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'Zenith': a future that looks all too believably grim

February 5, 2011 at 10:13 am by **Joe Meyers**



You don't need much money to serve up a chillingly realistic vision of the future — a fact Jean-Luc Godard demonstrated with "Alphaville" in 1965 and restated by writer-director Vladan Nikolic in his new film "Zenith."

"Alphaville" was filmed on carefully selected Paris locations — mostly gleaming new office towers — that made the future look well-designed and totalitarian.

"Zenith" was shot in various bombed-out districts in New York City — from the looks of it, mostly in Brooklyn or Queens — and in a mansion on Long Island Sound in Connecticut to show us a vision of 2044 that looks like the result of the public policies and financial disparity of today.

The mass, uneducated population lives in decaying factory buildings and warehouses — where the middle class worked in long-vanished 20th century manufacturing jobs. They have not scrambled for a living in "service" jobs like drug dealing and prostitution, while the rich and the educated live in luxurious compounds.

The rich have finally found the fountain of youth — suggested by today's advances in medicine and plastic surgery — and look somewhere around 35 when they are actually 80 or older.

The protagonist, Jack (very well played by the New York stage actor Peter Scanavino), makes a living selling vintage drugs from the turn of the century — long-expired medications that cut through some of the numbness and hopelessness of America 40 years from now.

Jack gets sucked into the paranoia of his father — a priest who fell from grace and married a prostitute.

Jack's dad eventually became obsessed with conspiracy theories involving the global rule of organizations such as the Council on Foreign Relations, the Bilberberg group, etc. and left behind a series

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of VHS tapes detailing his investigations.

Jack starts finding the tapes and like his dad begins to believe he is one of the few of the masses who knows how the system was rigged against people like him.

"Zenith" revisits material that has been explored in many other dystopian stories, but it is given a fresh feel through Nikolic's ability to immerse us in a believably detailed future.

And the characters feel real because the director was lucky enough to get excellent performers like Scanavino and theater veterans Arthur French, Zohra Lampert and Jay O. Sanders.

It's amazing what you can still put on a screen with nothing but talent.

("Zenith is now playing at Real Art Ways in Hartford and is set to open at the Criterion Cinemas, New Haven.)



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