



DREAMS OF A LIFE 2011

UK 95 mins

Drama documentary

Director: Carol Morley

Screenplay: Carol Morley

Cast:

Joyce - Zawe Ashton, Father - Cornell St John, Young Joyce - Alex Luke-Cain

If you Google “Dreams of a Life” it comes up as 83,000,000 results – even allowing for the vagaries of Google that is quite something.

Joyce Vincent died in a bed-sit above a shopping mall in North London in 2003, but her body wasn’t discovered for 3 years. Christmas presents and wrapping paper lay around her, the TV was still on and the sink was full of dishes.

Carol Morley first heard about the death when she picked up a discarded copy of The Sun on the tube. It was just a short paragraph, but she knew immediately that she would make a film about Joyce. What drew her to the subject was not the length of time that Joyce had lain undiscovered, but the image of the TV flickering over her body. “I had a strong belief that it was worth telling, and that therefore I would find things. I went to see her flat above a shopping centre visited by 250,000 people every week and which is all about consumerism. And it stuck me that the shopping centre and the TV are such powerful ideological tools. What we worship is communication – the internet, the mobile phone, the TV ---- without the TV, I might not have made the film”

Joyce’s death predates the Facebook age, but it is not worth speculating whether she would have been undiscovered for so long with it, as like everyone else Joyce could have presented any image she wanted to project onto it.

Morley had previously made “The Alcohol Years” in 2000. This was also a drama doc about herself and her years of drinking and partying in Manchester in the mid 80’s. She herself never appears on camera. She simply placed an ad in the paper and asked anyone who had known her to come forward. “Dreams of a Life” evolved in the same way. People came forward in response to Morley’s advert for people who had known Joyce and the film interweaves interviews with them and imagined scenes from Joyce’s life.

Her first break came when Martin Lester, who had gone out with Joyce when she was 21, googled his ex-girlfriend and came across Morley’s advert. “He became the hero of the film really,” Morley has said. She freely admits that “Joyce was a very beautiful woman and beauty is filmic. She was young and she lived her life – she was a “life’s too short” person and I didn’t want to portray her as a victim.”

The first question most people would ask themselves is why there is no evidence from Joyce's family in the film. This was deliberate on Morley's part. "I don't feel we belong to our family as adults so I didn't feel I needed their permission to make the film, nor did I need to portray them in the film. They didn't want me to make the film as they wanted to grieve privately. They talked to me off the record. They loved Joyce and they did try to find her."

She also didn't put into the film everything she could have done as, "I never wanted to solve Joyce. People seem to have different rationales about what happened to her and I'm pleased about that." In fact events did not stop for Morley with the closing credits. She was still receiving emails in 2012 from people claiming to have known Joyce. There is also an interactive game entitled "Dreams of Your Life" spawned by the film!

For some viewers the film is disjointed and goes nowhere, for others it is exploitative and for still others it strikes a chord they cannot shake off and causes them to review how much they either hold back or reveal about themselves, and how they conduct their relationships in general.

Knowing a few more hard facts about Joyce's story may help to frame the fact that this is a film, a creative exercise, not an official investigation into Joyce's death conducted by sociologists, the medical profession or the police.

Joyce was a victim of domestic violence and was living in a flat set up by a support organisation for such victims. Her housing costs were subsidised and these costs continued to be paid so the council were not immediately likely to pursue arrears. It was a noisy building so the constant TV was nothing unusual. The hallways were notoriously smelly because of where the bins were stored. Joyce had not contacted the domestic violence organisation again so they were not monitoring her. (They have since amended their practices.) Neighbours had knocked, but with no response they thought the flat was unoccupied. Joyce's sister had employed a private detective to try and find her and he was still working on the case during the period between her death and the discovery of her body.

Joyce, for whatever reason, was a drifter who came and went in people's lives, so her inconsistent presence was nothing new and yet ----- . Whatever you think of Morley's technique we are still left with a question mark by the end of the film.

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