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## Pain game

By V.A. MUSETTO

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Welcome to the year 2044, as envisioned by the sci-fi thriller **"Zenith."** The populace has been genetically altered to be happy all the time -- but that creates what one character calls "permanent numbness." To feel alive, people seek pain through the side effects of out-of-date prescription drugs. Only then are they truly happy.

Directed by Siberian-born New Yorker Vladan Nikolic, "Zenith" stars Peter Scanavino as a drug dealer, Jason Robards III as his deceased dad and Ana Asensio as a prostitute named Lisa.

Over brunch at the Cowgirl Hall of Fame in the West Village last week, Asensio told me that she won the role in a roundabout way. Years earlier, she had offered Spanish tutoring to Robards, who comes from a family of thespians; and when it came time to cast "Zenith," he recommended her.

Asensio grew up in Madrid. She came to the US four days before 9/11, and has lived in New York off and on ever since. Right now, she and her filmmaking husband, Craig Macneill, call Brooklyn Heights home.

Back in Spain, she has done stage, film and TV, including a one-time appearance (as a prostitute!) on the country's version of "The Golden Girls," which stars Almodovar muse Carmen Maura, but, luckily for Spaniards, not Betty White.

Asensio's US flicks include **"The Afterlight"** (2009), directed by her husband and featuring Rip Torn (it screened briefly at the Quad last year). And in September she produced and starred in "The Diva," a one-woman show in the East Village.

"Zenith" is the first time Asensio has indulged in screen nudity. "Always in the past I said no, but this movie is so avant garde in so many ways that I said I have to be part of that. So I went for it." Still, she admits, her husband "doesn't feel that comfortable" seeing her in the buff on the big screen.

Asensio's next project is an "almost autobiographical" movie called **"Breathe."** She's written the script, and will direct and star. But her husband won't be looking over her shoulder as she calls the shots. "I don't think that kind of thing works."

"Zenith" will unroll at 8 p.m. Wednesday through Jan. 26 at the Kraine Theater, 85 E. Fourth St.; 212-777-6088.

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