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Film Reviews

Posted: Tue., Jan. 18, 2011, 4:36pm PT

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New U.S. Release

Zenith

By JOE LEYDON

A Cinema Purgatorio release of a Sura Films production in association with Solo Films. Produced by Vladan Nikolic, Djordjine Lekovic, Jason Robards III. Executive producers, Eric Werthman, Tim Biancalana, Duke Greenhill. Co-producers, Jim Stark, Heather Murphy. Directed, written by Vladan Nikolic.

With: Peter Scanavino, Jason Robards III, Ana Asensio, David Thornton, Jay O. Sanders, Zohra Lambert, Didier Flamand.

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Smoothly incorporating influences as diverse as Philip K. Dick and Terry Gilliam, "Zenith" commands attention and builds suspense by taking inventive detours through familiar territory. Writer-director Vladan Nikolic's retro-futuristic conspiracy thriller is a low-budget, high-concept mind-teaser, the sort of provocatively ambiguous sci-fier that often can attract a devoted niche audience and inspire repeated viewings. Indeed, some ardent admirers may wind up scrutinizing the DVD edition as carefully as the pic's protagonist studies the videotapes that are crucial to Nikolic's complex plot.

Filmed on various grungy locales throughout Brooklyn and Queens, "Zenith" imagines a 2044 dystopia where the majority of the citizenry has been "genetically enhanced" to always be happy, leaving most folks dumbed down and benumbed. Those desperate enough to feel something -- anything -- often seek outlaws like Jack (Peter Scanavino), a doctor turned drug dealer who peddles outdated pharmaceuticals that trigger painful side effects.

When he's not plying his trade or sampling his own products, Jack videotapes his manic ramblings of words and their definitions, in the hope of preserving his understanding of language and abstract nouns. Such knowledge is an increasingly rare commodity -- so rare, in fact, that Jack easily attracts a similarly savvy soul mate, Lisa (Ana Asensio), an exotic dancer who appreciates a guy who can toss about words like "solace" and "curiosity" between bouts of hot, sweaty sex.

Jack graduates from challenging the system to divining its dark origins when he obtains videotapes made decades earlier by his long-missing father. Ed (Jason Robards III), an ex-priest turned obsessed investigator, recorded his efforts to uncover the conspirators -- known collectively as Zenith -- who devised a method for controlling the populace by imposing chemically enhanced passivity.

Like father, like son: "Zenith" alternates between Ed's fanatical truth-seeking and Jack's own attempts to identify the string-pullers. Berger (David Thornton), Lisa's way-too-ingratiating husband, seems a likely suspect. But then again, the pic's sly climax suggests that, in addition to borrowing from the above-noted influences, Nikolic also was inspired by a certain silent-movie masterwork of German Expressionism.

Rather than try to transcend his budgetary limitations, Nikolic makes a virtue of necessity, enhancing the overall mood of mounting dread and pervasive paranoia with production values that hint at the

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brutal pinching of pennies. Like a classic noir, "Zenith" relies heavily and effectively on moodily lit interiors, evocative music (from composer Luigi Colarullo) and wall-to-wall narration by a not-entirely-reliable protagonist.

Occasionally, Jack sounds a darkly comical note while considering his limitations and rationalizations. (Speaking of Lisa, he admits: "I lie to myself when I say my interest in her is linguistic.") For the most part, however, "Zenith" is deadly serious, if not grimly fatalistic, about the grave new world it depicts.

Scanavino gives a compelling, emotionally varied performance, but Thornton manages some nifty scene-stealing with his subtle underplaying as Berger.

It's worth noting that in the future according to "Zenith," someone as rich as Berger, who admits to being 85 years old, can afford enough nipping and tucking to look half his age. Little wonder, then, that in this future, the wealthy and powerful don't really need happiness drugs.

Camera (color), Vladimir Subotica; editor, Milica Zec; music, Luigi Colarullo; production designer, Brian Goodwin; art director, Grace G.G. Yun, costume designer, Vera Chow; sound, Mikhail Sterkin; makeup designer and special effects, Mara Palumbo; assistant director, Heather Murphy; casting, Nina Pratt, Kim Moarefi. Reviewed on DVD, Houston, Jan. 15, 2011. Running time: 93 MIN.

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