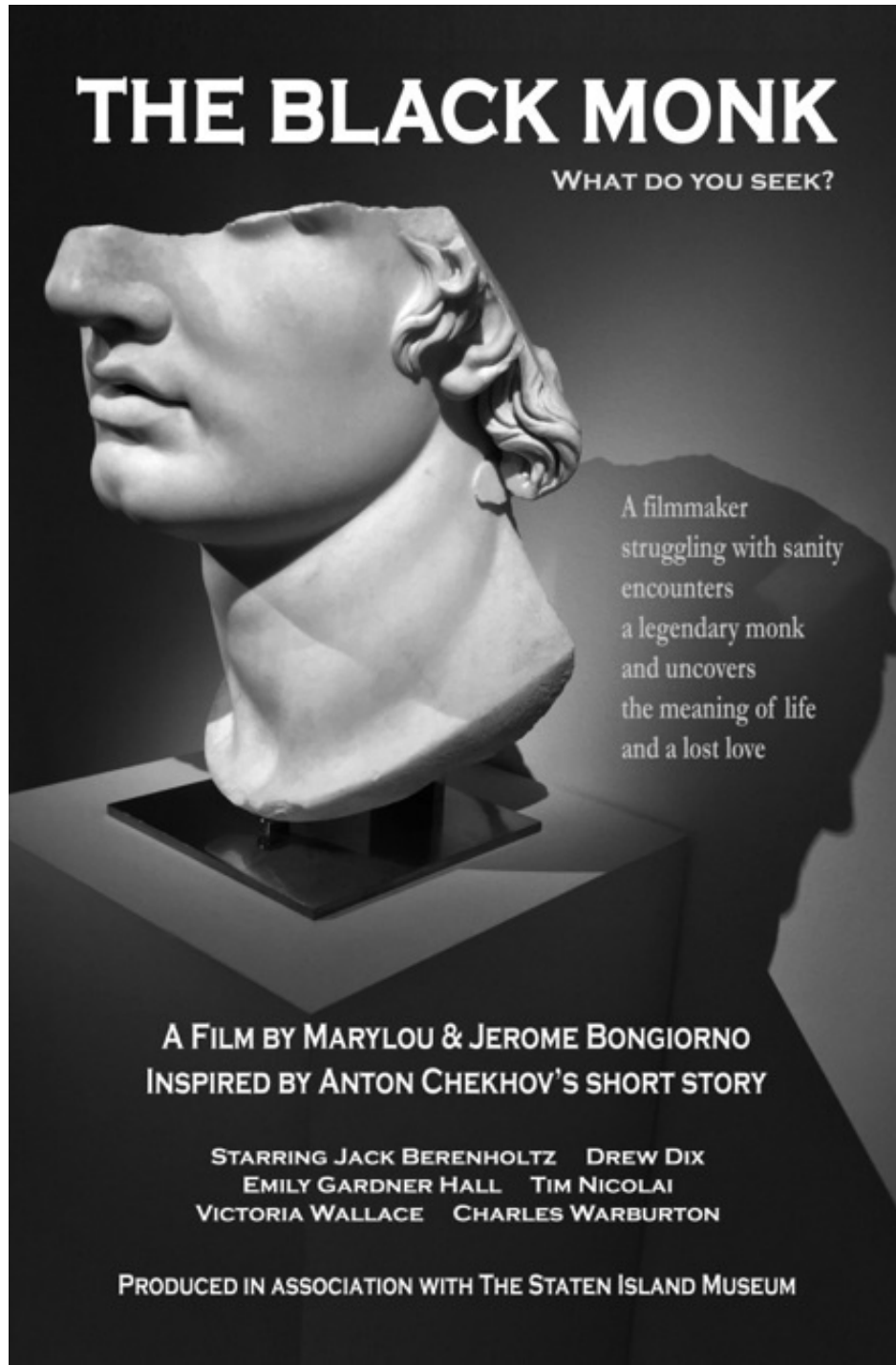


Upcoming Screenings: Chekhov's "The Black Monk," November 14, 7 PM, Montclair State University

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"The Black Monk," a loose adaptation of Anton Chekhov's short story by Newark-based husband-and-wife filmmakers Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno, is a beautifully shot, erudite, heartbreaking tale of

misbegotten love. Set in Jerome's native Staten Island, the film is small in scale but consistently rich in themes. Chekhov's spartan 1894 work tells of a scholar who marries his childhood sweetheart, has hallucinatory conversations with a worldly apparition (the titular character) and then falls into madness. The Bongiorno's have taken these basic elements and flooded them with modern and not-so-modern dilemmas: families that feud over politics (a young liberal doctor, her conservative father and fiancée); unrequited attraction; youths torn between bourgeois comforts and following their artistic passions.

