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▼ **A CLOSER LOOK**

Depression spurs reel madness

OPRAH. COP SHOWS. Soaps. All of it at distracting volume, coming from two TVs on two different channels. It was enough to drive a person mad.

And that was about the last thing Bruce Saunders needed as he fought his way up from the depths of depression. The relentless television and boredom he endured during two eight-week stints under psychiatric care in Eric Martin Pavilion sent him scrambling for an entertainment alternative.



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Saunders came across a theatre downstairs and got the OK to show videos every Monday. When patients didn't turn out in as large of numbers as expected, the video nights were opened to the public as well.

That was five years ago, and Movie Mondays are still going strong. A typical audience in the 100-seat theatre is a mix of people in streetwear and hospital attire, the artificial boundaries between who is sick and who is well cancelled out by the desire to see a good movie for cheap.

The exposure alone has doubtlessly enlightened moviegoers, some of whom once thought Saunders shouldn't show movies with subtitles because "mentally ill people can't read them." But now he's taking enlightenment to the next level with Reel Madness, the film festival that begins Thursday.

The concept behind the five-day festival is to use a movie about mental illness to spark a post-film discussion, thus raising awareness all round. Jack Nicholson's portrayal of an obsessive compulsive in *As Good As It Gets*, for instance, could become the jumping-off point to learn more about the disorder.

"It's very hard to get the general public, even health professionals, using movies to spur interest and discussion on these issues," says Saunders. "But one of the worst things about mental illness is that it's isolating and shameful, and talking about it is the way around that."

The movie industry has had a long-standing love affair with mental illness, with mixed results. Movies like *Shine*, *The Hanging Garden* and *Awakenings* have sought to explain the complex human dynamics behind mental health issues. Others — *Psycho*, *The Exorcist*, *Dressed to Kill* — have simply cranked up the misunderstanding several notches and played on wrong-headed fears.

"We mix in movies about mental illness regularly at Movie Mondays. Quite early on, I realized there were things I could do to break down the barriers," says Saunders. "In the first five months after we started Movie Mondays, I showed *Benny and Joon*. People with the illness could relate; people without it could understand."

Saunders has wanted to do a film festival for a long time, and the success this winter of Toronto's Rendezvous with Madness convinced him to go ahead. His continuing mental illness is both an inspiration and a hurdle as he works out festival logistics with co-ordinator Bruce Wallace.

"With something like the festival, I've got to work hard to keep it together. You're vulnerable if you're manic," says Saunders. "But I'm damn lucky to have my family, because they've helped me out a lot all along. If I'm up at five in the morning writing or something, they understand."

Saunders was 24 when his sister, also manic depressive, committed suicide. But it would take several years and his own suicide attempt before he knew he had the illness as well: "I just thought I was quiet, a bit of a misfit."

His treatment began in earnest nine years ago, and "it's been a rocky road" since then. But planning Movie Mondays has helped, as has the calm that comes from digging in the ground.

"I'm a landscape gardener, and my psychologist told me to guarantee I'd do three hours of gardening today. He told me to stay grounded."

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