The peak for illegal abortions in Britain was probably between 1945, when the end of wartime conditions brought a reassertion of traditional social values, and 1960, when the moral climate began to change and contraception became more easily available'.²¹ He also goes against the dramatic cliché of the backstreet abortionist who, in Imelda Staunton's words, is 'single, no children, pretty evil, in a basement, pretty grim'; as Staunton points out, 85 per cent of abortionists held in Holloway Prison in the 1940s and 1950s were themselves mothers and grandmothers.²²

Leigh admits that 'I would have loved to have talked to my father about the sort of dilemmas the film broaches. Given that he had a one-man, working-class practice in Salford in the period that the film is set, he would undoubtedly have had to face the dilemma of unwanted pregnancies, the aftermath of abortions. I happen to doubt that he ever performed one'.²³ Abe Leigh did tell him that he had on occasions administered lethal injections of morphine to sick elderly patients who wished to end

their lives. 'He put people out of their misery. Absolutely, but it was not a moral dilemma to him. He saw it as something that was positive, that had to be done, that was merciful. In that way, he was not unlike Vera'.²⁴

Not surprisingly, the subject matter dictates a less overtly comic style than we have come to expect from Leigh. Yet the importance of a sense of humour remains central to the main characters. Their mutual teasing as they gather round the table for their evening meal tells us a great deal about their security in each other's company and their solidarity as a family unit. Edward Lawrenson found that in these moments 'the rhythms of family life are so well captured that we almost feel like intruders, and indeed DoP Dick Pope's camera hangs back, observing things from behind a door frame';²⁵ Leigh himself comments: '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'.²⁶ As that final shot of the characters silent around the same table emphasises, our sense of their loss is all the more tragic as a consequence of seeing their family routines so lovingly captured, just as with Vera and Stan's contentedness as they huddle together for warmth in bed.

Reg's integration into the family is also characterised by a certain amount of good-natured ribbing. During one of his visits, his growing acceptance by them is indicated by Ethel's offer to patch a hole in his trousers and Sid's teasing him: 'I'll get you a bit of cloth from the shop ... it'll cost you – half a crown'. Reg smiles happily, secure in the knowledge that the joking is part of the assimilation. That said, occasionally they do also laugh at him behind his back: in one scene Vera, Stan and Sid consider the possibility of his taking Ethel to a dance hall. 'Can't see Reg dancing', says Stan, and the three of them laugh at the very idea, as well as at Sid's suggestion that 'they might turn out to be a proper Fred and Ginger'.

Sometimes, however, the joke is on us rather than the characters. I have already noted a couple of instances of Leigh's ability to make us laugh one moment, then whip the rug out from under us: Reg's heartfelt words to Vera on Christmas Day, or Vera's advice to the Jamaican girl about needing a nice cup of tea. Vera's propensity for making tea at every opportunity is also well used the very first time we see Vera carrying out her abortion procedures. We have just witnessed a comical sex scene, in which Joyce, anxious to become pregnant, has to force a tired and reluctant Frank to climb on top of her. Leigh catches us unawares by immediately showing the darker side of sex and pregnancy, cutting to Vera's visit to a nervous and slightly tearful girl (Sinead Matthews). 'The first thing we've got to do is put the kettle on', she tells the girl, and we laugh or smile in anticipation of yet another cup of tea. Yet the smile

is inclined to freeze on our faces with the realisation that the kettle is boiling this time for a very different reason; and the serious ramifications are brought home to us forcefully as Vera leaves, and the girl's husband or boyfriend, waiting ominously outside, tries unsuccessfully to get inside before the door is slammed. Leigh is able to manipulate our reactions back and forth between the richly comic and the deadly serious, although he admits he cannot always forecast what audiences will find funny: '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'.²⁷ He also acknowledges that 'people laugh for a variety of reasons – with, or at, or out of embarrassment, or nervousness even. It's not always a function of mirth'.²⁸

