

'Vera Drake' tackles the issue of abortion

Harry Forbes/CNS

NEW YORK — An outstanding performance by Imelda Staunton and an ensemble cast, a well-crafted screenplay and direction by Mike Leigh elevate this tale of an unsophisticated woman who, unbeknownst to her husband and children, leads a double life as she performs abortions on young women in difficult circumstances.

Leigh's "Vera Drake" tackles the difficult abortion theme with objectivity. His heroine (Staunton) is a cheery, lower-middle-class housewife in postwar Britain, circa 1950, with a loving garage-mechanic husband, Stan (Phil Davis), and two grown children who live at home: painfully shy Ethel (Alex Kelly), being courted by the sad-sack Reg (Eddie Marsan), and tailor's apprentice Sid (Daniel Mays).

MovieReview

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The middle-aged Vera, who works as a domestic, is guileless and simple, and thinks a cup of tea is the solution to all the world's ills.

But there's another side to her that soon becomes apparent: Besides helping sick neighbors and such, she also assists young women who are "in the family way" by performing abortions, then illegal. She sets off to various flats — many of them quite shabby — where, in a warm but no-nonsense manner, she administers a soapy disinfectant solution with a syringe. She then tells the girl that in a day or two she'll feel some stomach pain, should go to the bathroom to relieve herself, and "it will all be over."

Vera takes no money for this task, but simply sees herself as assisting these young girls who feel they have no other recourse.

Eventually, the mother of one of the young ladies recognizes Vera. The daughter later becomes gravely ill, and the mother rushes her to the hospital, where the authorities insist on knowing how the girl's mis-



Newmarket/CNS

Alex Kelly, Daniel Mays, Imelda Staunton and Phil Davis star in "Vera Drake."

carriage was induced. The mother is bullied into revealing Vera's name.

In the film's most unbearably suspenseful moments, Vera's family is having a cozy celebration of Ethel's engagement to the doltish Reg, as the police, headed by Detective Inspector Webster (Peter Wight), close in. When they finally knock on the door and ask to speak to Vera, the family is flabbergasted.

The police — portrayed as kindly and understanding, but firm in their need to see justice done — interrogate Vera at the station house.

Staunton's heart-wrenching realization of what she's done, and the impact it will have on her family, is acting of the highest order. The camera stays on her face unflinchingly, and you feel every ounce of her pain.

Depressing as the subject matter is, the period atmosphere provides visual interest and there's always the joy of watching great acting. As

this small, feisty, utterly ordinary woman, Staunton gives an indelible performance. Tremendous as she is, the entire cast is simply superb.

As for the abortion theme, the procedure isn't glorified in any way. The women involved are almost all desperate, and even though Vera's methods seem relatively benign, the women's fear and sorrow at what they are doing is achingly evident.

Leigh goes to pains not to make Vera a heroine. Nor, to my mind, does the film proselytize for abortion. The director leaves conclusions to the viewer, many of whom are likely to note that there is retribution on every level — personal and public — for Vera's well-intentioned, if misguided, actions.

Because of the abortion theme and one sexual situation, the USCCB Office for Film & Broadcasting classification is L — limited adult audience, films whose problematic content many adults would find troubling. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R — restricted.

Forbes is director of the Office for Film & Broadcasting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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