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Art-house films: 'Into Eternity,' 'Zenith'

BY BILL STAMETS Feb 18, 2011 5:39PM

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A technician at Onkalo, a nuclear waste storage facility in Finland, as seen in "Into Eternity."

Opening the weekend of Feb. 18:

'Into Eternity' 1/2

Beings in a far-off future uncover traces of humanity under an ice cap in "Into Eternity." In the beautifully sad ending of "A.I. Artificial Intelligence" (2001), the sci-fi movie Stanley Kubrick started and Steven Spielberg finished, the handiwork of American engineers survives for 2,000 years. "Into Eternity" contemplates a longer time span: Engineers in Finland are now entombing tons of

radioactive waste in bedrock for 100,000 years.

Danish director Michael Madsen visits the underground vaults under construction far beneath a forest in western Finland. He interviews a blaster setting off charges in the 1.8 billion-year-old rock, as well as a theology prof on the National Council for Nuclear Waste. "It is quite possible we will not be understood by the future, especially by the distant future," theorizes one expert.

Certain areas of the sleek, austere facility evoke interiors in Kubrick's "2001: A Space Odyssey" (1969). Could a modernist-style monolith, like the one in that classic sci-fi film, function as a marker for later generations? Madsen's artful film, which received funds from Danish, Finnish and Swedish film institutes, is not meant as a beacon for the place called "Onkalo" (Finnish for "cavern" or "hidden place.") The latitude and longitude of this hidden place are not cited.

Sealing the entrance may ensure the site is forgotten. The next ice age is likely to further block access. Illuminating himself by lighting a match in a tunnel, Madsen looks into the camera to make gnomic statements punctuated by the dying flame. At one point, he says the paradoxical duty of one generation is instructing the next "to remember forever to forget" Onkalo.

Madsen graces his ponderings with lithe cinematography and a moving score that samples Philip Glass, Arvo Part, Jean Sibelius, Edgard Varese and "Radioactivity," a dated Kraftwerk song from 1975 that needs a shorter half-life.

No MPAA rating. Running time: 75 minutes. In English, Finnish and Swedish, with English



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'Zenith'

Directed by "Anonymous," "Zenith" resembles "Zeitgeist: The Movie," another conspiracy-conscious feature made by another anonymous New Yorker. Both are nervous about secret vectors in society. "Zenith" is more entertaining, because it deploys paranoia in a futurist noir thriller, not for an esoteric expose of Christ and currency.

Genre formulas are rife in this B-movie exercise, but the background details are original. Jack, aka Dumb Jack (Peter Scanavino), is an epileptic dealer of post-dated drugs in the year 2044, when everyone is genetically fixed to always feel happy. Numbed, people yearn to feel. So there's a black market for three-decades-old meds prized for their pain-inducing side effects. Jack is on a quest to collect 10 VHS cassettes where his long-gone dad, Ed (Jason Robards III), a priest and locksmith, documented the secret master conspiracy to run the world.

Noir fixtures include Jack's wise, weird guide, a mute sidekick and an egghead hooker in a perverse jam. What makes Jack a freak at risk in this dystopia? "I know words no one else knows anymore," he says. "Many things cannot be said anymore and many thoughts can't be thought."

"Zenith" echoes the medicated futures of "Equilibrium," "Strange Days" and "A Scanner Darkly," as well as the plot frames of psychiatric hospitals used in "Final" and "Shutter Island." The design concept of this "transmedia" indie may extend to its credits that list an improbable 16 producers (that sounds more like a quorum for a cult) and an overseer with the ominous title "Experiment Supervisor."

No MPAA rating. Running time: 93 minutes. Opening today at Facets Cinematheque.

'And Everything Is Going Fine'

The acclaimed monologist Spalding Gray (1941-2004) composed and performed 18 autobiographical stage works before he committed suicide. His widow, Kathie Russo, entrusted 120 hours of archival footage of the raconteur to director Steven Soderbergh. "And Everything Is Going Fine" is the resulting film portrait that is wrongly billed as "a Spalding Gray super-monologue."

Soderbergh assembles home movie footage, local television interviews and assorted videos documenting Gray performances, including two recorded at the Goodman Theatre. There are no clips from the fiction films in which Gray was cast, such as "King of the Hill," directed by Soderbergh. He also made "Gray's Anatomy" (1996), based on a Gray monologue. His parts in porn films are left out, too.

As it was in Gray's art, death is a motif. Gray relates the story of a neighbor driving over his kitten and a brother endlessly asking their mother if death is "forever and ever." Gray once played a character who shoots himself onstage night after night. His mother's suicide is treated at length. However, Gray's own suicide goes unmentioned, since Soderbergh limits himself to what his subject said about his own life.

Soderbergh's portrait lacks the form and feel of a Gray monologue. Little of his stage persona is found here. We don't learn much about his craft or offstage life. "And Everything Is Going Fine" offers no other truth — underlying or overlaid — about this introspective extrovert. In the end, Gray's monologues are more insightful than Soderbergh's filmed memorial.

Soderbergh's choice of a last shot, though, is beautiful. Not long before his death, during an outdoor interview, Gray pauses and listens to distant howling. It's as if that dog is ventriloquizing his own unspoken pain.

No MPAA rating. Running time: 89 minutes. Opening today for a weeklong engagement at the Gene Siskel Film Center.

Bill Stamets is a Chicago-based free-lance writer and critic.



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