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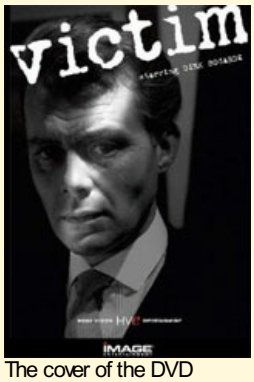
Dirk Bogarde's Gamble: *Victim* Revisited

by Patricia Juliana Smith

In 1960, the highly regarded British actor Dirk Bogarde took a daring risk, one that could have ended his career. He agreed to play the leading role in director Basil Dearden's groundbreaking film *Victim* (1961), the first feature film to present a sympathetic homosexual protagonist in a contemporary setting. The gamble did not, however, play out as many may have expected.

If *Victim* was not a huge commercial success, it nonetheless became, according to noted film scholar and critic Richard Dyer, one of the few films that could legitimately be said to have inspired genuine social change.



The cover of the DVD release of *Victim*.

The film exposed the everyday terrors experienced by gay men in England at the time, subject as they were not only to the Victorian criminal penalties for homosexual acts between men under the same law used to imprison Oscar Wilde nearly seventy years earlier, but also to the threat of blackmail from those who were willing to expose them.

For this reason, the film's success was not merely professionally significant for Bogarde but personally as well, for Bogarde maintained a quietly gay life with Anthony Forwood, his partner and manager, for over thirty years and was subject to many of the same pressures and dangers as the gay characters in the film.

Beginning in the late 1940s, Bogarde had established himself as Britain's first homegrown matinee idol and became an object of desire for many young women in his own country. Many parallels might be drawn between Bogarde and his American counterpart, Rock Hudson. With his good looks and charms, he played the romantic lead in over thirty films during the 1940s and 1950s, particularly in his recurring lead role as Dr Simon Sparrow in the popular if nonetheless light-weight comedy film series directed by Ralph Thomas that included *Doctor in the House* (1954), *Doctor at Sea* (1955), and *Doctor at Large* (1957), among others.

Unlike Hudson, though, Bogarde refused to enter into a marriage of convenience to disguise his widely suspected sexuality. He, thus, never gained any significant presence in Hollywood.

By the dawn of the 1960s, Bogarde was approaching his fortieth birthday. He had grown tired of his screen idol image and wanted to prove himself as a serious actor.

He had shown a capacity for playing sinister characters in such films as Brian Desmond Hurst's *Simba* (1955) and Lewis Gilbert's *Cast a Dark Shadow* (1955). Additionally, he had taken on the role of the conceivably gay title character in Philip Leacock's *The Spanish Gardener* (1956), and, just prior to filming *Victim*, had raised eyebrows for his performance as a sensual, leather-clad Mexican bandit caught in a romantic triangle with an errant priest and a young woman in Roy Ward Baker's *The Singer Not the Song* (1961).

When director Basil Dearden offered him the role of Melville Farr, a successful and seemingly happily married barrister whose personal secrets are about to be made public, Bogarde welcomed the challenge.

Through the 1950s and early 1960s, Dearden had departed from the typical British cinematic fare (costume dramas, period pieces, and drawing room romances) and had pioneered the "social issue" film, taking on controversial topics, particularly racism in *Pool of London* (1951), *Sapphire* (1959), and *All Night Long* (1962).

In the wake of the government-commissioned Wolfenden Report (1957), which recommended that sexual acts between men should no longer be treated as crimes and, moreover, that homosexuality

should not be considered a disease, it became possible to address the once unmentionable "love that dares not speak its name" in British cinema, but only with great caution.

The first efforts to do so appeared almost simultaneously in early 1960: Ken Hughes's *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (also known as *The Man with the Green Carnation*), starring Peter Finch in a peculiarly butch characterization of the playwright, and Gregory Ratoff's *Oscar Wilde*, with Robert Morley recapitulating his 1930s stage portrayal of the role.

As Wilde was already a historical figure whose "crimes" were well in the past, his life was a relatively safe topic. A realistic representation of a more ordinary gay man in contemporary British society was another matter altogether, and Dearden and his screenwriters spent months negotiating with the British Board of Film Censors to create a film that could actually be shown in public.

The script that resulted from this careful work appealed to a mainstream audience through its crime thriller plot. *Victim* begins with the arrest and suicide of "Boy" Barrett (Peter McEnery), a young working-class man accused of embezzling from his employer. In his futile attempt to escape to France, he makes several desperate telephone calls to Bogarde's character Melville Farr, all of which go unheeded. He takes with him a scrapbook of news clippings that he only partially destroys before the police capture him, and kills himself in his cell soon after being apprehended. The police are puzzled once they discover that all the clippings are about Farr's successes in legal cases.

After being questioned by the police, Farr begins to feel guilt over his refusal to help Barrett in his plight and resolves to find out what–or who–was behind his fate. To do so, though, he must risk exposure over the part he has himself played.

Farr's wife Laura (Sylvia Sims) grows increasingly alarmed over his emotional withdrawal and agitation, the mysterious phone calls, and the subsequent visits with the police. The tense confrontations between the couple provide some of the most powerful dramatic action in the film and showcase Bogarde's acting prowess.

