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The Black Monk

by Christopher Soden
EDGE Contributor

Despite the distinct contribution of artists who lead (and have lead) sober, sane, well-adjusted lives, the folkloric paradigm of the mad, dissolute, intemperate genius who tangos with his (or her) demons obsessively in a twisted romance with the abyss, persists.

In **The Black Monk**, David Rabe refines and elucidates this notion that genuine inspiration must consort with self-destruction and, the subsequent idea that any meandering from the path of propriety must be quashed lest the soul be forever imperiled.



Adapted from a short story by Anton Chekhov, Rabe's *The Black Monk* is set (naturally) amongst the gentility and aristocracy of Borissovka in late 19th Century Russia. Kovrin has returned from his studies of philosophy to the orchards of his step-father, Yegor Pesotsky. Orphaned after the death of his parents, Kovrin was taken under Pesotsky's wing and raised as his own son, with great love and affection. Kovrin discovers Tanya, Pesotsky's daughter, has grown up too, with lots of zeal and aplomb. His homecoming is unequivocally jubilant, and though he has odd habits that set him apart from the pack, Kovrin is charismatic, affable and exuberant.

After a few emphatic hints from Pesotsky (who dreads the ruin of his orchards, after he dies) Kovrin proposes to Tanya, whom he cares for sincerely. Not long after they are married, Tanya notices Kovrin's long sleepless hours, and conversations with the imaginary Black Monk, a sort of muse and invisible companion. Once she is convinced that Kovrin is certifiable, she and her father have Kovrin whisked away for treatment by the most prestigious and educated doctors.

When we next see Kovrin, he is more or less drained of energy. It's important to note here that he is not oppressed by narcotics or Draconian methods of psychotherapy. No alcohol (only milk) no cigars, only two hours of work a day, no more long hours burning the midnight oil. Yet everything that made him different, including regular visits from his hallucinated friend, The Black Monk, has evaporated. Kovrin's supple sybaritic vigor, his ardor and agreeable demeanor have been taken from him.

Rabe explores the attitudes of a culture that cannot distinguish between dangerous and innocuous

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insanity. He doesn't assume irrational behavior means turpitude or spiritual ruin. Pesotsky himself is given to mad eruptions of inexplicable behavior and pronouncements of despair. Grown up though she may be, Tanya tears into rants and crying jags. There's an unmistakable, keen irony, in Kovrin's childlike acceptance of his own eccentricities. He harms no one, is a danger to nobody. If he stays up all night and falls asleep on the couch, so what? Rabe makes it plain that Tanya and Pesotsky's bouts with erratic behavior are by far more extreme. Kovrin doesn't get drunk or violent and his phantom consort never instructs him to go on a killing spree.

Jonathan Brooks is rapturous in the quirky, avid, melancholy role of Kovrin. Rangy and docile, Brooks has a limber and agile quality, as if the character inhabited not only his mind, but his elbows and knees. Like a jaunty, introspective marionette.

Then there is The Black Monk himself, who tells Kovrin at the outset he is not real, but a manifestation of Kovrin's imagination. My own take is that the Black Monk is an evocation of Kovrin's mortality. Hence the appeals to Kovrin's posthumous vanity and the sensual comfort of tobacco and spirits. At first the monk seems ominous like an apparition from a Bergman film, but gradually, he becomes less foreboding and more consoling. It's easy to understand why someone with Kovrin's brilliance has created imaginary kindred, to exchange ideas about the cosmic and divine. He feels rich, genuine love for his step-father and bride, but lacks stimulation for his restless mind.

The Black Monk might seem something of a departure for Rabe, who has previously dealt with the lives of soldiers, gangsters, exotic dancers and thuggy Hollywood drug addicts in his plays. But maybe when you consider the common element they share, that in one way or another they're all fringe dwellers, it feels like a plausible culmination of his work. Rabe's picaresque heroes have all fallen prey to the vapid indoctrination of a culture that presumes to have definitive answers for the wounded and disillusioned. In a way it might stand to reason that Rabe would appropriate a narrative (true to Chekhov's diction) in which the well-meaning would feel the urgent need to fix the contented but wayward Kovrin.

Directed by Katherine Owens, Undermain Theatre's production of The Black Monk is intelligent, modulated, spirited and suffused with a somber undercurrent. Set designer John Arnone's trappings feel sparse, eerie and surreal, yet tangible. The small trees set far apart and tied with rope. The candelabras and tapered, diminutive wine glasses. They all seem to evince privilege, gravitas and isolation. Bryan Wofford's costumes seemed dense and heavy, with complicated and earthy hues, even when the characters dress for a party. Though finely attired, the three key characters often have the comfort of thick clothing usually associated with the working class.

Bruce DuBose as Pesotsky is filled with robust, tender emotion, brimming with steam and conviction.



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Shannon Kearns-Simmons is volatile, fretful and affecting as Tanya. Jessica Cavanaugh brings a resilient fortitude and frailty to Varvara Nikolaevna, Kovrin's second wife, doing her best to provide a compass for her distraught and diminished husband.

Jonathan Brooks is rapturous in the quirky, avid, melancholy role of Kovrin. Rangy and docile, Brooks has a limber and agile quality, as if the character inhabited not only his mind, but his elbows and knees. Like a jaunty, introspective marionette. His take on Kovrin is soulful and guileless, and all the more wrenching when the flicker of bravado leaves his eyes.

Undermain Theatre presents David Rabe's **The Black Monk**, playing September 9th - October 3rd, 2009 at 3200 Main Street, Dallas, Texas 75226. 214.747.5515 www.undermain.org