

# The MaNiC. DEPRESSIVE Movie MINISTRY

*By the time the credits roll each week, Movie Monday has quietly, radically, created a community*

By FIONA McCAW

**C**HARLTON Heston is in love. His close-up shows rapture, the music swells with emotion. And now the camera shifts to his object of desire—apparently a staircase. No, wait. Forty seconds later, the leading lady glides onto the screen and down the steps.

This is not an ordinary screening of *Ben Hur*. The 1959 epic is being shown on a video projector, and the film was shot for a cinema's wide screen. The sound's a little dodgy as well, too loud during the war scenes, too quiet now for the dialogue. But the 65 people in the audience wait patiently for Heston's love interest. The lights are off, the smell of popcorn fills the air.

It's Monday night at the Eric Martin Pavilion of the Royal Jubilee Hospital, Victoria's main psychiatric ward.

"Battle's over. Better turn the sound up," says Bruce Saunders, the man who runs the Movie Monday series, as he leaps up yet again to make the adjustments.

In a small lobby next to the 100-seat lecture theatre, still more people watch Heston and company from orange vinyl couches gathered around a TV monitor. Others wander in and out of the theatre, or step outside for a smoke. Some people's wrists show the flash of a yellow hospital bracelet.

A fortysomething man with yellow peeking out his jacket cuff arrives with a flushed face.

"I just rode my bike all the way from Elk Lake," he announces. "Can I sweep the floor after?"

Yes, says Saunders, providing it's OK with the nurse. The man leaves and comes back. The nurse said yes. He leaves again.

Too much energy. Can't sit still long enough to watch a movie.

"He's a bit of a loose cannon," says Saunders, "but he's a good sweeper."

It's a typical Monday night for Saunders—maybe a little quiet. He's been running his award-winning movie series for almost four years.

The event is a combination of a social and a personal crusade. Saunders wanted to give psychiatric patients an opportunity to mingle with the general community and get a break from life in the wards. It's a tedious he knows well. Saunders has been hospitalized twice for what medical textbooks call bipolar disorder, but which Saunders still calls manic depression. "I just find it more accurately descriptive," he says. "Bipolar sounds like some geographical expedition."

The 46-year-old gardener's life is punctuated by frantic, euphoric highs, when the ideas popping into his head make sleep impossible, and crushing lows, when he has to make the greatest effort just to work at all.

It shows up in his job. When he's up, he's compulsively creative, burning the midnight oil as he pencils out gardening schemes. When he's down, he sticks to simple, repetitive tasks: mowing lawns, sweeping walkways, weeding beds.

But Saunders wanted an outlet that wasn't limited by the seasons, clients' budgets, or the feeding habits of slugs. He also wanted to prove to himself and the world that he is able to show up week after week, high or low, and put on a movie.

"Most people in my situation can't imagine being somewhere at a particular time every week," he says.

But Movie Monday doesn't happen in

spite of Saunders' mental illness. It happens because of it.

**S**AUNDERS sat slumped in front of the TV in the hospital common room, watching a police drama. A SWAT team had its guns trained on an insane criminal, who in turn had a gun to a woman's head. The wild-eyed hostage-taker was supposed to be manic depressive.

Some weeks earlier—Saunders isn't sure how many—his wife Laurel had found him passed out in his basement with the lawn mower running. When he'd woken up in the hospital, he'd thought he was dead.

It was while he was recovering from that suicidal depression in 1993 that an acquaintance from the Friends of Music Society showed him the Eric Martin Pavilion's theatre.

"People who are slightly manic have some pretty creative ideas, and I thought there was just this big potential there," he says. "I could see it was a

good idea right from the start. I could see it ought to work."

Saunders had a long-time interest in film and photography, and a sincere desire to change the small world of the hospital. By the time he was sent home, he was determined to put on movies.

"I wasn't in favour of it at first," says Laurel, Saunders' wife of 23 years. "He came out of the hospital with this idea that he wanted to do this movie, and we wanted him to put his energy into us, and into getting well again."

