

STUDY GUIDE



THE COMPANION (EL ACOMPAÑANTE)

a Film by PAVEL GIROUD

CUBA / 2016 / 104 MIN

Spanish with English subtitles

With Yotuel Romero, Armando Miguel Gómez, Camila Arteché, Yailene Sierra, Jazz Vilá, Jorge Molina



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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Sanitariums: When HIV was discovered in the early 1980s, the world was searching for answers on how to control the epidemic. Cuba believed it had found its own solution to the rampantly growing problem. *The New York Times* states:

As their numbers grew and more civilians tested positive, the government opened sanitariums — both to keep the infected from having sex with anyone uninfected and to help them die comfortably. At first the institutions were run by military doctors and guarded by soldiers; patients had home visits only with escorts. But life inside was not brutal. Inmates got food, medical care and their old salaries; theater troupes and art classes formed. Gay men could live together, which was not true in the macho culture outside. The network of sanitariums grew to 14.¹

Although these sanitariums were denounced outside of Cuba, and some HIV positive Cubans expressed their desperation to escape their life sentences at the sanitarium, there is proof that these sanitariums did help to keep the spread of HIV relatively low in the earlier years.²

Sports during the Cold War: By the time World War II ended, the Communist (USSR) and capitalist (USA) superpowers of the world were intent on spreading their respective ideological control. This was done not with armed conflict, but rather with symbolic achievements, for example, excellence in sports. As the Wilson Center writes:

Sport has long been linked with politics, but never more so than during the Cold War. In this highly precarious time, nations and peoples around the world used sport to promote their political, social, and economic development. The media promoted mega-events between capitalist and Communist athletes as surrogates for diplomatic and military tension.³

Within the film *The Companion*, the audience witnesses the importance that boxing holds in Cuba, especially when against the United States, as Cuba allied itself with the Communist superpower during the Cold War.

¹ McNeil, Donald G., Jr. "Cuba's Fortresses Against a Viral Foe." *The New York Times*, May 7, 2012.

² Ibid.

³ "The Global History of Sport in the Cold War." Wilson Center. Last modified September 23, 2014.



INTRODUCING THE FILM

A film **synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarise the film's narrative, genre, style and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this official synopsis for **THE COMPANION**:

CUBA'S OFFICIAL ENTRY TO THE ACADEMY AWARDS®

Set in 1988 Cuba as the government dispatched HIV patients to AIDS centers under military rule, *The Companion* narrates the unlikely friendship between a boxing champion and a conflictive patient.

After failing a doping test, Horacio Romero has no other choice but to serve a sentence. His fate is in Los Cocos, a sanatorium under military rule where HIV patients are compulsorily confined, with the exception of a weekly pass to visit their families under the supervision of personal wardens called "companions."

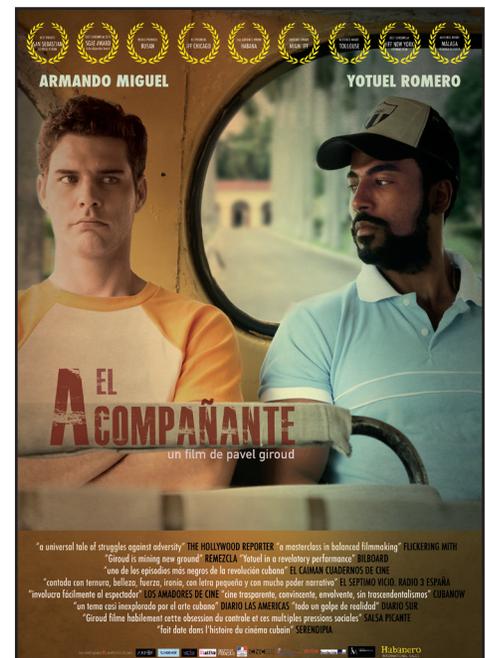
As a "companion," Horacio is supposed to keep an eye on Daniel -the most conflictive patient in the ward- and get him to comply to the regulations. Their interests immediately collide as Daniel is set to spend his last days in freedom and is ready to do anything to make this happen.

