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Movie review: 'Zenith'

To say the least, writer-director Vladan Nikolic's "Zenith" is challenging and elusive; it evokes a bleak view of the human condition and a sense that pervasive paranoia might well be justified.

By Kevin Thomas

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In a post-industrial future, humanity has been genetically altered to experience perpetual happiness and has been robbed of much of its language; one individual remarks, "What you cannot express in language does not exist in human minds."



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This is the premise visionary writer-director Vladan Nikolic uses for his nightmarish "Zenith." He drew inspiration from a series of experiments conducted by psychology professor Stanley Milgram that were designed to determine whether the participants would obey an authority figure who gave orders that directly conflicted with their consciences.



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Jason Robards III, who has the same sort of authoritative screen presence as his eminent father and grandfather, plays a guru who becomes obsessed with pursuing a shadowy conspiracy involving a small group of all-powerful individuals. Decades later, his son Jack (Peter Scanavino), a neurosurgeon, finds himself afflicted with a rare form of epilepsy that allows him to understand words that no one else can anymore.

Tormented and afflicted by seizures, Jack peddles pain-causing drugs designed to relieve the numbness people feel living in a state of perpetual happiness. One day a stranger hands Jack a videotape that had belonged to his late father — it is the first of 10 that could reveal the nature of the conspiracy that has plunged humanity into an intellectually stunted state. Many of Nikolic's concerns and motifs are familiar yet their expression here is vivid and idiosyncratic, designed to intensify a highly contemporary concern about the loss of freedom and power of the individual to secret, manipulative cartels.

"Zenith." No MPAA rating. Running time: 1 hour, 35 minutes. At the Downtown Independent, Los Angeles.

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