

**T**HE day I arrange to meet film-maker Carol Morley at the 55th BFI London Film Festival's flagship cinema, the mighty Odeon Leicester Square is teeming with PR people, TV crews and film-makers. Several interviews are going on simultaneously. Outside, Westminster Council has decided this would be a good time to redesign Leicester Square so cranes, diggers and several pneumatic drills are noisily at work on the task.

So I am worried whether I will be able to hear what she has to say about her extraordinary new film, *Dreams of a Life*. But Morley, whose feature *Edge* screened at last year's LFF, reassures me. 'Don't worry,' she says, 'I'm quite loud.'

Indeed, whatever other interesting colours may be streaked into her short blonde hair, shrinking violet is not one of them.

*Dreams of a Life* is a docudrama about a macabre footnote to London's history: on 26 January 2006, the body of a woman was found in a bedsit above Wood Green Shopping Centre. The TV was on, as were the lights and the heating. When the bailiffs broke in (the rent was seriously in arrears), they discovered Joyce Carol Vincent. She had been dead for three years. Her skeleton, said one observer, had crumbled away into a dusty outline which 'seemed to melt into the carpet'.

Morley, the younger sister of music journalist Paul Morley, came across the story when she picked up a copy of *The Sun* on the Tube. 'There was no picture of Joyce, there was just one of the bedsit,' she says. 'I became obsessed with it. They had her down as 40 [she was actually 38] and that was all. They didn't mention whether she was black or white – there

# Mystery of a life

Carol Morley talks to **Nick Roddick** about her extraordinary docudrama about the woman found in a Wood Green flat three years after her death, with the TV still on

*Zawe Ashton plays Joyce Carol Vincent with great delicacy in the film's re-enactments*

was nothing. What fascinated me was that, when they found the skeleton, it was apparent that she had been wrapping Christmas presents when she died.'

Morley placed an ad on the side of a London taxi, another in the *Evening Standard*, and finally began to piece together Joyce's life, interviewing those who had known her. The result – which took the tenacious film-maker five years to put together – goes way beyond reportage. It's a personal history that almost unbelievably manages to be heartbreaking, life-affirming, funny and scary while at the same time offering a disturbing portrait of modern life.

**'It sounds a bit corny but I think it celebrates her life rather than her death'**

'I suppose it looked like a story where nobody cared,' says Morley. 'And it also looked like a story about somebody you might not bother caring about.'

'People were blogging, "She must have been one miserable bitch!" But actually it's the opposite of that: the reason she had been neglected for three years was not that she was awful and that people didn't care about her: they all thought she was off having a better life than they were.'

*Dreams of a Life* skilfully mixes interviews with the people who knew and loved Joyce – in particular an early boyfriend, Martin, who has a habit of laughing

nervously at the end of an answer – with home-movie footage, photographs and extensive re-enactments in which Joyce is played with great delicacy by up-and-coming actress Zawe Ashton.

Not producing the expected downbeat chronicle of a death unfortold was important to Morley. 'I always felt I didn't want to wallow in grimness,' she says. 'I'm not that sort of person. There's definitely humour in it and in the characters she met. As I got to know her and them, I realised it was as much about them as it was about her. It sounds a bit corny, but I think it celebrates her life rather than her death.'

## THREE MORE NEW BRITISH CINEMA FILMS

**SHOCK HEAD SOUL**  
Experimental film-maker Simon Pummell's poetic film about lawyer Daniel Paul Schreiber, who spent nine years in an institution after becoming convinced he was receiving messages from God.  
**Thu 20 Oct, NFT1, 18.30;**  
**Fri 21 Oct, NFT1, 15.45**

**SKET**  
A tough trip into the world of London's gang culture. If that sounds like every other new British film, there's two reasons you'd be wrong: this one's about girl gangs; and it's really good.  
**Sat 22 Oct, Vue 3, 18.30;**  
**Sun 23 Oct, Ritzy Screen 2, 21.00**

**WEEKEND**  
A gay romance about how what started as a one-night stand develops, via a process of exploration and excitement, into a strong new relationship.  
**Sat 15 Oct, NFT1, 18.30;**  
**Mon 17 Oct, NFT3, 15.45**

*Dreams of a Life* doesn't solve the mystery of Joyce's death, but what makes the film so unforgettable is the fact that it forces us to think about how delicate a thing identity can be. 'The major theme of the film for me is disconnection and connection,' says Morley. 'I think it tells a story about our age, because we live in an era where we're all supposedly so connected through technology. That was why I was so passionate to make the film. Weirdly, she lived above a huge shopping centre that about a quarter of a million people go to every week. I do think it's a very modern story, that someone could be so isolated in such an age.'