

DVD Review: 'The Exploding Girl' Provides Great Showcase For Zoe Kazan

Submitted by [mattmovieman](#) [1] on September 19, 2010 - 10:24pm

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CHICAGO – At a time when many so-called independent film distributors are following the mold of mainstream companies, Oscilloscope Pictures is a breath of exhilaratingly fresh air. Its films range from electrifying shoestring documentaries like “Dear Zachary” and priceless foreign imports like “Kisses” to major award season contenders such as “The Messenger” and “Wendy and Lucy.”

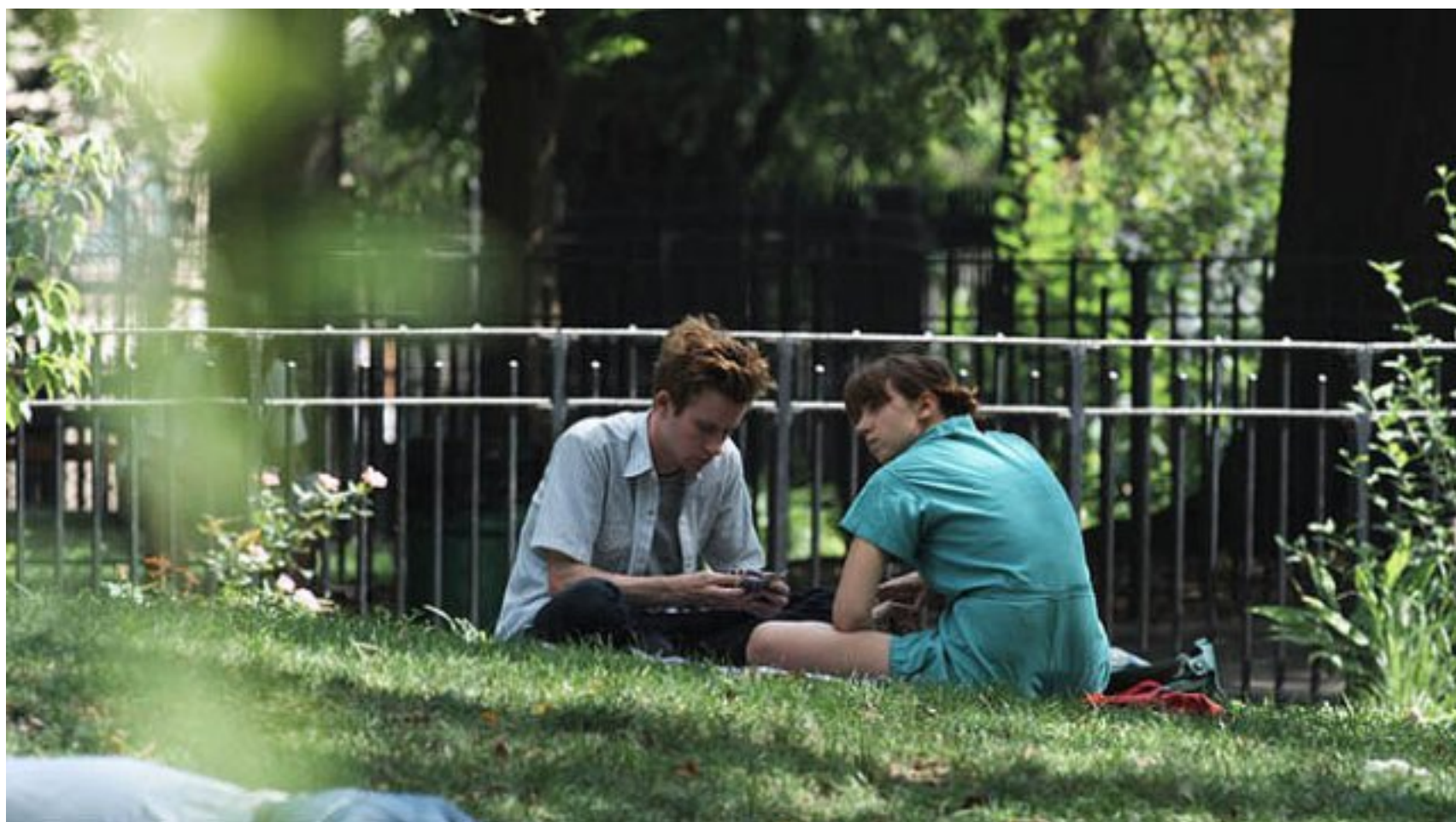
All of these films are independent in a way that few commercial entertainments are ever allowed to be. They are each artworks more than entertainments, and often paint riveting and provocative portraits of the society in which we live, devoid of any stereotypical speechifying. When a big star signs on for one of these pictures, the filmmakers often allow the performer to work at a raw and intimate level rarely achievable in Hollywood (much like how HBO brings out the best in every actor, from Claire Danes to Al Pacino).



