

# Citylife

## I Lost it at the Movies

Reel Madness challenges the myths of mental illness

by DAVID LEACH

**H**ollywood has always been crazy about crazies. The demented villain. The manic artist. The moody loner. There's nothing like an off-kilter character to prompt actors into wide-eyed, arm-waving performances sure to leave them seeing little gold men come Oscar night. Geoffrey Rush in *Shine* and Jessica Lange in *Blue Sky* are just two recent examples.

But long after the acceptance speeches are done, movies can leave an enduring impression on viewers' attitudes about mental illness and its treatment—for better and for worse.

Bruce Saunders knows this well. For the last five-and-a-half years, as the "mogul" behind the Movie Monday series at Eric Martin Pavilion, the Royal Jubilee Hospital's psychiatric ward, Saunders has organized weekly video showings and discussions in which the general public can mix with patients, defusing the anxieties and misconceptions they both may have about the facility and each other.

A gardener by trade, he's also a former patient and continues to be treated for manic depression. While most of his Movie Monday video selections are well-made crowd-pleasers, he likes to pop in films about mental illness every so often to spark debate—and he's developed strong opinions about how madness has been represented on the big screen.

"The ones I find offensive are often ones that are really well accepted as movies about mental illness," says Saunders, citing *Sling Blade* and *Silence of the Lambs* as films that confuse, respectively, mental disability and psychopathy with mental illness in the popular imagination.

To counter misleading impressions about mental health issues—and to showcase some of his favourite movies—Saunders has helped organize Reel Madness, a five-day festival of feature films, documentaries and experimental shorts. The program ranges from *Within These Walls*, Vancouver filmmaker Jill Stainsby's exploration of her own and other patients' recovery, to *Stuart Saves His Family*, the light self-help parody starring *Saturday Night Live* alumnus Al Franken. One of the most popular screenings should be *Completely Cuckoo*—an insider's peek at the making of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* that played to a packed house last November at Toronto's Rendezvous with Madness festival.

**S**aunders hopes both movie buffs and mental health professionals will attend the films and discussions at the festival, which he promises will break down "myths about conventional treatment" by showing that "people need more than just medication". But he prefers dialogues to diatribes, and refuses to demonize the profession. "There's a lot of movies about psychiatrists using their powers to overwhelm people—like *Big Nurse*," says Saunders. "People come away feeling that all help at psychiatric hospitals will be evil—that's a dangerous thought as well."

Even as we chat in his Oak Bay home, we're interrupted by a phone call: a representative from Ely Lilly has offered to sponsor the festival. But won't skeptics question Reel Madness's independence and integrity if funded by the makers and marketers of Prozac?

"There are poor doctors and there are excellent doctors," explains Saunders of the dangers of blanket judgments about treatments. "I've been lucky enough to get excellent treatment. I need the chemical intervention, but I've certainly been helped by a counsellor suggesting that I do this instead of that with my time, that I pay more attention to my family instead of going off on tangents."

What both the general public and health professionals need to understand, he says, is that the individual experiences of mental illness often defy rigid clinical definitions or popular stereotypes, that in preventative treatments doctors need to first listen to patients then help them balance both brain chemistry and their often turbulent lives.

"It would be neat if that wisdom from the street can seep back into the system," says Saunders, "because it's vastly more expensive to treat people once they're really sick."

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▲  
Clive Holden,  
filmmaker

**F**or Clive Holden, looking through the lens of his 16mm camera was a way to reconcile the anger and fear, guilt and loss, both he and his parents felt about his older brother, Niall, a schizophrenic who has lived in Vancouver's Riverview Hospital for over two decades.

"Family members of people with schizophrenia are rarely able to be honest because their focus is on the person who's sick," says Holden, a Nanaimo-born author, filmmaker, and spoken word correspondent for CBC's *Definitely Not the Opera*. "So I wanted to do something partly about Niall and partly about my own feelings, too."

Holden filmed a short feature *Gordon's Head* based on his experiences growing up with his brother near Cadboro Bay, then followed it with a 10-minute experimental "film-poem" called *Hitler!*, which he'll introduce on Reel Madness's opening night at Cinecenta. The title comes from one of the few words (along with "Yoko Ono" and "hamburger") Niall can still utter after suffering a massive stroke in his late 20s.

For *Hitler!*, Holden edited a montage of frames from old 8mm family movies, slow motion urban scenes, and close-up footage of Niall taken at Riverview, then layered in his own spoken word script and a haunting saxophone soundtrack by Vancouver street musician Max Murphy. It's an elusive yet touching portrait of a brother, locked away by mental illness, whom Holden still considers "part of my life's riddle."

"It seems like a fluke of fate that a person so close to you can go that way, and you don't," says Holden. "It makes you think about the nature of reality, why some of us can stay on the side of the line we stay on and others cross that line into psychosis"

The creative impulse, says Holden, can often drive a person to the edge of what's understood as sanity. "Any artist will go close to that line to explore it in their art, but you don't want to go past that line and become dysfunctional."

By featuring films, like *Hitler!*, that explore the borderlands of mental illness, Bruce Saunders hopes to further dissolve the barriers between patients, professionals and the public—and prove that a festival of madness can be a very sane project indeed. ★

*Reel Madness opens Thursday, January 14, 7:15 p.m. at Cinecenta, then continues afternoons and evenings until January 18 at the Eric Martin Pavilion theatre. For more info, call 595-FLIC or check the Calendar.*