

## ***VICTIM: NO WAY OUT* by Michael Koresky**

With its opening images of London under construction, Basil Dearden's *Victim* (1961) announces itself as a work about a city in transition. And the film did herald change. A landmark in mainstream moviemaking, the Allied Film Makers production was one of a handful of cinematic responses to the 1957 Wolfenden Report—which recommended the legalization of homosexual acts in Great Britain, outlawed since 1885—and is indisputably the most resonant and historically important of those. Though Dearden never considered himself an activist filmmaker, it was his and producer Michael Relph's intention to contribute to a national dialogue and effect change; as Relph would later recall, "Homosexuality was something we accepted completely, and it seemed to us absolutely preposterous that the law was the way it was." It took a decade, but the report eventually resulted in the 1967 Sexual Offences Act, which decriminalized homosexuality.

The film stars Dirk Bogarde as Melville Farr, a successful, married, closeted barrister who discovers that a former acquaintance of his, a young gay man named Barrett (Peter McEnery), has been targeted by a mysterious blackmailer. A tragic turn of events incites Farr to action, and he risks his own livelihood by revealing his connection to Barrett and the London gay community, a number of whose members have been systematically victimized by the same criminal. The transformative power of Dearden's film, which, like his earlier social-problem thriller *Sapphire*, was written by Janet Green (here alongside her husband, John McCormick), lies in the facts that its weighty melodrama is seen largely from Farr's perspective and that the other homosexual men are portrayed just as sympathetically, as compelling victims of not only a nefarious villain but also a corrupt, repressive system.

A series of midfifties events (including the post-Kinsey-report cases of such "accused" homosexuals as John Gielgud and Lord Montagu) had made the British public increasingly receptive to the decriminalization of homosexual behavior, but this was still delicate material. And though the filmmakers got the censors involved even before production began, the film couldn't avoid being slapped with an X rating. But that didn't keep it from box-office success, buoyed as it was by media coverage and critical debate. Certainly, its sensitive treatment of its subject and its utilization of genre helped: *Victim* is both a whodunit and an intimate domestic drama (Melville's wife, Laura, played by Sylvia Syms, is as integral and sympathetic a character as Melville himself). It wasn't so successful in the U.S., however, where the MPAA demanded that the word *homosexual* be removed from the soundtrack. Dearden and Relph wouldn't capitulate, and having lost the board's all-important seal of approval, *Victim* was marginalized; according to Vito Russo's book *The Celluloid Closet*, it was "typed as a film that condoned homosexuality" and thus "shunned by the public."

What often gets lost in discussions about the film is how elegantly crafted and profoundly felt it is (and how sharply acted, by a fully committed cast that also includes Dennis Price and Norman Bird). This isn't just a film demanding reform; it's an absorbing depiction of the shifting nature of society. The persecuted cross lines of class and status: lawyer, bookseller, and barber are united in a community of men who, though preyed upon, soldier on with dignity.