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The Black Monk

Tibaldo-Bongiorno, Marylou

Primary Category: [Performing Arts](#) / [Film, TV, Video](#)

Genre: [Film](#)

Annotated by:

[Glass, Guy](#)

- [Depression](#)
 - [Medical Education](#)
 - [Mental Illness](#)
 - [Obsession](#)
 - [Patient Experience](#)
 - [Psychiatry](#)
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- Date of entry: Feb-20-2018
 - Last revised: Feb-20-2018

Summary

As the film opens, George Anderson tells us he has been advised to treat his anxiety by going “to some island to rest.” We see him arrive by ferry in Staten Island where he has arranged to spend several weeks at the beautiful home of his father’s best friend. There, he renews his friendship with the friend’s daughter, Maggie. We discover that George, a filmmaker, dropped out of medical school, and that Maggie is now a doctor. We learn from the start that, though they have not seen each other for ten years, there is a longstanding mutual romantic attraction.

One day, while walking around the house’s lush gardens, George suddenly and improbably sees a monk. We are made to understand this is not the first time this has occurred, although at this stage George still recognizes it as a “mirage.” However, when the monk foretells a “grand brilliant future” for George and entrusts him with a divine mission, George is inspired. He becomes obsessed with attending church, and we learn he has not been sleeping. In his religious fervor he calls Maggie “disgusting” because she performs abortions.

Maggie becomes aware that something is not quite right. We learn too that George enlisted in the army and resigned under suspicious circumstances. Other details about his past are mysterious. The relationship between George and Maggie intensifies. Meanwhile, a friend warns Maggie that she has witnessed George saying peculiar things about a monk and smiling inappropriately. Finally, in Maggie’s bedroom, George has a full-fledged psychotic episode as he hallucinates the monk in front of her. She accuses him of “becoming schizophrenic,” and begs him to see a psychiatrist. He responds by accusing her of trying to drain him of his inspiration, packs up his belongings, and, despite her entreaties, leaves.

Commentary

This film is loosely based on Anton Chekhov’s short story [The Black Monk](#). The merit of Chekhov’s stories for teaching about the human condition is attested to by the large quantity of them that are annotated on the Database. It almost goes without saying that much of Chekhov’s output reveals the fine powers of observation of

a physician.

The Black Monk turns out to be an excellent subject for film adaptation. The filmmakers (also co-screenwriters) have managed to tap into some of Chekhov's quiriness and wit, and the result is quite entertaining. They have also done a great service by providing a valuable tool for teaching about mental illness.

Miscellaneous

Jerome & Marylou Bongiorno (filmmakers) on why they made *The Black Monk*:

“As filmmakers, we are drawn to the work of Anton Chekhov, who was a physician and social justice activist who suffered and died from tuberculosis, elements which inform this short story. We were inspired by the universal search for meaning and created a contemporary setting infused with our social justice film themes.

The film is an indie production produced by our company, Bongiorno Productions. It was created in association with the Staten Island Museum and supported by grants from cultural and other foundations. The NJ Council for the Humanities (NEH) grant funded outreach with medical schools to use the film in their curricula.”

Anthony Tobia, M.D., Department of Psychiatry, Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, on how he uses *The Black Monk* to teach medical students:

“During their 2nd year basic science curriculum, film clips are shown to depict fictional case accounts of mental illness. The clips form the basis of our integrated cases/problem-based learning didactic. Specifically, after watching a clip, students break up into small groups to address specific questions posed by the course director. After providing their answers, another clip is shown that demonstrates the “correct answer” and provides additional information upon which the next series of questions are based.

In their 3rd year, students are assigned to watch *The Black Monk* again and are expected to attend a didactic called “Filmulation” prepared to discuss its content from a clinical perspective. Selected sessions of “Filmulation” are broadcast over Periscope® (@ATobiaMD) to ensure distance education of students at different clinical sites.”

The film's website includes a link to the short story, and how to order a [DVD or streaming file](#).

The following is a [trailer for the film](#).

Year

2017

Studio

Bongiorno Productions

Running Time (in minutes)

105

Based on

The Black Monk by Anton Chekhov