Horacio, on the other hand, dreams about boxing again to get his champion's status back. For that to happen, however, he must first win this battle out of the ring...

- From the text, identify the key plot and character points as well as the historical background to the film.
- How does the trailer, poster, and image stills encourage you to watch the film in the cinema?
- Can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about just from the marketing (i.e. trailer, poster, and image stills)?

CINEMATIC ART/TECHNIQUES

- Judging from the first few minutes of the film, what do you think this movie is about? What assumptions can you make?
- In the first scene (00:50-01:10), the audience is given information in the titles that Cuban HIV patients were contained in sanitariums under military control. The next scene (01:10-02:03) progresses with several shots, starting with the barbed wire at what is seemingly Los Cocos sanitarium, and ending with Havana's city and nature (including diegetic sound of birds chirping, trees rustling in the wind, etc). What do you believe is the significance of these back to back scenes? In other words, what does the outside world of Havana have to do with the narrative of the sanitarium?
- Keeping in mind dialogue, clothing, and any behaviors, how are the characters introduced to us at the start of their story lines? What are the differences in how they are introduced?
- Although a relationship develops between Horacio and Daniel, they get off to a rocky start. How does the film demonstrate the tension in their relationship? Think about their body language, their positions in the frame, how they talk to each other, how they look at each other, etc.
- Both Horacio and Daniel feel isolated from the communities they wish to belong to. Explain how the film shows, rather than explains, this feeling of isolation.
- What experiences in the film push Horacio to gain sympathy for the patients in the sanitarium? Use specific scenes from the film to explain your answer.
- After Daniel's death (1:36:40-1:37:02), the next scene repeats the several shots of Havana's city and nature. What do you believe is the significance of this?



LANGUAGE

- Does the language difference present a barrier to your viewing experience? What about the subtitles?
- If you have knowledge of the Spanish language, do you think the characters spoke clearly and slowly enough to where you could understand parts of the dialogue without the help of the subtitles? Did you notice the differences in accents depending on the nationality of the film?

NARRATIVE

- Do you feel you needed a preamble to Horacio's story? What about Daniel's story?
- Think about the contrasts between Horacio and Daniel's storylines. Explain the differences, but also describe the connection between the two storylines.
- Were you surprised that Horacio kept Daniel's rule breaking in private, instead of telling the director of the sanitarium? Why or why not?
- At the end of this film, what were your reactions to the stories that were told? Would you describe this as a happy ending?
- How did you find the final minutes of the film? Did the film give a clear resolution to the narrative, or was the narrative suspended?
- What do you think is the point of the narrative? What overall message is being relayed?



THEMES

- Horacio, Daniel, and the nation of Cuba are all striving for freedom. However, their definitions of freedom are all different. Explain what freedom means to each of them using specific scenes from the film.
- Why do you think the director chose for his film to follow the story of Cuba's national champion boxer? What is the significance of showing the importance of boxing in Cubans' lives? Think about the time period (Cold War) when writing your answer.
- How does fear play a role in the stories told? Use specific examples from the film. Think about each character, but also think about the fear Cubans (and the rest of the world) had regarding AIDS and HIV.
- In this film, we see the discrimination and stigma that comes with a patient's AIDS and HIV diagnosis. Pick three scenes from the film to elaborate and describe this discrimination and stigma.
- What are your thoughts on the sanitarium? Do you think it's an abuse of rights, or a beneficial system for all of Cuba? Explain how the movie has influenced your opinion.
- Do you think the director is critiquing Cuba's government and governmental policies (specifically HIV/AIDS sanitariums) in this film, or simply portraying an unfortunate situation without giving away any political thesis? Use examples from the film to explain your answer.
- In the film (1:16:26-1:19:03), the audience catches a glimpse of another political problem in Cuba: people must illegally escape Cuba if they want to leave for the US. Why do you believe the director included such politically charged moment in his storyline?

