

Spencer's "The Ninth Cloud"

By Maria Giese for IndieWire

2013 brings a new cinematic gem, "The Ninth Cloud," directed by Jane Spencer. This exquisite film follows a beautiful, dreamy, yet doomed young woman to glorify the fleeting, transitory moments of her final days in 1990's London and ultimately depict a new kind of feminist heroism.

Spencer's multi-layered film is woven with themes from Djuna Barnes to Beaudelaire, and it traverses the landscapes of Marcel Carne, "Les Enfants du Paradis" and Antonioni's "Blow Up." What makes it so exceptional is seeing them reimaged through this director's effortless lens. The result is radical new indie cinema for the new millennium. "The Ninth Cloud" is at once tender and deeply moving, yet it manages to reject romantic notions of existential self-pity to glorify its heroine and uplift its audience.

Spencer uses swift brushstroke imagery from the frames of a 16mm camera to interweave clipped close-ups with dreamy long shots expressing an ephemeral modernity through the eyes of the lovely, waif-like sprite, Zena (MEGAN MACZKO). Zena is a girl entering womanhood, who has lost her way and who is searching for meaning in a new city, a beautifully recreated London in a cinematic homage to the 1960's.

Zena is one-part Holly Golightly from "Breakfast at Tiffany's" and one part Beatrice Dalle from Beineix's unforgettable, Betty Blue. Spencer places her delicate main character in a world that is both as romantic and sordid as that of Garance, the beautiful courtesan who is loved by four men in 19th century Paris in "Les Enfants du Paradis."

We are introduced to Zena under the ethereal sound of a woman humming—Spencer's work with composer, Marcel Vaid, is particularly transcendent—Proust wrote about "keys of tenderness," and they are captured here. Zena is seen in close up—pretty and flighty, flicking straight, brown, baby-bangs from her porcelain, near-translucent face as she skips and trips down London streets, musing Ophelia-like, and day-dreaming, smiling at her own inner thoughts, often looking up at the sky for something, something... But what?

In voice over, she confides to us, in a soft American accent, occasionally addressing the camera: "I have come to seek a new life after something terrible happened in my own life. A plane fell out of the sky..." Zena is a recent orphan—she has suffered a sudden tragedy—the loss of both mother and father in a mysterious plane crash. She is a person uprooted both from home and society, and from conventional sanity, and she keeps her gaze on the sky, hoping it will all come back to her.

She has moved to London in search of a new life, an anchor, meaning. She is staying in a rough apartment with three female roommates—including one who wakes up screaming in the middle of the night—every night (Elana Krausz). And during the day, while she

waits to receive a vaguely promised trust fund, she wanders around this strange, new city where she finds herself torn between two worlds: that of bohemian street artists and London's decadent upper-class.

Zena is in love with one of those bohemians, "Bob" (MICHAEL MADSEN), a "gay" poet who is fully consumed with his own manic delusions of grandeur. He is trying to transform his small street community into a living theatre, a universe of his own that he can rule over; having been rejected from society—he longs to create his own. His self-proclaimed persona as "director" appears to be accepted by the artists and lowlifes who surround him like supplicants, while he lounges around "reading" Cocteau's "Orphee."

Zena's aristocrat friends seem even less connected to reality than she or Bob, and are certainly no more contented. They spend their hours partying around the clock while "reading" Sartre, even less convincingly than Bob. Spencer is brilliant at capturing close-up clips of absurdist conversation during parties reminiscent of those from "La Dolce Vita," "Blow Up" and even "Breakfast at Tiffany's."

We enter London's club scene where we meet Brett (LEO GREGORY), a vulgarian who is desperately trying to contrive a place for himself in the tabloid news, but whose even richer relative, "Guy Wordsword," always manages to upstage him with spectacular spreads that proclaim him "Humanitarian of the Year," and the such.

The real star of the scene is Jonny (JEAN HUGUES ANGLADE), previously from "La Reine Margot," "Betty Blue" and "Killing Zoe," who drinks his way through his angst as a disappointed artist, trapped in this world of superficiality. He is the only one who sees Zena's fragility and authenticity and pursues her, even throwing over the wannabe "It Girl," Bumble (ELODIE BETRISEY) who trails him hopelessly. Jonny, unfamiliar with women of such real vulnerability, tries his best lines to seduce her, "Without your body, how shall I find you?"

Zena, unmoved, wanders back to her pathetic Bob, who could never be interested in someone so real, yet so like himself—so lost and disconnected. In fact, the only character whose feet appear solidly adhered to the firmament is a boy refugee from the Congo who lost his leg in an explosion and desperately needs a prosthesis or face death.

Zena, for her part, defines herself through the lens of her vision of "Bob" as an iconoclast, who, as it turns out, is neither gay, nor a director, and evinces no signs even of being much of a poet either. He's an American transplant from the Mid-western industrial city of Milwaukee, famous for its heavy-duty industrial electric power tools, hammers, sanders, drills and screwdrivers. He has fled to London to seek poetry, but has brought Milwaukee with him.

But love is blind, and Zena will have no other. When Bob points to the crippled boy and launches into a litany, saying that all that matters is money in this world—that money alone could save the boy, Zena takes it as her cue. She now knows how to find salvation: she will get the money, save the boy, and find both a home and meaning in life in the

arms of Bob, her savior.

She will raise the money (8,000 pounds) to pay for a prosthetic leg for the boy. "I know people who would help," she tells Bob passionately, thinking of her rich friends. "From now on, I MOVE!"

She heads back uptown to ask Brett and Jonny for the money. Once she departs, Brett recognizes sinister possibilities. He will give the money to the boy with a great media storm of his own devising, and finally out-do his philanthropic cousin, claiming the title, "Humanitarian of the Year," for himself. Prodded by Brett, Jonny finds Zena and proposes the deal, the publicity stunt, with which Zena is happy to comply.

A media circus takes place (a hilarious scene exposing the universal farce of human primate behavior), and everyone gets a taste of reality that drives him and her closer to existential crisis. As Zena says, "You know we are on a planet that is hurtling through space at 60,000 miles per minute and we are never where we think we are."

Spencer, whose previous feature film, "Little Noises," (Crispin Glover & Tatum O'Neal) was a hit when it premiered at Sundance IN THE 90's, is fascinated by the glorification of mediocrity in life through detailing daily life in a dream-like fashion that is magnetic to watch. This quality defines the tonality of her work and both challenges traditional notions of cinema and gives birth to a new perspective on art. Likewise, in "The Ninth Cloud," she glorifies the vulnerable Zena through a nuanced appreciation for her ability to "see." In this way, Spencer records her character's fleeting, childlike, and magical perception of the world around her.

Without missing embellishments of irony and humor in her scenes, Spencer creates a new version of cinematic impressionism that eschews certain visual conventions that have once again come to dominate the film world. She appreciates beauty in brief moments as fleeting as a painter's sudden awareness of reflected sunlight glancing off rippling water--impressionism. Sometimes this can lead the viewer to meditate on dark, existentialist thoughts, other times we are happy to find ourselves simply lost in Zena's childlike wanderings.

In the end, Zena's eyes-toward-the-sky, head-in-the-clouds musings lead her nowhere, but Spencer's recording of her journey becomes our gift. Zena had been searching for a home she may not find because for her "home" is a place of profound safety. Spencer reminds us of Djuna Barnes' words: that while "there is no place like home," that may just be so "chiefly because here we can best forget."

We leave the theatre with Zena's words resounding: "The sky is not blue. It just looks that way to hide the black. And Bob's not Bob."