These scenes reveal Farr's past and present secrets, beginning with a passionate if apparently platonic relationship years before that ended with the other man's suicide. In the aftermath, Farr retreated into the safety of heterosexual marriage with a prominent judge's daughter, a connection that boosted his career. Before their marriage, he had told his wife of his inclinations, but assured her of his love and told her he was no longer susceptible to homoerotic desires. However, the film bravely suggests that homosexuality cannot simply be wished away, a concept some still do not grasp even half a century later.

Farr's acquaintance with Barrett had begun with him offering a ride to the attractive young man whom he saw standing in the rain at a bus stop. This became the first of many such rides, until Farr, realizing his desire for Barrett, ended the connection.

The high point of the drama is reached as Laura's endless demands for explanations push Farr to the breaking point: "You won't be content until I tell you, will you? Until you've ripped it out of me. I stopped seeing him because I wanted him–can you understand?–because I *wanted* him!"

These lines, scripted by Bogarde himself, were in all probability the first unequivocal and frank declaration of homosexual desire so vehemently articulated in the history of English-language film.

While Melville Farr's marriage falls apart, he becomes increasingly entangled in the web of blackmail plaguing London's gay subculture. Assisted by Barrett's best friend, he discovers a wide range of gay men–from hairdressers, car dealers, and booksellers to prominent stage actors and political figures–who face financial ruin and personal despair at the hands of extortionists threatening to expose them to the police.

Indeed, one of the detectives in the film argues, in a conversation with his colleague, about the injustice of the law criminalizing homosexuality, calling it "the blackmailer's charter."

Soon the anonymous extortionists have Farr in their sights as well, and vandalize his home with the message "FARR IS QUEER" painted on his garage door when he refuses to pay. Subsequently, Farr, working with the police, sets a trap, and the blackmailers–including a leather-garbed body builder who would seem to embody the stereotypical self-loathing homosexual who preys on his fellow gays–are arrested.

Justice has triumphed, for the moment, yet the ending is not necessarily a happy one. Farr realizes that bringing the culprits to trial will result in public exposure of his own sexuality and probably end his brilliant career. In addition, the future of the Farrs' marriage remains unresolved.

But what is clear in the end are that homosexuality is not perforce a matter of perversion and degeneration and, moreover, that it is so integral a part of one's being that it cannot be willed away in order to conform with social norms.

By means of a very popular film star giving a powerful performance as a dignified, heroic, and sympathetic gay man in a plot illuminating the plight of gay men as the victims of an unjust law and left to the mercy of the predatory criminals who exploited them, a gradual change in British public attitudes towards homosexuality came about.

Subsequent films, such as Tony Richardson's *A Taste of Honey* (1962), featured sympathetic gay characters, albeit in supporting roles. A change in political power saw the implementation of a series of liberalizing laws regarding private life under the auspices of Harold Wilson's Labour Government, and, in 1967, sexual acts between consenting adult men were mostly decriminalized. It is widely believed that *Victim* was crucial in bringing about this change.

Bogarde's gamble, moreover, paid off. His performance in *Victim* not only established him as a serious actor, but it also earned him the first of his six nominations for the British Academy Award for Best Actor, an honor he would win twice.

After *Victim*, he was cast in numerous complex roles in serious films throughout the 1960s and 1970s, including Joseph Losey's *The Servant* (1963), John Schlesinger's *Darling* (1964), Luchino Visconti's *The Damned* (1969) and *Death in Venice* (1971), Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974), and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Despair* (1978).

He subsequently retired from film and moved with his partner to France, where he began a new career writing memoirs, essays, and fiction. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth in 1992 for his services to British film. He died in 1999, laden with accolades.

Despite its historical significance, *Victim* has, however, lapsed into relative obscurity, even among gay audiences, over the course of five decades since its first release. Indeed, it never had a significant impact on American audiences, as few venues in the United States were willing to screen it during its initial run.

Fortunately, recent developments have worked to revitalize interest in the film. In 2011, the British Film Institute presented a retrospective screening of Bogarde's films to commemorate the ninetieth anniversary of his birth.

In addition, a volume dedicated to *Victim*, authored by Bogarde's biographer John Coldstream, was published in 2011 by Palgrave Macmillan as part of the British Film Institute's BFI Film Classics series. The book delineates the historical contexts that gave rise to the film, the story of its creation, the script and the actors' performances, and, finally, the film's cultural legacy. It is required reading for anyone interested in gay cinematic history.

Finally, the Criterion Collection, known for its high-quality reissues of historically significant films, has made *Victim* available to American viewers through its Eclipse Series box set *Basil Dearden's London Underground*. The set also include the controversial films *Sapphire*, *The League of Gentlemen*, and *All Night Long*.

Younger viewers, having grown up in a time of greater openness about matters of sexuality might find *Victim* dated, even a bit quaint with its depictions of extortion, marriages of convenience, and other aspects of life in the closet. But as we come to the end of a tumultuous year in which highly vocal individuals on the far right of the political spectrum worked furiously to denounce glbtq individuals and their quest for equal rights, it is vital that we never forget what queer life was once like–and would be again if we fail to persist in the fight that Melville Farr symbolizes.

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