To widespread surprise throughout the film industry, *Vera Drake* was rejected by the organisers of the Cannes Film Festival, but promptly accepted instead by the Venice Festival, where it was screened in competition four months after Cannes, winning the Golden Lion as best film and the Volpi Cup for Imelda Staunton as best actress. Accepting his award, Leigh mischievously thanked 'most sincerely the Cannes Film Festival for rejecting this film'. As Peter Bradshaw remarked in his *Guardian* profile: 'That was Leigh all over. At the very summit of his success with his greatest masterpiece and a modern classic of British cinema, he was triumphant, gloomy, witty and curmudgeonly enough even to risk exasperating the Venetians with a joke reminding them they had been second choice'.²⁹

Reviewing the film, Bradshaw found it 'as gripping and fascinating as the best thriller, as well as being a stunningly acted and heartwrenchingly moving drama' in which Staunton gave 'one of the most moving, haunting performances I have ever seen in the cinema'.³⁰ By contrast, in the *Daily Telegraph*, the less enthusiastic Sukhdev Sandhu raised what for some of us would have been a rather alarming prospect: 'Staunton is very good ... But I would have preferred Emily Watson to play her role, and possibly Lars Von Trier to direct the film, too'.³¹ More positive comments came from two long-standing supporters of Leigh: Philip French thought the film 'outstanding' and 'provocative without presenting itself as a conventional problem play',³² and Roger Ebert praised the 'pitch-perfect, seemingly effortless performances'.³³ In the *Village Voice*, J. Hoberman paid the film a tremendous compliment by saying that Vera's 'anguished solitude as she is judged by a world of powerful men in uniforms and wigs cannot help but invoke the passion of Carl Theodor Dreyer's Joan'.³⁴

In *The Independent*, Anthony Quinn was impressed by the film's 'wonderfully tender portrait of proletarian togetherness' and thought that the performances of Staunton and Davis caught 'something quite elegiac about the virtues of charity and mercy'.³⁵ Recognising the centrality of these virtues, Quinn makes a point that others, including Sandhu, miss in their eagerness to find 'class caricatures' in the film: that wealthy characters like Mrs Wells or the young seducer David are indeed treated with scorn, but then so are Joyce's lower-middle-class aspirations and Lily's mercenary lack of compassion: 'In Leigh's vision, class allows no one to escape the freaks' roll-call'.³⁶ It is true that we see rather less of the upper-class characters than we do of Joyce or Lily, with the result that they are more like thumbnail sketches than fully fledged character portrayals. But what all these characters have in common is that for them money and material possessions take priority over care and concern for others, a fault which transcends class barriers, and for which the film will not forgive them. The upper-class character of whom we see most is, of course, Susan, who is portrayed sympathetically; she is, after all, a victim in the sense that her age and gender deny her – for the moment – the power that usually goes with wealth and privilege. One wonders whether her experiences at the private clinic will make her more compassionate to others in a similar plight, or whether she will simply end up like her mother. After Vera's arrest, some of her former employers provide written testament of her good character as an employee, while declining to appear as character witnesses; Mrs Wells, her solicitor reports sadly, 'has not even had the decency to respond to my second letter'.

Apart from minor complaints about caricatured upper-class characters *Vera Drake* opened to largely excellent reviews – indeed, it is hard not to conclude that the absence on the whole of stylised characterisation and broad comedy was one of the things that many critics most approved of; even the highly enthusiastic Peter Bradshaw noted that Leigh's 'trade-mark cartoony exaggerations of dialogue and characterisation are toned down almost to zero'.³⁷ The film was also widely seen in the UK, in both multiplexes and independent cinemas; Leigh puts this box-office success down to the nature of the subject matter, in the sense that 'My most successful film commercially was *Secrets and 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 ... abortion'.³⁸ The awards at Venice were followed by many more: among others, British Independent Film Awards in six categories, London Critics Circle Film Awards in five, and further Best Actress awards for Imelda Staunton

from the film critics associations in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, San Diego, Toronto and Vancouver, as well as the American Film Critics Society, the *Evening Standard* and the European Film Awards. For Leigh, perhaps, the sweetest victory may have come courtesy of BAFTA, who at long last saw fit to name him as the year's best director. (*Vera Drake* was nominated for eleven BAFTAs in all, and won two others, one for Jacqueline Durran's costume design and the other – once again – for Staunton.)

