

Bruce Saunders & Movie Monday
by Bruce Wallace 1998

The person sitting next to you in the theatre may be wearing a hospital bracelet and slippers; the next person may have once been a patient in the hospital and is now living in the community. For many other people this is the first time they have ever set foot in a mental institution. It's Monday night at the Eric Martin Pavilion, Victoria, B.C.'s psychiatric hospital, which means it's Movie Monday.

I've been in the institution many times. I go to watch movies for the "Movie Monday Experience". The experience is being part of a group, dare I say a community. We are more than an audience because we are participating in the event, we are sharing our space, as much with the person who has a strong feeling he is long due for a Nobel Prize as with the person next to him, who may be feeling a little uncomfortable. When the movie is laced with humour, like *The Full Monty*, we laugh together, some people laughing harder than others. When it is a tragic movie, like the *Sweet Hereafter*, we stay after the film and share our feelings. Each time I go back to Movie Monday, the more normal it seems.

It is difficult to describe the atmosphere in this small theatre, in the lobby and outside the doors, where some are taking smoke breaks. By day the room is a teaching theatre for doctors and nurses or retirement seminars. But on Monday night it is transformed into a movie theatre – posters of upcoming shows are taped on the walls, popcorn is brought out and bagged, cases of pop are put on ice. Many nights the theatre is full, a hundred people coming to watch a film. Later, the theatre is swept, the signs taken down, the ice bucket dumped, and by the next morning no one can tell anyone had even entered the room. No one can tell of the magic that filled the air as a hundred people came together and became one – an audience. An audience of movie lovers – not patients, not doctors and nurses – but people who share the same movie experience.

A woman who first came to Movie Monday during a hospital stay in the psychiatric intensive care unit explains “it gives me a great sense of acceptance of who I am as a person, a manic-depressive, where I don’t feel as marginalized. The atmosphere of safety, and camaraderie, especially between patients really helps me. Despite the noise and darkness, I feel it to be a safe place, with no nurses, security guards or police. I find myself relaxed and enjoying myself, even laughing, which is something that seemed such a remote possibility.”

Another Movie Monday fan is Joseph Egoyan who also enjoys participating by introducing and discussing his son’s (Atom Egoyan’s) films, such as the *Sweet Hereafter*. “The reason why I back Bruce 100 percent is because there is a stigma about mental illness, a stigma that I want somehow erased,” he tells the packed theatre. “I think that what Bruce is doing here, by showing films and allowing you to talk and to question, helps us clear the mist and see mental illnesses without prejudice,” he says during an hour-long post film discussion of his son’s work.

What makes Movie Monday magical is its main character, Bruce Saunders. Five years ago Saunders was upstairs, a patient being treated for manic depression. Every Monday night for the last five years he comes back to the sanitized halls and locked doors of the institution to show movies.

“The message I’m hoping to get out is: here’s a guy who was hopeless and helpless in the institution who is now doing pretty well, doing something positive and creative and hopefully helpful for other individuals who are still struggling in the same way. I like to think I’m being a positive example of recovery from a mental illness that is sometimes absolutely daunting,” he explains.

I wait for Saunders outside the doors to the institution. There is a small group of patients huddled by the door for a brief smoke and a taste of sunshine before returning to the ward. The scene is such a remarkable contrast to the one that Saunders will create in his small theatre later that night. At the doors, some patients are awkward, outside in their

hospital pyjamas and slippers, wincing in the sunlight. There is no interaction between them and the traffic of outsiders who share the entrance. It seems we have nothing in common, until we share a movie.

When Saunders approaches, he looks unlike any patient, doctor, nurse or other service provider – he looks like a gardener! In fact, gardening is his day job, the sub-plot to his story. “Doing physical work is a nice counterpoint to Movie Monday, which can be a real stretch because it is underfunded, undersupported and at times stressful. Some days I’m mowing a lawn, picking up a video, mowing a couple of more lawns, picking up popcorn and distributing posters on the way,” he explains. He is a very tall, lanky man who is usually not without his rose pruners holstered on his belt, wearing a sun hat and suspenders. At forty-eight, Saunders is a husband and father of two teenage sons. Movie Monday is something they do together.

