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For Director Mike Leigh, the Personal and Political Are One and the Same

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When we first meet the title character of *Vera Drake*, the new Mike Leigh movie that won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival last month, it's hard to imagine anyone more ordinary. She's commonplace even by the standard of previous Leigh films, which usually focus on the hard-pressed working classes, using garden-variety personal crises to jump-start their bittersweet stories. The results range from satires like *Who's Who* (1979) to tragicomedies like *Life Is Sweet* (1990) and domestic dramas like *Secrets & Lies* (1996) and *All or Nothing* (2002).

From all appearances, middle-aged Vera is a woman with little time for diversion as she shuttles between her labors as a professional cleaning lady, her activities as a good-natured wife and mother, and an occasional project like fixing her daughter up with a lonesome neighbor. One day, though, she makes a side trip we don't expect -- visiting a woman she's never met and inducing an abortion by means that are dangerously unsophisticated even in the repressed 1950s, when the story takes place.

Realizing that Vera does this on a regular basis, we discover a whole other side of her life, secret even from her closest relatives. But is it really out of keeping with the rest of her personality? She's not a calculating criminal who helps women "in trouble" to boost her family's budget or put spending money in her pocket. Quite the contrary, she gets the names of her clients from a dishonest friend who is pocketing fees Vera knows nothing about. As far as Vera is concerned, she's doing what any good-hearted person would naturally do: providing a desperately needed service to desperately needy women who simply can't get it any other way.

Even when she is found out, arrested, and put on trial, she worries

as much about her family's dismay -- and its loss of her housecleaning income -- as about her own travails. She is a bit of a saint, but a saint in the eccentric Mike Leigh mold, bumbling into good works through instinct and intuition rather than self-righteous agendas.

Although he has been making movies since 1971, this is the first time Leigh has named a film after its main character -- a sign of respect for Vera, perhaps, or a reminder of how deeply he cares about each individual in every one of his stories. Vera Drake is one of Leigh's rare period films, like the musical *Topsy-Turvy* in 1999, but otherwise it is of a piece with his overall body of work.

With its view of abortion as both a necessary option and a button-pushing cultural issue, it is also as timely and topical as can be, providing a good opportunity to re-examine a perennial question regarding the filmmaker some call England's greatest: Can he be considered not just a gifted writer-director, but a dedicated political artist as well?

Some of Leigh's critics reject this notion on the ground that his satires of the working class and bourgeoisie are too, well, satirical. A notorious example is the late Dennis Potter's review of Leigh's comedy-drama *Abigail's Party*, produced on the London stage in 1977, then filmed and aired on the BBC's popular *Play for Today* program.

Writing about its TV version in the *Sunday Times*, the dramatist of *Pennies From Heaven* and *The Singing Detective* said Leigh's stylized account of a small suburban get-together was "based on nothing more edifying than rancid disdain, for it was a prolonged jeer, twitching with genuine hatred, about the dreadful suburban tastes of the dreadful lower middle classes. ... The force of the yelping derision became a single note of contempt, amplified into a relentless screech. As so often in the minefields of English class-consciousness, more was revealed of the snobbery of the observers rather than the observed."

One would hardly guess from this outburst that *Abigail's Party* aims its barbs not at derisory individuals, but rather at the

materialism and conformity into which they've been educated, indoctrinated, and funneled by the tenor of modern British society. Evidently the film's deadly serious critiques were too deeply embedded in the story's dark comedy for Potter to appreciate them.

This has happened more than once in the continuing dialogue between Leigh's movies and the critics who interpret them. His works have always gone against the grain of mainstream assumptions, offering an implicit challenge to the self-satisfied set of materialist, consumerist attitudes that Leigh has long feared and loathed in Western culture. The key word here -- and the approach that has confused Potter and other skeptics -- is "implicit." Leigh has rarely used the in-your-face tactics of a Ken Loach or a Derek Jarman, whose films throw their cards more aggressively onto the ideological table.

A related aspect of Leigh's strategy, perfectly illustrated by the open-ended last scene of *Vera Drake*, is his refusal to resolve stories with neatly tied-up conclusions. Few filmmakers are more averse to ladling meanings and messages over their material like so much faux-nutritious sauce.