The dialogue is certainly on the verbose side; the Bongiorno's are proud fans of Eric Rohmer. But the action is never too stagy, because they use lush, serene backdrops—the courtyards of the new Staten Island Museum and the Chinese Scholars Garden—and vibrant tracking shots for their most revelatory scenes. There's always a piece of Buddhist sculpture or a reservoir or swath of violets to gaze at, as the central duo, George (Jack Berenholtz) and Maggie (Emily Gardner Hall) flirt and tease and argue their way through these wondrously uninhabited establishments. (There is something undoubtedly romantic about having a whole museum or botanical garden to yourself, for a full day of intoxicating conversation, with the love of your life).

The film screens Tuesday night, November 14, at 7 PM, at Montclair State University's [Film Institute](#), in the SCM Presentation Hall, room 1040.

"The Black Monk" has screened at various colleges and—because of its sensitive treatment of schizophrenia—at psychiatric and medical institutes. It has won praise from a slew of scholars, including Rosamund Bartlett, author of *Chekhov: Scenes From a Life*, who said the film "works much better than any period adaptation. The filmmakers include the deft touch of subtly incorporating the [Gaetano] Braga serenade, which is such an important element of the story's intrinsic musicality."

There are a lot of hot button topics discussed in "The Black Monk"—abortion, the Iraq war, urban development, corrupt politicians, race riots. But the most scintillating message the film delivers is a warning against megalomania. According to George, the ghostly monk only makes an appearance once every 1,000 years, and so George understandably feels special that the monk "chooses" him to talk to. George, a budding documentarian (the Bongiorno's, who have made several acclaimed documentaries, tend to follow the mantra of "Write what you know about!") is a gentle soul, a lover of the arts, an academic—just like Maggie, who first spurns and then adores him. But unlike Maggie, who is a card-carrying lefty, he is torn on the abortion issue, deeply devout and not as dismissive of war (we are told he almost fought in the Iraq war before turning to filmmaking). He also has a high opinion of himself which only grows more inflated when the monk—whom one would expect to impart the young, fledgling George with formidable wisdom—preaches to George that he's a genius, better than everyone else.

This is the tragic element of the picture, and the Bongiorno's pull it off vividly. As George slips further into disarray, the Bongiorno's retain the finest speech of Chekhov's piece, wherein George castigates Maggie for trying to medicate him, to rein him into mediocrity. They raise some wrenching questions: to what extent should we let the ones we love obsess over their passions, and when do we need to pull them back into reality, and what furor do we risk unleashing by mollifying their intensity, however brilliant? Rather than end the story with a horrific death, as Chekhov did, they close on a far sadder note of bitter isolation. And what better place to stage this melancholy closing shot than a near-empty Staten Island ferry ride?

Asked which Rohmer films were used as a blueprint for "The Black Monk" and other movies, Jerome Bongiorno, responding via email, said the pair particularly like the ones that "don't have high production values. These films, like '**Rendez-vous in Paris**,' inspire us to make films on any size budget. His use of actor blocking and camera movement is exemplary. He doesn't use a lot of cuts, he focuses on direction/composition and not on editing. And watching a film like '**My Night at Maud's**,' you get a sense of how to embed important universal themes without being too pedantic."

Nineteenth-century literature has also been an inspiration. In the 2015 omnibus **“Love & Arguments,”** Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Henry James’ *Washington Square* and Edith Wharton’s *The Other Two* are among the classics alluded to in various short films about class, familial and racial conflicts. (One of these films, coincidentally, starred one of my old bandmates, the very talented keyboardist and music producer [Adam Chimera](#)).

“Using those stories gave us a launching point, in terms of structure,” Jerome said. “But any conversational points in the dialogue that dealt with politics, inner city poverty, God, religion, come from the questions we are constantly thinking about/dealing with in our daily life.”

Indeed, throughout “The Black Monk,” the Bongiorno sometimes reference their own past work, in one case quite explicitly. Two characters discuss, summarize and praise the Bongiorno’s 2007 documentary **“Revolution ’67,”** examining the 1967 Newark race riots. (This self-promotion might be annoying if “Revolution ’67” wasn’t in fact so powerful and multi-faceted). Maggie’s father criticizes the poor people in Newark as being lazy, bringing urban blight upon themselves, a viewpoint shared by many of the rioters’ real-life antagonists. And Maggie’s friend, who is African-American, lambasts Maggie’s fiancée—a rich real estate developer—for only working in the inner city and not *living* there, among the citizens. This issue is addressed outright in **“The Rule,”** the second in the Bongiorno’s “3Rs Trilogy” of documentaries.

