



review

The Black Balloon

Directed by Elissa Down, produced by Tristram Miall, Icon Home Entertainment, 2008

Released September 2008, *The Black Balloon*, winner of the 2008 Berlin International Film Festival, had its UK debut at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in June 2008. The writer and director Elissa Down was present to answer questions after the screening.

The film explores the dynamics of a military family, the Mollisons, whose teenage son Charlie has an autism-spectrum disorder. The narrative of the disruption caused by the family's move to a new area and the mother's (Maggie, played by Toni Collette) pregnancy, is delivered by Charlie's 15-year-old brother, Thomas (Rhys Wakfield).

The film clearly portrays the core features of autism-spectrum disorder. Charlie's deficits in social interaction shine through as we watch Thomas's completely 'neurotypical' developing romance with Jackie (Gemma Ward). Thomas and Jackie's reciprocal gaze, body language and use of nuance are all at stark contrast to Charlie's clear frustrations regarding social appropriateness, shown at its best when he runs off with Jackie's school bag, to be

later found chewing one of her tampons, with no comprehension of his brother's embarrassment.

Communication is a further difficulty: Charlie 'signs', which perhaps obscures the extent to which language, or the misinterpretation of meaning, can be an issue. Thomas's frustrations at the limitations this imposes are clear, reinforcing the underlying point. The matter of routine and the challenges of new situations are demonstrated at the outset as the family move house and Charlie heralds their arrival by sitting on the front lawn, banging a wooden spoon and wailing, demonstrating both his distress at his situation and his difficulties articulating this.

The film is set in the early 1990s when less was known about developmental disorders and services were less well established. However, there is a notable absence of professional input and the family copes as best they can, explicitly accepting that they must sacrifice to care for Charlie. This is regrettable, as Charlie would have likely benefited from speech and language therapy and behavioural psychology input, which could have mitigated the impact of his more challenging behaviours. In one scene, Charlie is found rubbing excrement into his bedroom

carpet, which his pre-eclamptic mother and brother clean up, the latter horrified when he realises his girlfriend has witnessed the scene. This also reminds us of the often huge responsibility for providing care and support that falls on siblings, sometimes overshadowing their own developmental and emotional needs.

The writer, Elissa Down, has two brothers who have autism-spectrum disorder and the script is based on her own experiences growing up, which gives the film a 'matter-of-fact' quality. There is also a genuine emotional warmth – Thomas's love for his brother resonates despite his daily prayers that Charlie should be 'normal', and there is one scene where he empathically mirrors Charlie's 'communication style' to excellent effect.

In short, *The Black Balloon* is good cinema and an excellent primer for discussing the issues relevant to individuals with autism-spectrum disorder and their carers, as well as professionals with a clinical responsibility of care in the field; as such, I recommend it.

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miscellany

Choosing psychiatry as a career: a WPA international call for research proposals

The World Psychiatric Association (WPA) is the largest organisation active in the mental health field worldwide, with 134 member societies (national psychiatric societies) representing more than 200 000 psychiatrists and 65 scientific sections.

In the WPA Action Plan 2008–2011, one of the institutional goals is to enhance the image of psychiatry worldwide among

the general public, health professionals and policy makers. This is to counteract some negative messages – often biased by ideological prejudice – which are affecting the motivation of persons with mental disorders and their families to seek psychiatric advice and to adhere to psychiatric interventions, as well as the motivation of medical students to choose psychiatry as a career.

As one of the activities pursuing this goal, the WPA will fund an international project aimed to assess the factors facilitating and those hampering the choice of psychiatry as a career by medical

students, and to suggest strategies to encourage this choice.

Proposals from individuals, departments or societies are welcome. They will have to include a description of the project (maximum 1200 words), a list of the participating centres, a timetable, a detailed budget, and a short curriculum vitae of the proposed principal investigator(s). Proposals will have to be sent by email to the WPA Secretariat (wpasecretariat@wpanet.org) by 30 June 2009.

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