



## [Dreams of a Life](#)

Screened at [Cornerhouse, Manchester](#)

Reviewed by [Anne Ryan](#) December 2011

In a week in which Hollywood spent millions publicising the multi-stellar film 'New Year's Eve' this British production succeeds in showing the real message of the festive season – the importance of our common humanity.

Carol Morley's drama documentary attempts to solve a mystery – how can a young, vibrant woman die alone, surrounded by Christmas presents and lie undiscovered for three years. At a time when people have hundreds of 'friends', it makes you wonder how connected we really are.

Morley read this newspaper story in 2003 and was unable to forget Joyce Carol Vincent's fate. She spent years interviewing Joyce's friends who guiltily remember a bubbly, vivacious and attractive woman with whom they had just lost touch.

In silent scenes, backed by Barry Adamson's haunting score, we see Joyce's life, as portrayed by Zawe Ashton. She was a confident, talented woman with ambitions to be a singer. She dated a series of men in the City and all remember her with love. So how did she end up alone in a flat above a shopping centre? She did not realise her dreams, but did her story have to end so tragically? Was there something wrong with her, with her particular set of friends or with society as a whole? Do we concentrate too much on the surface attraction of a person and did Joyce retreat when she could no longer live up to her own image?

Many of her friends, particularly her boyfriends, seem to feel guilty. They had enjoyed her company, but perhaps only as a decorative companion – a Sade wannabe – who personified the materialism and celebrity culture which began in the 1980s. When the real Joyce, estranged from her family, and facing life with unfulfilled dreams, had problems there seemed to be no-one to whom she could turn.

Carol Morley does not solve the mystery, perhaps because of the refusal of her family and some friends to talk to the film-maker, perhaps because there is no answer.

This is not a comfortable film to watch – I found it difficult to get the story out of my head and

found myself asking painful questions about Joyce's life, and my own. But it is a film I would highly recommend. Like me, you may well find yourself thinking of the Christmas presents that Joyce wrapped on her last night of life and wonder why the intended recipients did not ask themselves 'where is Joyce?'

The classic Christmas film is 'It's a Wonderful Life', where a man is saved from suicide by the recognition that he is part of a community. Joyce Carol Vincent was truly alone when she lost her grip on life, and there was no one to help and no community to care.

So in a strange way 'Dreams of Life' is also a Christmas film – and like Capra's classic it will make you want to reach out to those you love, and hold on to them.