“I’ve always wanted to be a projectionist,” Saunders tells me. I thought it would be a really cool job, showing all those movies and looking out at everyone watching your films through that little hole.” Saunders loves movies and his conversation is scattered with references to scenes and characters from movies he uses to figure out real life. There are glimpses of Saunders in the movies he loves. He is the projectionist in *Cinema Paradiso*, he is Jack Nicholson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* taking patients on a field trip. He is Nick Nolte in *Cannery Row*, well meaning, full of wisdom and just trying to make things work out in his small but troubled world.

But when Saunders walks into the hospital he is now a service provider. He walks past the smokers, through the same door that leads to the ward, jokes with the security guard and signs out his identification and keys to the facility. Saunders seems at ease in a place that many fear. “It’s empowering to come back here with earned authority where once I was powerless and hopeless”, says Saunders. Few people walk in and out of these doors willingly. There is no welcome mat and outsiders commonly joke that if they walked in, they wouldn’t be let out.

On Monday nights, “people find out that it’s not so scary to walk into a mental institution and it’s not terrifying to sit next to someone with a mental illness,” says Saunders. “It demystifies and destigmatizes mental illnesses. While health professionals are busy creating pamphlet after pamphlet and hosting endless conferences, workshops and forums in the hopes that we will become better educated on mental illnesses, Saunders has been quietly inviting patients and the public to have fun together, to be entertained. But while we are laughing together, Saunders has given us an education without our even knowing it. Ask me, what I would rather do tonight, watch a movie or go a meeting?

Nine years ago Saunders was diagnosed with manic depression. In a devastating bout of the illness he saw no hope for himself and no future. He attempted suicide. Four years later, on another desperate day, he would try to gas himself with carbon monoxide, and be hospitalized in the psychiatric hospital for seven weeks, being treated with drug therapy in conjunction with psychotherapy sessions.

He describes this time as an almost out-of-life experience, as a dream sequence in a bad movie, living day to day on the ward sterilized of any real world props, with the exception of two TV’s, one at each end of the ward. Sitting in the middle, bored, waiting for the drugs to take effect, the sounds of the TV's clashed in his head. An amazing nothingness, “televium” he would later call it.

What was even worse was the invasion of stereotypical images of mental illnesses flowing out of the televisions. Saunders recalls sitting amongst other patients watching a violent movie about a man supposedly also afflicted with manic depression, who had taken a woman hostage. The happy ending to the movie was the SWAT team shooting and killing the man, and thereby saving the hostage, and assumingly the rest of society from this person with a mental illness.

It was during this stay that Saunders noticed a theatre on the main floor of the hospital. Even after leaving the hospital he remembered the cacophony of duelling televisions and

the lack of quality entertainment for patients. Several weeks later he went back and asked if he could show a movie for the patients.

“Right from the first week I had this idea that this was a good thing to do, and I’ve been able to follow through on it. A lot of people thought I wouldn’t or couldn’t, and I wasn’t even sure myself, but I started and I persisted, and it’s working, it’s really working, and I’m proud of it,” he says tearfully.

“Movie Monday is my passion. Every week I put on a show, no matter what goes on, no matter if my mood goes down and I’m feeling really crappy I still show up. And I know that every Monday as the house lights go up and the credits roll, I’ll be feeling great. It’s good to have to be committed to putting on the shows week after week. I can’t not do it, but sometimes I feel like I’m gambling, that I’ll feel up to an event that I planned two months earlier,” he says.