DVD Rating: **4.5/5.0**

Though she is the granddaughter of legendary filmmaker Elia Kazan, 27-year-old Zoe Kazan isn't quite a household name. Her star has been on the rise in a variety of acclaimed stage roles, and she has even stolen scenes in a few pictures, particularly “Revolutionary Road.” But Bradley Rust Gray's wonderful character vignette “The Exploding Girl” provides her with the first great cinematic showcase for her abilities, in much the same way “Wendy and Lucy” gave Michelle Williams the opportunity to deliver the performance of her young career. Gray's visual poetry offers an ideal framework for Kazan's face, which proves to be a hypnotic canvas. She plays Ivy, a college student attempting to enjoy her spring break while at home in New York City.

After her longtime friend, Al (Mark Rendall), discovers that his parents have rented out his room, Ivy freely allows him to stay at her place. Yet it's clear to the viewer from the get-go that Al may be developing feelings for Ivy that transcend the boundaries of friendship. Their casual playfulness often seems to carry the vague aura of flirtation. As Ivy tries to remain connected with her increasingly distant boyfriend through a series of agonizing phone calls, most of which lead to an answering machine, her emotional state becomes increasingly fragile. None of this has a positive impact on Ivy's private struggle to maintain control over her epilepsy.

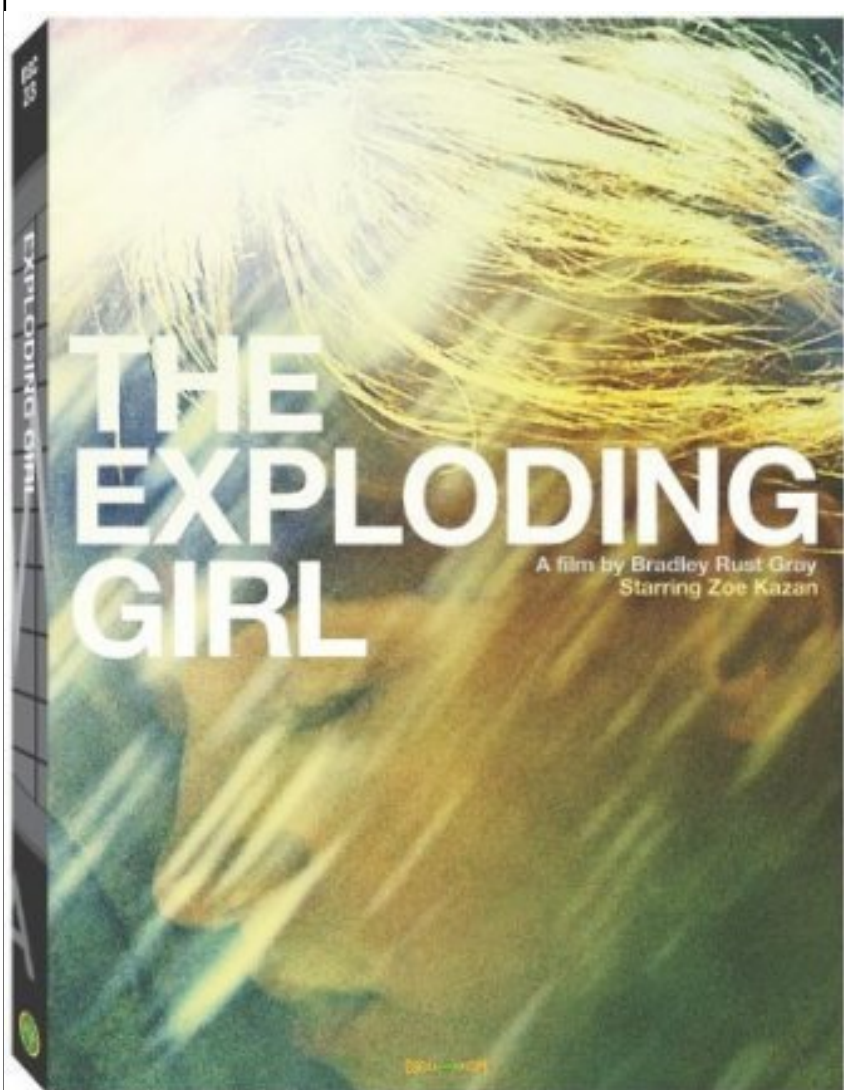


Mark Rendall and Zoe Kazan star in Bradley Rust Gray's *The Exploding Girl*.

Photo credit: Oscilloscope Laboratories

Gray does a beautiful job of conveying the bittersweet uncertainty that twentysomethings feel as their life pauses at an eternal crossroads. The disconnect between college life and home life forces the characters to spend much of their time wandering the streets, yet Ivy and Al don't at all fit the stereotype of aimless, self-absorbed young adults. Despite all of her internal battles, Ivy exudes great strength, maintaining an external calm even as a storm rages beneath. Kazan is utterly mesmerizing in moments where the camera focuses in on her face, subtly exposing the fear and vulnerability lying behind her controlled façade. The filmmakers refuse to exploit Ivy's epilepsy, and keep most of her seizures offscreen, save for one exquisitely framed shot late in the picture.

Cinematographer Eric Lin works wonders on a low budget, capturing several breathtaking images, including the opening shot of Kazan asleep in a car as streams of light soar across her window, while the ambient sound resembles somewhat of a hushed waterfall. Gray also deftly explores the current culture of relationships so heavily reliant on technological devices for communication. Few films have observed so impeccably how a heart can be broken or mended by the vibration of a cell phone, and how the failure to answer a call has now taken on a far more personal nature since, as Kazan puts it in the extras, "we're ostensibly so available." This lovely little gem of a film simmers rather than erupts, but Kazan's star certainly seems poised on the brink of becoming a supernova.