The hospital agreed to give him access to the theatre. Two weeks later, the budding impresario put on his first show: *Cannery Row*, a gentle recounting of life in an idiosyncratic neighbourhood in Monterey Bay. Fourteen people showed up.

This was just what Ron Thomson expected. The hospital's manager of audiovisuals had watched a social worker try—and fail—to set up a similar program earlier.

"We did expect him to fail, but he wasn't going to fail," Thomson says now.

Saunders persevered, stalking around town with his trademark cut-and-paste flyers. He finally reached his audience, he says, when he put a listing in the *Monday Magazine* calendar.

By then, his wife and two sons—Daniel, then 13, and Paul, then 10—had warmed to the idea. The whole family worked together picking movies and running the concession. Daniel set up a Movie Monday web site, including the collected writings of his computer illiterate dad.

"When I started to see what it did for Bruce, and what it did for our whole family, I changed my mind," Laurel says.

After an attempt to make popcorn set off the hospital fire alarms, Saunders got Memorial Arena to donate some. When the original movie projector, salvaged from Expo '86, started to flicker, he raised

\$7,000 to get a new one.

Saunders was doing much more than putting on movies. He invited artists to do slide-shows. For *The Madness of King George*, psychiatrist Dr. Richard Williams gave a pre-movie talk. When Mark Idczac, an avid movie buff, asked Saunders to show the '30s chestnut *San Francisco*, Saunders asked Idczac to introduce it, which he did with star-struck enthusiasm. For the screening of *Dead Man Walking*, Saunders invited Rev. David Stewart of the Upper Room soup kitchen. The reverend argued the case against capital punishment, only to be hotly debated by a woman whose niece had been murdered.

Each occasion is recorded on the video tapes spilling over the shelves in Saunders' small basement screening room. Copies are sent out to the people involved; he calls it his "video ministry."

Saunders picks one off a shelf: Movie Monday's 1994 screening of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.

When he decided he wanted to screen this classic, Saunders first looked around for a psychiatrist to introduce it. The first doctor he asked turned him down. "He said it wouldn't be constructive. I was told it was not accurate in the way shock therapy was shown. It was not even correct for the era it was shown in."

But the doubtful doctor suggested another expert: Dr. Dean Brooks, the former supervisor of Oregon State Hospital who was a technical advisor to the film and played a bit part as psychiatrist Dr. Spivey. Brooks accepted.

The video opens abruptly to a flustered looking Saunders. Seeing himself on-screen, Saunders smiles. It was Movie Monday's first ever full house.

The evening had not begun well. Everything had conspired to delay the presentation. The sound system screamed with feedback, and when Saunders could finally introduce his special guest, he was suddenly interrupted.

"A patient got on stage with me and she wanted to do a little dance," he recalls. "It was really embarrassing."

Two video recorders had been readied for the big night, but then one camera-tech had to leave suddenly to photograph a surgery. Saunders' son Paul took charge, and the resulting image is steady and focused—even if Saunders himself was not.

Dr. Brooks takes the stage, to immediate applause: The psychiatrist, now 80, is an eager performer, striding around, getting big laughs for stories about Milos Forman's cryptic directions and Jack Nicholson's odd improvisations.

As we watch, though, the camera drifts away, and Brooks is lost from sight. The microphone cord had caught the camera, now under Saunders' direction, and pulled it to one side.

"Oh well," Saunders laughs, shrugs.

**T**UCKED in Movie Monday's cash box is a clip-on ID card, similar to those worn by paid hospital employees, with Saunders' name and picture on it.

"It's a little trophy after two and a half years of already using the key," he says.

Glen Colwill is the regional director of human resources and organizational development for the hospital, and a constant advocate for Saunders' project.



▲ Saunders: he was expected to fail

*As he prepared to 'come out' as manic-depressive, Saunders was asked 'What if you want to get a real job?'*