Try to think of what you did last Monday night - and every Monday night for the last five years. It would be a feat for anyone to be so consistently dependable – it’s phenomenal for someone with manic depression. Recently renamed as bipolar mood disorder, it’s an illness characterized by wild mood swings from manic euphoria to deep despair and desperation, an illness that often results in job loss, marital break-up and alcohol and drug use. Like Saunders, many others feel trapped in their madness and see killing themselves as the only way out. There is no cure for bipolar disorder, but it can be managed with mood stabilizers such as lithium often combined with anti-depressants, psychotherapy, and equally important, personal life adjustments and supports.

Saunders goes as far as to talk about the positive aspects of this “shameful” illness. “I don’t altogether regret having manic depression, it’s kind of neat to have lots of good ideas. Fortunately, I’ve been well enough over the last few years to put some of these ideas into practice, and put together Movie Monday,” he says.

It is widely acknowledged that creativity and manic depression are linked, that a person's state of mania can sometimes enhance their creativity. Manic episodes can be characterised by excessive euphoric feelings and an unrealistic belief in one's abilities. Combine this with a decreased need for sleep and it becomes obvious that increased creativity is possible. But it is an energy that can be equally counterproductive, and followed by further depression. Left untreated, it is an often lethal disease and treated or not, it is an illness that carries a stigma that few care to disclose.

Saunders admits that Movie Monday is driven by manic power. "I'm not presenting myself as a victim of manic depression, but as doing something that I'm really proud of in spite of it – because of it almost. Instead of talking in platitudes on what people with mental illnesses can or can't do, they see me out there every week doing something special," he says. While many people with manic depression get these wild imaginings of spectacular projects they could take on, usually the ideas don't come through. Often people envision wilder things than they can achieve and that's where the frustration, exhaustion and depression kicks in, he explains.

But Saunders is also driven by the tragedies he has survived. Movie Monday is not just a hobby, or simply an outlet for his passion for movies. For Saunders, there is a life saving component to what he does. While he survived his two suicide attempts, his sister did not. At only twenty-six years of age, she became a casualty of this mental illness that runs in families. "I'd like to think that now, knowing what I know, I'd be better able to help her. She could have had a pretty good life," says Saunders. And while he couldn't help her, he knows he can still improve things for himself and his two teenage sons.

For others with mental illnesses, Movie Monday is like a weekly support group. Some nights it seems that everyone knows Bruce. Person after person wants a piece of him, of his time, his attention, his thoughts, his warmth. He is someone who is dependable, trusted, respectful, and knowledgeable – he knows because he has been there and he knows how to stay healthy. They count on him to be there for them every Monday, to

provide not just ninety minutes of free entertainment, but also support and encouragement to keep up the struggle.

Recently, a friend of Saunders who also had been diagnosed with manic depression (and seemingly doing well) attempted suicide and was admitted to the ward above the theatre. What Saunders found most troubling was that like him, she was someone who had seemed to have made it through okay. It was a sobering reminder of how close the ward is to the theatre. Rather than slow Saunders down, it reminded him even more of how important it is to keep Movie Monday going strong.

It is because manic depression claims so many lives that Saunders stands in front of this audience every week, “out” about his mental illness. While he jokes about being “Mr. Manic Depressive – the best known manic depressive in town”, being out about it is the most critical and positive step in his continued recovery. He is truly a role model for others with mental illnesses.

After showing films consistently for five years, Movie Monday is now well known in Victoria as a great free event. It’s a real movie-going experience, with popcorn, drinks and the film shown on a large screen in a real theatre. “It’s a special event, it means not being alone watching garbage on TV in your crappy little room,” a more pervasive form of televalium, he explains. For Saunders, it’s a great compliment that there are some people who come out to Movie Monday not even knowing what is playing that night. They know they can count on Saunders telling a story, having a bag of popcorn and, oh yeah, maybe the movie will be a good one. He considers this a real testament to the appeal and importance of Movie Monday to people on the margins.

He has shown 275 films over the last five years, and while only seventeen people came out for the first show, *Cannery Row*, the 100-seat theatre was a full house when he replayed it for the fifth anniversary. He estimates that about 18,000 people have sat in his little theatre “and I’ve never ran out of popcorn yet,” he boasts.