The Exploding Girl was released on DVD on Sept. 7th, 2010.

Photo credit: Oscilloscope Laboratories

"The Exploding Girl" is presented in its original 1.78:1 aspect ratio, and comes in a typically gorgeous case, since Oscilloscope has made a habit of packaging its films as if they were classic LP records. The special features are brief but rewarding. A 13-minute featurette follows Eric Hynes of "Reverse Shot," as he interviews Kazan and Gray on the streets of New York, as if attempting to recreate the atmosphere of the film (the lens is even self-consciously flared at one point). Kazan says that Gray's work with non-actors has influenced the language he utilizes to direct his cast, and allowed her to take an entirely fresh approach to her character. Gray's goal is to combine the traits of each actor with the characters that they play, resulting in more authentic, unaffected performances. During the shoot, Kazan found herself creating moments for her character that wouldn't end up in the finished film, but would inform her work nonetheless, such as her explorations of Ivy's playful side. She says that the experience ended up helping her during the production of a recent play. The two close collaborators reminisce about various happy accidents that occurred during the shoot, such as the fittingly blaring appearance of a fire truck during Ivy's pivotal talk with her boyfriend. They also admit that all of the film's subway shots were stolen by a camera snugly placed in a duffel bag.

There's also a delirious music video, "Thursday" by Asobi Seksu, which is performed by soandbrad, the band that Ivy and Al listen to together on his iPod. The most intriguing extra is Gray's 1997 short film, "Flutter," which he made at the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts. Based on a Paul Klee etching, this simple tale shares some notable elements with "The Exploding Girl," and even includes the same visual motif of feathers during its end credits sequence. The disc also includes trailers for a few other Oscilloscope releases well worth seeking out: "The Maid," "Treeless Mountain," and of course, the woefully under-appreciated "Wendy and Lucy."

'The Exploding Girl' is released by Oscilloscope Laboratories and stars Zoe Kazan, Mark Rendall and Maryann Urbano. It was written and directed by Bradley Rust Gray. It was released on Sept. 7th, 2010. It is not rated.

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