

Festival unspools showcase of mental health films

BY MICHAEL D. REID
Times Colonist staff

IF A MENTALLY ILL PERSON pushes a commuter onto a subway track in Toronto or someone suffering from manic depression shoots a bystander in Australia, chances are we'll soon be reading about it in the newspaper.

Bruce Saunders has had enough of those bad news stories. And he's determined to do something about it.

One of the ways he has been challenging common perceptions about mental illness is through Movie Monday, his popular weekly series of free screenings at the Eric Martin Pavilion that is entering its eighth year. Another is through his spinoff festival Reel Madness, which tonight unspools its third annual showcase of off-Hollywood movies about mental health problems and how we react to them.

"It's amazingly difficult to get the good news about mental illness out there," laments Saunders, 46. "We



Bruce Saunders: Challenging perceptions of mental illness through films.

John McKay/Times Colonist

at Jubilee Hospital's mental health facility, he is manic depressive himself and a devoted visitor to his 82-year-old mother, an Alzheimer's patient. He has risen above his disease.

The wiry, articulate film buff, family man and landscape gardener describes his cinematic brainchild as a therapeutic experience. And his efforts have not gone unrewarded. Whidbey Island's Giraffe Project gave Saunders a "Giraffe," for having stuck his neck out in attempts to create a positive outlet of a negative. And the Canada Council has increased its funding for this year's Reel Madness, which also receives support from corporate sponsors, the Canadian Mental Health Association, Capital Health Region and "my mom and dad," among others.

Modelled on Toronto's Rendezvous with Madness, Saunders's variation is expanding its scope this year in attempts to appeal to the general public and those he describes as "consumers" of mental health services.

"It's important that people who have illnesses participate as well as the art crowd," says Saunders. "It's a drug to exclude people from the films that are about them."

Please see REEL MADNESS, B5

Reel Madness Film Festival

What: An Exploration of Mental Illness and Recovery Through Film and Video

Where: Movie Monday Theatre, Eric Martin Pavilion, 1900 Block Fort Street

When: Jan. 18-22, screenings nightly at 6:30

Admission: By donation.

Festival Workshops

Sat., 1-4 p.m.: How to Survive as a Filmmaker, with Lulu Keating (\$10)

Sun., 1-4 p.m.: Taking a Topic of Social Relevance...And Telling It in a Dramatic Context, with Davor Marjanovic (\$15)

Pre-registration by e-mail: bsanders@islandnet.com

Info: 595-FLIC

Reel Madness: Entertaining and provocative

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As always, Saunders aims to provoke thought as much as entertain.

"We want to present things in a way for people to react more positively to illness," he says, adding it's okay if filmgoers feel uncomfortable by what they see. "You want to challenge their ideas and make them think but you don't want to scare anyone."

The film most likely to provoke a mixture of outrage and stunned disbelief is *Dad*, Regina filmmaker Chris Triffo's controversial, devastating documentary about his estranged father, a drug-addicted paranoid schizophrenic whose mistreatment of his children triggered a legacy of despair and substance abuse. Although Triffo's bleakly stylized, edgy and painfully personal film has been praised and won awards, it has also drawn criticism because of the manipulative, ethically questionable methods the understandably angry filmmaker uses to portray a well-educated family man's regeneration into an abusive, toothless monster who tried to murder his own mother.

"I hope people don't walk out or not engage in discussion," says Saunders. "My purpose is to get people talking about it constructively."

The film is being screened Friday with an updated version of *Gordon's Head*, Nanaimo-born poet and filmmaker Clive Holden's experimental meditation on a teenager's reaction to growing up with a schizophrenic older brother. Holden is flying in from Winnipeg to introduce his film. The features will be preceded by *Pride*, a short film about the consequences of racism by native filmmaker Michelle Ryan and Jessica Salo, a fellow student at the Gulf Islands Film and Television School.

Reel Madness kicks off tonight with *The Moody Brood*, Vancouver-based filmmaker Lulu Keating's remembrance of life with 10 siblings growing up in a small Catholic community. Keating, who will be in attendance, will also introduce her short films *Lulu's Back in Town* and *Ladies in Waiting*, and will lead a workshop titled "How to Survive as a Filmmaker Creatively and Financially" Saturday at 1 p.m.

Says Saunders: "Her family was made up of a lot of very creative and interesting people and she wanted to tell their story first."

Another highlight is Saturday night's screening of *My Father's Angel*, writer-director Davor Marjanovic's unsettling and deeply moving Genie-nominated drama about the haunting impact of war atrocities in Sarajevo on two troubled Bosnian families — one Muslim, one Serb — who now live in Vancouver. Marjanovic will introduce the film that was co-produced by Saltspring Island's Mort Ransen. The director will also lead a workshop on making socially relevant dramas on Sunday at 1 p.m.

On Sunday, which Saunders describes as "the relatively quiet night," Vancouver filmmaker

Reel Madness film festival features several films based on painful family experiences.



Katherine Surridge will introduce her film *The Goodbye*, on a double-bill with *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* as part of the "Caring for Our Aging Parents" event.

"It might not be as polished as *Dad* but it's very authentic," says Saunders of *The Goodbye*. "It might even seem a little corny if it was made up, but what makes it fascinating is that it's a true story."

Based on personal experience, the 22-minute film observes the effects of mental illness on family and friends through the story of Emily, an elderly woman with Alzheimer's disease who disappears and shows up at a palliative care ward just in time to bid farewell to her best friend, who is dying of pancreatic cancer. In the Oscar-nominated documentary that accompanies it, a daughter wrestles with the challenges of caring for a mother with Alzheimer's disease who she doesn't want to put in a home.

For the closing night presentation, Saunders is bringing back Vancouver filmmaker Scott Smith's *Rollercoaster*, which received the CHUM-TV Award for Best Canadian First Feature at last year's Victoria Independent Film and Video Festival. It's a stylish, emotionally involving and downright chilling drama about a group of troubled teenagers who plan to commit suicide at an abandoned amusement park. The feature will be preceded by David Birdsell's *Blue*, a short about a boy, a suicidal man and car thieves who cross paths in an inner city.

Admission to all screenings is by donation.

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