So with great critical acclaim, good distribution and audience reaction, and awards at home and abroad, *Vera Drake* could fairly be described not only as a major work, dealing humanely and powerfully with a difficult and highly inflammatory issue, but also as, in Peter Bradshaw's words, a breakthrough with which Leigh 'shows every sign of entering a glorious late period of artistry and power'.³⁹ The recognition was deserved, almost certainly hoped for, though perhaps, after so many years, not really expected. Anyone who saw the television presentation of that year's BAFTAs will remember Leigh's genuine, open-mouthed astonishment when his name was announced. It was an endearing moment, as well as a heartening one. After all, a little incredulity could on such an occasion be allowed the man who had only recently insisted that he felt lucky purely because 'I get to make films without even showing a script. To be honest, the fact that I'm allowed to do what I do in the way that I do it never ceases to amaze me'.⁴⁰

Notes

- 1 'Vera Drake', *The Movie Magazine: The Magazine of StudioCanal* (May 2004), p. 69
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Cast and crew documentary, *Vera Drake* DVD (Momentum Pictures, MP399D, 2005)
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 7 January 2005
- 7 Ryan Gilbey, *Sight and Sound*, 15: 1 (January 2005), p. 72
- 8 Anthony Quinn, *The Independent*, 7 January 2005
- 9 Ryan Gilbey, *Sight and Sound*, p. 72
- 10 Cast and crew documentary, *Vera Drake* DVD
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Quoted in Emma Brockes, *The Guardian*, 8 October 2004
- 13 Quoted in Seamus Ryan, 'Fame at Last', *Saga Magazine* (January 2005), p. 12
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Quoted in Peter Bradshaw, 'The Guardian Profile: Mike Leigh', *The Guardian*, 7 January 2005
- 16 Quoted in Edward Lawrenson, 'Backstreet Revisited', *Sight and Sound*, 15: 1 (January 2005), p. 12

- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Cast and crew documentary, *Vera Drake* DVD
- 19 Quoted in 'Vera Drake', *The Movie Magazine: The Magazine of StudioCanal*, p. 67
- 20 Quoted in Edward Lawrenson, 'Backstreet Revisited', p. 15
- 21 Robert Murphy, 'Crime and Passion', *Sight and Sound*, 15: 1 (January 2005), p. 16
- 22 Cast and crew documentary, *Vera Drake* DVD
- 23 Quoted in Sean O'Hagan, 'I'm Allowed to Do What I Want – That Amazes Me', *The Observer*, 5 December 2004
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Quoted in Edward Lawrenson, 'Backstreet Revisited', p. 12
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 15
- 28 Quoted in Sean O'Hagan, 'I'm Allowed to Do What I Want – That Amazes Me'
- 29 Peter Bradshaw, 'The Guardian Profile: Mike Leigh'
- 30 Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 7 January 2005
- 31 Sukhdev Sandhu, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 January 2005
- 32 Philip French, *The Observer*, 9 January 2005
- 33 Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 22 October 2004
- 34 J. Hoberman, *Village Voice*, 4 October 2004
- 35 Anthony Quinn, *The Independent*, 7 January 2005
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 Peter Bradshaw, 'The Guardian Profile: Mike Leigh'
- 38 Quoted in Edward Lawrenson, 'Backstreet Revisited', p. 15
- 39 Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 7 January 2005
- 40 Quoted in Sean O'Hagan, 'I'm Allowed to Do What I Want – That Amazes Me'