

#BFIBLACKSTAR

Dreams of a Life (12A)

Tue 29 Nov 2016, 18.15

Part of: Black British Breakthroughs

Dir Carol Morley / 2011 GB / 95 mins
Zawe Ashton, Alix Luka-Cain

Part fact part fiction, Carol Morley's unsettling, yet ultimately life affirming film confronts some of our deepest fears about dying alone and unremembered. A mysterious headline about the skeletal remains of a woman, who lay dead on a sofa in a Wood Green flat for three years without anyone noticing, initially sparked Morley's curiosity. What happened and why could the journalists find so few details about Joyce Vincent and her life? Using deft detective work and haunting illustrative reconstructions, aided by a finely judged performance by Zawe Ashton, an image of Joyce and her mysterious past is brought to life.

The story everyone wanted but no one could get.

One of the real joys of the film is the seeming resurrection of Joyce. Morley reconstructions are a perfect counterbalance to the direct testimonies provided by friends, classmate's ex-fiancé and past flat mates that she uncovered during her research. Perfectly cast as Joyce, Ashton in her first major film role injects an emotional power to Morley's storytelling, along with her own subjectivity as a young black woman who grew up in North London not far from where Joyce's body was found.

As director turned sleuth, Morley uncovers a story that confounds every assumption we may have of people found in such tragic situations. Using Facebook, classified ads and even the side of a London taxi, Morley sets out to find the truth behind the headlines and track down those who knew Joyce. From interviews we see that for a number Morley was the one to inform of Joyce's death – so far removed were the facts of her demise to the person they knew. The story of the body that lay undiscovered – they didn't connect it with the person they know - a lively 38 year-old woman who lit up a room.

We the audience are left to make up our own opinions about the truth behind the headlines. What lingers is that this took place not a remote location the middle of nowhere but in a busy area of London above a shopping centre frequented by thousands of people. The Vincent family declined to take part in the film, it was surprising to discover they had hired a private detective to look for Joyce. She sifted through mountains of leads to discover a long-term boyfriend with whom Joyce met people like Stevie Wonder Betty Wright Isaac Hayes, and whilst back stage at Wembley, Nelson Mandela. This is no journalistic exposé about who was at fault for Joyce's death, rather it is an exploration of us as a society that holds lessons for us all.

Exposed in the film on walls with floor to ceiling notes and scribbling like an enormous mind map linking events, locations and people to Joyce, and each other. Morley discovers other interviewees, include

Music is an important component in the film is sets a melancholic mood composed for the film by Manchester based Barry Adamson. Joyce was a keen singer an aspect of her life

#BFI BLACKSTAR

amplified in a poignant sequence where Zawe Ashton sings, 'Frown of a clown' in front of a mirror.

At the heart of the film is impossibility of knowing what really happened to Joyce, yet we like the interviewees can't help but endlessly speculate as more information about her life are discovered. The film creates a sense that Joyce as a nomadic transitory character, yet as one of her close friends says 'the life she should have had was looking her in the face'. Joyce held down steady responsible jobs, she was no addict or alcoholic, all factors, which make her ultimate lonely demise even more unbelievable and mysterious. As Morley digs deeper we find out more about that when situations or people didn't work for her she moved on, she lost her mother when she quite young was brought up by her much older her sisters and was bit ashamed of her father being a manual worker.

Morley's use of reconstruction scenes bring Joyce and the period itself to life and she was always moving from place to place and boyfriend to boyfriend, as one friend says, contradictory facts about Joyce's life are revealed. What her explorations uncover confounds any expectation we may have about a 38-year-old woman found dead alone in her flat in London. As the film progresses we realize the more details uncovered about Joyce the less we actually know about her. Joyce's life becomes darker and more complicated and yet unknowable all we can do is guess what happened to her.

Part detective part film noir. Throughout, despite hearing from friends ex-partners and work colleagues Joyce Carol Vincent remains such an enigma that we never 'get to know' her in any real sense. As we find out what we can about this literal invisible woman - over three years her body had decomposed so much only bones and teeth were left for any form of forensic examination, we are left to wonder as much about ourselves and the society we live in, as we are about the young woman's life we see redirected.

About Zawe Ashton

Zawe Ashton Graduated from Manchester Metropolitan University in 2006 with a degree in acting and later became writer in residence at Manchester's Contact Theatre. Since making *Dreams of a Life* Ashton has been appeared regularly on British television and recently performed onstage alongside Uzo Aduba in *The Maids* at Trafalgar Studios in London. She has directed two short films and is currently on screens in *Nocturnal Animals* by Tom Ford.

By Karen Alexander, Independent film and moving image curator and educator

Part of the BFI Black Star season, taking place UK-wide, supported by Film Hub North West Central, part of the Film Audience Network, awarding funds from the National Lottery.