To understand Leigh as a "political" artist -- and films like *Vera Drake* as "political" works -- one must understand that term the way he does. "I don't do films that are agenda-driven," he told me in a 1996 interview, "and I don't do work that is ... propagandist. But nevertheless, what I do is kind of political, in the sense that my characters are always identifiable, and I instinctively draw them in their social and economic contexts."

A phrase like "kind of" seems kind of evasive to Leigh's less sympathetic critics, and he's aware that some have attacked him for not being more aggressive in the political arena. I've long been convinced that part of the misunderstanding arises from the fact that Leigh is a fundamentally subtle thinker -- subtle enough, in my view, not merely to pronounce but actually to believe that there's no dividing line between the political and the personal, or at most a dividing line that's forever shifting, permeable, and blurry.

Vera Drake exemplifies this by putting her individual well-being on the line every time she helps a client, and Vera Drake exemplifies it by telling her story carefully and gently, allowing viewers to reach their own conclusions about the moral issues it raises. Leigh's definition of "a political act" is "just to share with other people things that you feel, in a way that makes them feel in some way. What I'm concerned with is the way we live our lives, and what politics should be concerned with is the way we live our lives, and what our lives are about.

"It's terribly important there are filmmakers whose films have very direct, specific, political objectives," he continues, "and it's terribly important that those films work and cause changes to happen ... , but I don't make films of that kind." Sounding like other directors as different as Jean-Luc Godard and Spike Lee, he adds that his movies "ask a great number of questions but ... don't come up with too many answers. ... I hope I make films where you walk away from the [theater] with work to do, arguments to have, things to worry about, things to care about. ... In that sense, I would regard what I do as political."

Another aspect of Leigh's creative personality that sometimes confounds critics is his fellowship with a brave handful of filmmakers, such as the late Luis Buñuel and the Mexican director Arturo Ripstein, who refuse to romanticize, patronize, or condescend in their portrayals of the poor and disadvantaged. Finding that aesthetically incorrect, some reviewers accuse Leigh of deriding individuals too addled to live proper lives.

More sensible critics feel the opposite. In film after film, Leigh's stories swell with compassion for everyday people stuck in social conditions that weigh down their abilities to love, work, and feel a sense of dignity. He sees no necessity to convey this in sentimentalized terms, however. To borrow from his own description of the protagonist of *Naked*, his most rage-filled movie, Leigh is "an idealist who's so frustrated that he turns in on himself and becomes angry with the world [so that] everything he says and everything he expresses ... is a lamentation on the terrible grip of materialism and the terrible lack of values in society."

Vera Drake is so openly sympathetic to its title character and her long-suffering family that it may escape charges of dissing the disadvantaged -- or, ironically, it may be accused of making them so sympathetic that they tug too much at the heartstrings, not enough at the mind. The movie comes close to justifying this complaint with its lingering shots of Vera's suffering face in the latter part of the story. The same problem occurred in the second half of *All or Nothing*, with its heavy-handed emphasis on love's redeeming power.

So far, though, *Vera Drake* has earned enthusiastic notices, thanks in part to Imelda Staunton's nuance-filled portrayal of the hard-pressed heroine. Her performance won the Venice festival's Volpi Cup, and the entertainment trade paper *Variety* likened it to Brenda Blethyn's acting in *Secrets & Lies*, the drama that earned Leigh his only Oscar nomination as best director.

Staunton and the other cast members -- including Leigh regulars Jim Broadbent and Peter Wight, among many others -- were key contributors to *Vera Drake*, participating in the creation of their characters through a long process of improvisation and rehearsal that has become Leigh's standard moviemaking mode.

He developed this method in the early '60s, deciding that "writing, directing, designing, and filmmaking could all be combined on the floor rather than at the desk," as he once put it.

He has followed that pathway ever since, using loose improvisations to suggest a basic story outline, then building on this material scene by scene until it is structured and disciplined enough for the cameras to roll. "It's the kind of work that is obviously highly creative and collaborative for the actors," Leigh has said. "But the contributions of designers and cameramen are [also] greater than normal because everybody shares all aspects of the work."