In a phone interview, Marylou Bongiorno herself mentioned this disconnect as a prevalent socioeconomic problem in Newark. While “Revolution ’67” is about the despair, crime and poverty that left Newark feeling hopeless and forgotten about for decades, “The Rule” (my favorite of the Bongiorno docs) is somewhat of an antidote, an offer of hope. It’s about a monastery school situated in one of Newark’s poorest neighborhoods, kept alive and fortified by a small selection of Benedictine monks who remained in Newark in the troubling years following the riots. They wanted to stay and help, and today the school is flourishing, though the film does not shy away from the school’s struggles and missteps. (Both films are currently shown on PBS, and “Revolution ’67” will be screened at St Peter’s University—the Bongiorno’s alma mater—on November 18 at 10 AM). The final film in the trilogy, **“Rust,”** about ways to reduce poverty in Newark, is in production.



“Revolution ’67” is most commendable for including several viewpoints on such a controversial subject. While

various community awareness groups, organizers and historians with first-hand knowledge of the riots are profiled, equal screen time is devoted to Paul Zigo, who served in the National Guard during that time. The police as well as the National Guard believed there were snipers on various Newark tenement rooftops, and so semi-automatic weapons were fired, killing and injuring residents. On-screen, Zigo staunchly denies the forces' use of these weapons and swears by the presence of snipers—despite much evidence to the contrary.

“The footage raised the question in Paul’s mind that there may not have been a sniper, that it could have been friendly fire,” said Marylou.

“Once we found footage of a Newark police officer using an automatic weapon, it was a revelation to us,” said Jerome. Marylou added that this footage was shown to Zigo post-filming; he was visibly stunned.

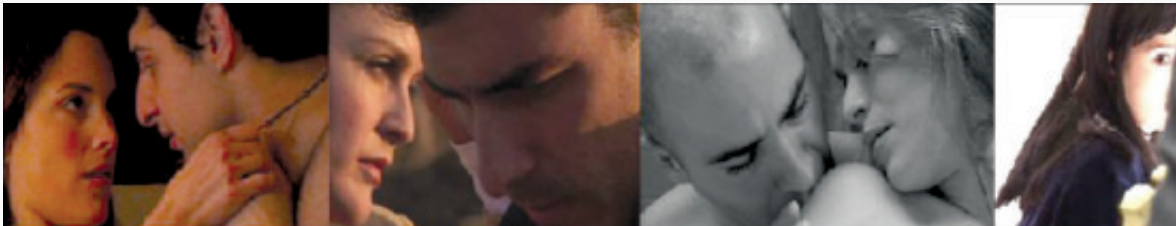
“Revolution '67” did not begin as a documentary.

The duo met at St. Peter’s “over a fetal pig,” said Marylou. “We both graduated as biologists.”

But film was their true calling, and Marylou ended up graduating from NYU’s Graduate Film School. While she was at NYU, she and Jerome, who are of Northern Italian and Sicilian descent, respectively, began making a short film assignment “about Jerome’s cousins of mother-son restaurateurs. They were such wonderful subjects, so open to our camera, so full of life, that we decided to expand the film to other men who had made their mothers part of their life’s work.”

Those men included Martin Scorsese, John Turturro, Rudy Giuliani (then New York City Mayor) and Pat DiNizio of the rock group The Smithereens. The resulting 1999 work, “**Mother-Tongue: Italian American Sons & Mothers,**” was shown on public television and nominated for an Emmy. It is an absolute must-see, if nothing else to witness Giuliani in rare humble mode, nervously revealing painful moments of his childhood (a lifelong Yankees fan, he was strung up from a tree by some bullying Brooklyn classmates). The press-shy Turturro gives a candid, playful interview with his mother, alternately bantering with and cowed by her; Scorsese discusses his mom’s disapproval of the bad language in his films—a disapproval immortalized during her brief scene in “**Casino**”; and—in the most wrenching sequence—the performance artist **Mario Giacalone** discusses how his sister’s untimely death brought him closer to his previously estranged mother.

Before Marylou graduated from NYU, the pair turned in “1967” as a short fiction thesis film. (Marylou said that Spike Lee served as mentor on the film). They planned to eventually develop the short into a feature film. They first completed a small-scale family drama in the vein of “**The Brothers McMullen,**” called “**Little Kings,**” shown on the festival circuit throughout 2003. (Marylou explained that there are no plans to distribute this film, or “Mother-Tongue,” in wider release because of expensive clearance rights).



Scenes from “Little Kings.” (Courtesy of <http://www.BongiornoProductions.com>.)

The film, which won the \$75,000 NYU Vague Award and premiered at the Hamptons International Film Festival, is about a tight-knit Staten Island Italian family. A soft-spoken Science teacher at a Catholic school is in love with his macho, philandering brother’s pregnant wife; he’s also preyed on by a lusty (and underage) student. Meanwhile, a

younger sibling has an illicit love affair with his own cousin (right under her domineering father's nose). Some of these situations are resolved in too pat a fashion, but the film is notable for breathing humanity into characters that could otherwise be loathsome. And it throws in a few distinctive quirks, such as the Lolita-esque student not only making passes at the teacher, but stealing his blood bag from an ambulance after an accident (long story) and using it for voodoo spells.

