

HEALTHY LIFE

Also ran
in Victoria's
Times Colonist
Mar. 24
2002

EDITOR LUCY HYSLOP 604-605-2037 / FAX 604-605-2521 / E-mail lhyslop@pacpress.southam.ca

THE VANCOUVER SUN

C MONDAY, MARCH 18, 2002

B7

Movie madness

Oscar-nominated Hollywood film, *A Beautiful Mind*, is being lauded by health care professionals for a sensitive portrayal of schizophrenia that may help educate the public

Karen Gram



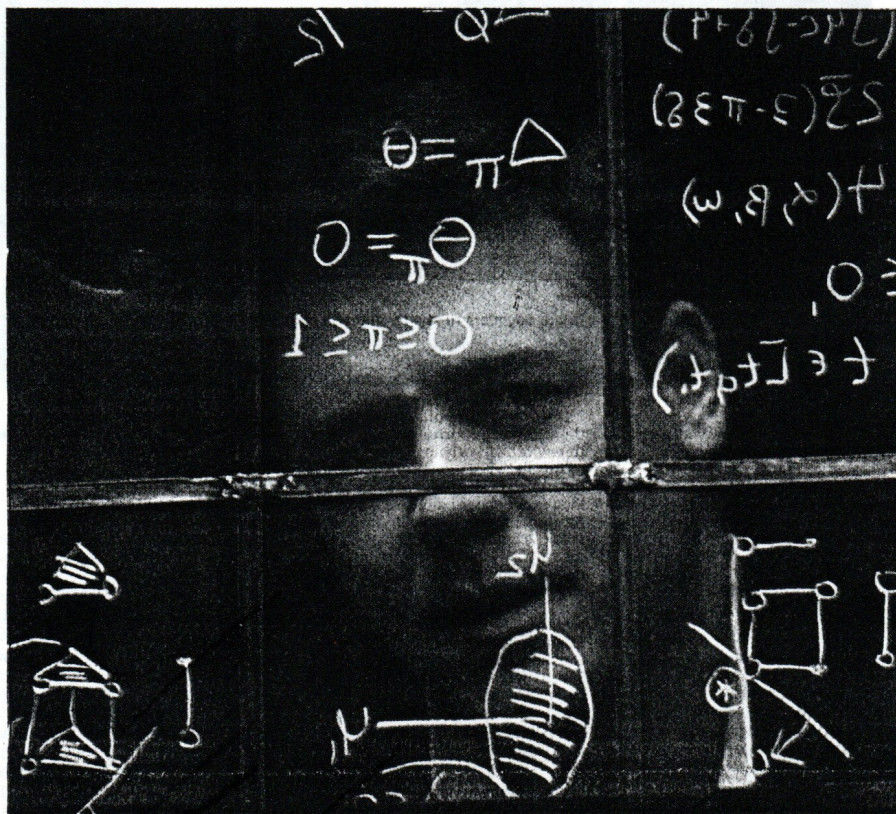
When the lights went up after Jane Duval saw the film *A Beautiful Mind*, about a Nobel Laureate with schizophrenia, she noticed the absence of the usual jokes among audience members. You know the ones: "I'm schizophrenic and so am I." Or, "My daughter has schizophrenia. At least she'll never be lonely."

People seated around her were crying or sighing with empathy. Unlike other films depicting the disease — think of looneytoons Jim Carrey in *Me, Myself and Irene*, a film that drew public protest from mental health providers — Duval knew she had seen something onscreen that might ultimately become a valuable tool for public education. As communications director for the B.C. Schizophrenia Society, she is often in the position of doing damage control when a movie about the misunderstood brain disease comes out. This time she didn't have to. There were a few inaccuracies, but for the most part, she had only accolades to offer.

"Movies are hugely influential," she says. People get lost in them, and feel the emotions of the characters. They are a total immersion experience. According to Duval, what the public takes away from a film is a perception, good or bad, that can influence the quality of life for people living with a disease like schizophrenia, and their families.

Movies such as *Me, Myself and Irene* perpetuate the myth that schizophrenia is a split-personality disorder. That it is something to laugh at. By showing the disease in a realistic way, and by making it Oscar-quality, the makers of *A Beautiful Mind* could blow that myth off the silver screen and out of people's minds forever.

The split personality theme has always been box-office fodder for Hol-



Russell Crowe portrays John Nash in *A Beautiful Mind*. The movie has been hailed as a breakthrough, allowing movie patrons to understand, for the first time, some of the difficulties facing schizophrenics.

lywood, starting with films such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Three Faces of Eve*, *Sybil* and so on down to Jim Carrey's offering. The standard recipe goes something like this: a lead character who veers between terrifying monster-with-a-human-face and tragic victim. Throw in a little electroshock therapy — always good for a dramatic screen visual, but not a treatment that is used for schizophrenia except in very specific instances — and you've got high drama. But it hasn't always been good for people coping

with the disease, and the loved ones who struggle to help them.

A Beautiful Mind, starring Russell Crowe, has already won four Golden Globe awards and is up for eight Academy Awards. It is inspired by the true-life story of John Forbes Nash Jr., a brilliant mathematician who seemed destined for great things when he first arrived at Princeton University in the late 1940s.

His doctoral dissertation in game theory would earn him a Nobel Prize in economics 45 years later. But Nash's stel-

lar trajectory was dashed at age 30 when, as a full professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he developed paranoid schizophrenia. The disease left him house or hospital-bound, periodically shifting from a medication-induced stupor to non-medicated delusional rhapsies. The brilliant mathematician seemed doomed.

After years of hospitalizations Nash fought back, struggling to overcome the disease by forcing his delusions to the sidelines. He returned to Princeton, first

as "the phantom of Fine Hall," scribbling weird but witty messages on blackboards, later as a mentor of students and eventually as a Nobel Laureate.

The movie has been criticized for glossing over some of the unsavoury elements of Nash's life — during a delusional period he reputedly made anti-semitic remarks — but, says Duval, "it managed to show the reality of schizophrenic delusions and how difficult it is to pull yourself out of that."

In order to become functional again, Nash, a social misfit, had to give up his only friend, a roommate from Princeton who had supported him for years, but who was, in fact a creation of his own delusional imagination.

"Imagine how hard it would be to get rid of that," says Dr. Bill MacEwan, a Vancouver psychiatrist. Add to that the fact that the most common characteristic of schizophrenics is a lack of insight into their own illness, such that they rarely come to understand that their delusions are not real, and the level of difficulty mounts.

Through *A Beautiful Mind*, the audience, and the public, has the opportunity to understand this for the first time. And Duval is grateful because movies have a powerful influence on the way people see the world.

Bruce Saunders, a Victoria-based man with bi-polar disorder, knows first hand the value of film as an educational tool. He runs a regular Monday night film series called Movie Monday open to in-patients and the public at Eric Martin Pavilion, a psychiatric facility in Victoria. He says movies are influential simply because they are popular. "It raises the whole issue up," he says. "People will turn out for a movie, but not for a meeting about schizophrenia," he says, adding that film engages all the senses and the intellect.

A discussion after a film about mental illness enhances the experience, he adds. "When they engage with a film, people think, and when they engage in discussion afterward, people think and learn."

Where the movies, with their tight story lines leave off, people like Duval and Saunders pick up, telling people, now thirsty for information, more about the disease.

By showing movies in a psychiatric facility that are open to the public, Saunders wants to demonstrate by doing that people, like himself, can function with a mental illness.

See **BREAKTHROUGH** B8