Presiding over all this, Leigh feels his most important function is to challenge his collaborators in the hope that they'll transcend common movie clichés. The credits of his earlier films say "devised and directed by Mike Leigh," while the later ones say "written and

directed by Mike Leigh," indicating the importance he places on his role in guiding the improvisation process and collating the results into a finished screenplay that may be published under his name. I feel the term "devised by" is more accurate than "written by" in Leigh's case, but he's honest enough to remind moviegoers every chance he gets that his films are collaborative creations to their bones.

As offbeat as they are, Leigh's methods aren't unique, since they somewhat resemble techniques used by the American director Robert Altman and the French filmmaker Jacques Rivette, who also ask performers to contribute elements of character, plot, and dialogue. What lends a distinctive stamp to Leigh's brand of group creativity is the overlooked fact that his cooperative, communal approach is itself an implicit critique of what he sees as the egotistical, neo-Darwinian climate of contemporary English culture. The political bite of Leigh's art is more in its practice than in its preaching.

Leigh is intimately familiar with the British social landscape. Born in 1943, he grew up in England's industrial north. His grandfather, Mayer Liebermann, had emigrated from Russia in 1902, and his father -- a Jewish physician who shortened the family name -- took pride in being an educated professional who lived and worked among people in less fortunate circumstances. Leigh's mother was a midwife, and while she was no Vera Drake functioning in secret, her professional experiences can be felt as an influence in his new movie.

That background exposed Leigh to an unusual blend of well-schooled intellect and steady interaction with the working class. To this day he is acutely concerned with class hypocrisies, as in *Vera Drake*, where a subplot shows the comparative comfort of a doctor-authorized abortion obtained by the daughter of a well-off woman whose house Vera cleans.

Entering the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art on a "fluke" scholarship in 1960, Leigh trained as an actor in what he later described as a ridiculously sterile atmosphere that induced him to question everything the place was trying to teach him. He moved

to a London art school in 1963 and started taking film classes the following year, discovering a wide range of exciting influences -- the stage maverick Jerzy Grotowski, the humanistic filmmaker John Cassavetes, the performance artist Allan Kaprow, and others -- along the way.

Leigh's aptly titled *Bleak Moments* (1971), about an unhappy secretary and a pathologically shy English teacher vainly reaching for romance, appeared onstage in 1970 and became his first movie the following year. After that he created made-for-television features -- *Hard Labour* (1973), *Grown-Ups* (1980), *Meantime* (1984), and others -- until returning to theatrical film with *High Hopes* in 1988. Biographical milestones include his marriage to actress Alison Steadman in 1973; his formation of the production company Thin Man Films with Simon Channing-Williams in 1989; and a pair of triumphs at the Cannes film festival: his best-director prize for *Naked* in 1993 (accompanied by David Thewlis's award for best actor) and the Palme d'Or given to *Secrets & Lies* in 1996.

Accolades and all, Leigh remains a controversial filmmaker, as *Vera Drake* is proving -- garnering the Venice festival's highest prize and landing a slot in the highly selective New York Film Festival, yet denied an invitation to Cannes, notwithstanding Leigh's earlier victories there. He would surely have a larger audience (and an even lengthier list of glowing reviews) if he played it safer on political and aesthetic grounds, comforting his audience instead of confronting it with its own social and cultural failings.

But ask Leigh why his most deeply felt scenes are often the most abrasive ones, and he'll tell you it's because holding a mirror up to society is the most important thing an honestly made movie can do. "Life is abrasive for a lot of people," he once told me, "and there's no getting round it. I think the function of art -- and the cinema not least -- is to confront these things. ... I'm absolutely committed as a filmmaker to be entertaining and to amuse; but I am also concerned to confront."

Vera Drake is a quintessential specimen of Mike Leigh cinema -- a cinema focused on run-of-the-mill people whose talk isn't small,

but microscopic; whose gestures aren't grand, but ungainly; whose cups of tea are clutched like talismans; whose tragedies blur into comedy according to a sensitive filmmaker's poignant, precisely calibrated purposes. From the inarticulate love-seekers of *Bleak Moments* to the afflicted urban peasants of *Vera Drake*, his characters are rough beasts, to be sure. But the world has been a more compelling place since they started slouching into Leigh's studio to be born.

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