Asked if the incestuous plot line caused any controversy, Marylou replied, "We have stories of cousins marrying in our own families, so it was natural to insert that story point into the script."

Following "Little Kings," the Bongiornoes began researching the Newark riot feature film.

"We started interviewing, not really intending to do a doc, but little by little, the revelations that the research yielded, coupled with mind-blowing revelations from 9/11...well, let's put it this way, making 'Revolution '67' became a watershed for the awakening of our consciousness," said Marylou.

The Bongiornoes are staunch opponents of preaching to the choir, so "Revolution '67" has been shown to a wide variety of audiences, including a group of New Jersey police officers, a few of whom took issue with the film.

"A few officers opted not to watch the film with the group, but were vocal during the talkback about how the State Police are often negatively depicted," said Marylou. "The late historian Dr. Clement Price, who was such a gentle soul, and we, the filmmakers, ultimately welcomed the dialogue, wanting to hear all viewpoints. We addressed their perceptions of the film and explained our goal in creating it: not to vilify but to prevent this violence from recurring."



I asked the Bongiornoes if, for their next documentary, 2014's "The Rule," they considered similarly profiling some more controversial figures, namely former instructors at the Newark Abbey who *did* flee Newark after the riots, ostensibly for racist reasons. The movie notes the white flight that occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but Marylou said the directors genuinely preferred to focus on the people that persevered and made the school thrive (it now has a nearly 100% graduation rate, despite Newark's continuing drug and crime problems, and formerly troubled students are now class leaders, assisting the monks with disciplinary tasks).

In the most beautiful scene in "The Rule"—perhaps in all of the Bongiornoes' repertoire—an older monk explains that the prevailing image of monasteries as reclusive, rural hillside communities is "pious nonsense." Cut to a younger

monk, meditating with enviable peace of mind, amid the sirens, youthful screams and screeching tires of Newark—about as far from a bucolic monastery as you can get.

To the Bongiorno's happy surprise, "The Rule" has been equally well-received by liberals and conservatives. The latter group appreciates the old-fashioned work ethic that the school encourages among its students.

The filmmakers are consistently hit with provocative questions at their various screenings, such as "Why should I give handouts to people who don't want to work to get themselves out of poverty?" said Marylou. "This not only reveals what assumptions they're making and what knowledge they're missing, but it also helps us exercise our reasoning ability and fuels the material in the next documentaries."

Jerome and Marylou just wrapped a short fiction film called "**Hearing Voices**," about "two historical figures returning as ghosts to hash out their legacies and the question of 'Why do we fight?'" said Marylou. They are also doing prep on another fiction feature film inspired by classic literature, that picks up where "The Black Monk" left off and probes inner city poverty, religion, and sanity.

Also in development is "**Monks in the Hood**," a feature film based on "The Rule," and "**Watermark**," about global warming's devastating effects on coastal cities.

Over the years, the Bongiorno's have altered their technique when making fiction films.

"We used to get to the set, figure out the actors' blocking, and take lots of coverage from all different angles. Subsequently, the film was then shaped in editing," Marylou explained. "But we found that this method was creating too much of a generic edit. So, we started pre-visualizing the film by using animated storyboards to minutely plan out the blocking and camera moves in pre-production. This allowed us to shoot a lot less coverage, create longer takes, cover more script pages, and focus on performance and fluid camera compositions, much like what we we admired in Rohmer and Hitchcock."

The pair have also gotten involved with [3-D film](#) exhibits at museums, inspired by city symphony films of the 1920s and 1930s. They have even served as activists, having created and hosted the [Newark Poverty Reduction Conference: Historical Perspectives and Strategies](#) event in 2011.

Asked what advice they would impart to budding filmmakers—especially in an age where it is increasingly difficult for films to see the light of day—Jerome replied, "Making films doesn't need to be expensive. In fact, today, there are no excuses: you can easily make a viable, great-looking feature with just a cell phone, a good audio recorder/microphone and decent editing software."

"The key is to write a script that is producible, that is, don't write scenes that will be ultra-difficult to shoot without a large budget and large crew, that have fancy camera moves and effects. Write simple but potent scenes. Just look at Rohmer films! Just look at Ozu films! Altman, Antonioni, Bergman, Huston, Olmi, Pasolini, Rossellini, Varda and Welles—the list goes on and on of directors that demonstrate that a large budget is unnecessary."



Marylou Tibaldo-Bongiorno and Jerome Bongiorno

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