Each Monday night has its own stories, notes jotted down on foolscap paper at the end of each evening – a detailed, yet impressionistic, record of the film shown, the number of people attending, the audiences' reaction to the show and special "Movie Monday Moments". There are so many special moments in his small theatre, a theatre where everyone feels welcome, where people can watch a movie for a couple of hours barefoot and in pyjamas, pay nothing, and then go back to the ward. It's a place that welcomes the "normals" and "not-so-normals", no one can really tell us apart.

Over the years he has added a few extras. He now sets up a TV and chairs in the lobby for people who are not comfortable with being in the dark, crowded theatre. It gives them the opportunity to pace or laugh loudly. But largely Saunders keeps things simple – a large pickle jar at the door for donations, the coming attractions photocopied and taped on the wall with black electrical tape, and a welcoming string of flashing Christmas lights draped over a lit Movie Monday sign, giving the room the needed marquee touch.

The movies are a wonderful mix of recent releases, great classics, documentaries, independent releases and foreign films. Saunders distributes his homemade showbill around town and is listed in the entertainment weekly. There is always a good mix of light entertainment and thought-provoking films to go to.

"Movies are a great way to learn. They are so engaging, especially on a large screen with a hundred other people around you, all responding to the same message, but interpreting the message differently. However, I try not to make it too therapeutic," he explains of the selection. "It's more than showing movies about mental illnesses to people with mental illnesses," although it is these "value added movies" that are the most rewarding Movie Monday experiences.

Society's perception of people with mental illnesses and mental institutions is largely based on Hollywood movies. Consider the images that millions of people encounter in films such as *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Awakenings*, *Shine* and the *Fisher King*. The power of these images in people's perceptions of mental illnesses is as

underestimated as has the use of independent films that support more varied depictions of mental illnesses. Saunders provides a venue not only to show these movies but also to bring in speakers and facilitate audience discussions on the movies.

Anyone can show a movie and pack the house. “The challenge is showing movies that get people thinking about issues, working out their own experiences through the movie, sharing it with others – that’s a whole lot more interesting to me – seeing people not only respond to the entertainment but also the ideas presented in the movies,” he explains.

Saunders’ guest speakers are as varied as his films. When he showed *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* he had Dr. Dean Brooks introduce the film – the actual Superintendent of the Oregon State Hospital where the film was shot and who played the key role of Dr. Spivey in the movie. Joseph Egoyan has introduced his son’s, Atom Egoyan, films, such as *Exotica*, *Next Of Kin* and Oscar nominated *The Sweet Hereafter*, and everyone from the Chief of Psychiatry in the hospital to ex-patients have shared their views on films about mental illness. Saunders also provides a venue for other mental health consumers to show their art, sing a show tune, get acknowledged. He believes that movies can provide us with a vocabulary to understand and express ourselves, and Movie Monday has become the venue for this expression.

While Saunders is not naïve about the fragility of his recovery, he is full of hope and plans for the future. “I’ve taken some risks, but in my experience the benefits have been immense,” he says. “What would be the greatest compliment would be if someone else thought of doing this because of what I’ve done, use their own hospital in some other town and do the same thing. I’d be really happy. He calls it the ultimate compliment. “There’s got to be more empty theatres and more people with a bit of a spark who would like to do what I’m doing.”

The movie is over. Everyone has now left Saunders’ theatre of dreams. The evening’s spark is fading and the house lights are up. I stick around to help sweep up the spilled popcorn from under the rows of seats. In twenty minutes we have cleaned-up the theatre,

taken down the signs, put away the string of Christmas lights and locked the doors. Tomorrow morning when the doctors and nurses, the conference planners and consultants – when the professionals arrive – they will not know of the spark of magic that filled the theatre the night before. For Movie Monday is much more than showing movies on a Monday night!

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