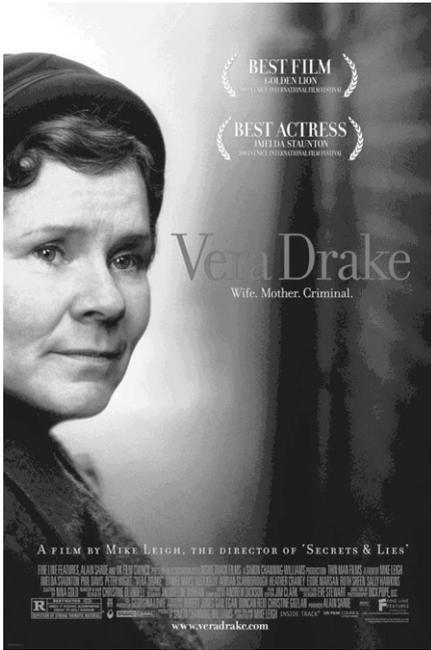


Vera Drake



Director Mike Leigh has a reputation for innovative film-making, famously asking his cast to improvise and rehearse for months without a formal script. His most recent film, *Vera Drake* - winner of three BAFTA awards and nominated for three Academy Awards - relies on this technique to deliver emotionally powerful results. Set in 1950s London, the film tells the story of a working-class wife and mother who also performs discreet abortions for girls who are 'in trouble'. When her secret is revealed, it threatens to break up her family.

For editor Jim Clark, nominated for a BAFTA award for his work on the film and recipient of this year's ACE Career Achievement Award, it was a chance to work with an old friend. "I have known Mike socially for years - we also used to teach together at the London Film School in the 1960s - and although our paths crossed occasionally we had never worked together," he says. "When *Vera Drake* came up, Mike's regular editor wasn't available, so for a variety of reasons he asked me."

The experience turned out to be a very pleasant one for Clark, offering an unusual way of working. "The main virtue of a Mike Leigh film is that, when you begin, there is no script - you only know the subject. Mike works intensively with the actors for six months and they improvise a script. Then, a week before shooting, he gathers all the heads of departments together and goes through the main themes to give an inkling of what you're going to see... so the pleasure is not knowing what you're going to get before you get it," he explains.

The film was shot on Super 16mm film and went through a digital intermediate (DI) process - a first for Leigh - and which, Clark notes, had an interesting effect on the look of the piece. "Thanks to this process, most people I have spoken to can't tell it was originated on Super 16mm. The film gained something of its period look just by going the DI route, and the result is stunning," he says.

The Super 16mm film was telecined to SD at 25fps, then down-converted to 24fps for editing in the Film Composer system. Each day, assistant editor Gavin Buckley synced up the audio using a Deva audio hard disk recorder. Clark would then create a rough assembly on one of the production's two Film Composer editing systems, which were connected to an Avid Unity LANshare shared-storage system. This setup, supplied by Hyperactive Broadcast, enabled the editing team to easily share and simultaneously access media, which resulted in a faster and smoother workflow.

The LANshare is absolutely brilliant. In the past we'd be constantly passing files or tapes back and forth and getting confused about versions," explains Buckley. "With LANshare, we could both access the same material, which was great."

Once they had finished work on the day's edit, Clark took the dailies to location in the evening to show Leigh ~ even though Clark had already edited the scenes. However, the two men's visions of the film turned out to be remarkably in sync from the beginning. Says Clark, "On most occasions his choices were very similar to mine."

The audio had been carefully recorded on set to maintain its immediacy and originality. However, some of the locations were under the London City Airport flight path, and the shoot also happened to fall within the annual Halloween and Bonfire Night celebrations. Buckley remembers the sound supervisor, Nigel Stone, having a major job on his hands. It was a nightmare, working with all the noise of jets and fireworks! He did an awesome job of cleaning it up. Imelda [Staunton, the lead actress in *Vera Drake*] only had about three lines of ADR - that's unheard of for a leading lady," says Buckley

One of Leigh's rituals is to have a screening of the rough assembly about two-thirds of the way through shooting, but it took Clark by surprise. "I thought it was just for Mike, but to my great surprise 20 of the crew turned up to this screening, at 9am on a Sunday!" he recalls. "I was rather nervous, particularly as Mike hadn't seen a frame of the assembly, but it all went well and everyone was happy."

Around a month later, Leigh and Clark ran the full assembly, which was approximately 150 minutes long. Then they went back to the cutting room, carved out what they didn't require, and whittled the running time down to two hours.

Once the picture was locked, the film went through a DI process at London-based facility VTR. It was scanned on a Spirit data scanner at 2K 10-bit log - one of the fastest scanners in Europe - which took just a day to scan the entire film. This data was then passed to a Thomson Specter datacine system, where it was conformed to the CMX3600 EDIL. The six-day grade was carried out by Tom Russell, the senior colourist at VTR, working with Leigh and director of photography Dick Pope to achieve a dull, post-war 1950s period look. VTR also conformed the titles and performed some minor corrections.

Clark, a veteran editor whose credits include *Charade*, *The Killing Fields*, and the James Bond film *The World Is Not Enough*, readily admits that *Vera Drake* was a relatively simple job. "I had very good material and a director who knew exactly what he wanted, and there was no 'committee' of people looking over his shoulder," he says. "It was a very similar atmosphere to the older films I worked on, when there was only the director and maybe the producer to satisfy. These days, there are far too many people telling us what they want, and unfortunately the results of this often show."

Says Clark: "*Vera Drake* was one of the happiest films of my career, largely because I was working with a man who is very creative and has an attitude that is extremely flexible. Mike is a very warm man, and there's a lot of humour involved. I find that levity is very important in the editing room."