

# Breakthrough movies air out serious issues



DIANA NETHERCOTT

Bruce Saunders runs a regular film series in the Eric Martin Pavilion theatre called Movie Monday.

## From B7

He also wants to offer the people on the ward an opportunity to do something normal, with normal people. But mostly, he wants to show good depictions of mental illness or the situations they experience to increase awareness. Awareness leads to change, he says.

The accuracy of the portrayal of the disease in *A Beautiful Mind*, is what makes it a breakthrough, not just for Hollywood, but for those who struggle for acceptance and understanding. John Nash's schizophrenia developed in young adulthood, as with most. It caused paranoia, hallucinations and social withdrawal, as with most, although usually the hallucinations are auditory or sensory — not visual as was shown in the film. (Some people believe they have bugs crawling all over them or they are constantly

thirsty and if not prevented, can drink water until they die.) Nash was in the unlucky one per cent of people worldwide who develop it — more than 300,000 people in Canada.

*A Beautiful Mind* shows how destructive the disease can be. But it also shows Nash conquering it in the end, allowing him to return to his work. In this, the film was also reasonably accurate although it is more likely that the effects of the disease waned than that Nash beat it through sheer willpower. Despite the wide-spread misconception that schizophrenia is degenerative like Alzheimers or Huntington's, it is actually a developmental brain disease in which life experience and neuro-transmitters combine to make abnormal patterns in the brain. It is these patterns that cause the paranoia and hallucinations, says Dr. Bill Honer, a psychiatrist and Jack Bell chair of schizophrenia research at the

University of B.C.

Schizophrenia can be a life sentence, especially if it's not treated early because the abnormal patterns become hard wired over time, but many people do recover. In papers published between 1972 and 1995, researchers found that 20 years after their discharge from a mental hospital between 46 and 68 per cent of patients had either fully recovered — they had no symptoms of mental illness, took no psychiatric medication, worked and had normal relationships — or were, like John Nash, significantly improved but impaired in one area of functioning.

Although the patients received a variety of treatments, researchers speculate that the improvement may reflect both an ability to manage illness that accompanies age coupled with the natural decline, beginning in the mid-40s, in the levels of brain chemicals that may be linked to schizophrenia.

Despite the opportunities for managing the disease, and for recovery, a 1998 report released by the US Screen Actors Guild found that characters with a mental illness in American primetime TV were depicted as the most dangerous of all demographic groups with 60 per cent involved in crime or violence. Movies are much the same as evidenced by films such as *Psycho* or *Silence of the Lambs*. It is such depictions that make it difficult for the average person to feel empathy for someone with a mental illness. Instead, people either fear or laugh at them.

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**BRUCE SAUNDERS**  
Former patient

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“*Shine* and *A Beautiful Mind* are breakthrough movies,” says Saunders. “They show that you can get better. People will walk out with an idea that will be incorporated into their thinking even without the intellectual process. They will think a little differently about people who are different from them. That is a huge step forward.”

Dr. Harry Karlinski, director of continuing education in the Psychiatry department at the University of B.C., has just begun to use movies as a teaching tool. He believes that even the bad ones can become a springboard for a good discussion among professionals. “Virtually every psychiatric disorder seems to be fodder for the film industry,” he says. “It’s a powerful way to teach because it’s more than just text, it’s images, story, dramatic technique. As an educator, we should be taking advantage of it.”

Karlinski is hosting a film night in June at Pacific Cinematheque where he will show the film *Completely Cuckoo* which documents the making of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, another film considered groundbreaking because it used real in-patients. Dr. Dean Brooks the superintendent of Oregon State Hospital where *Cuckoo's Nest* was filmed and who appeared in the film will speak at the event. Karlinski is targeting mental health professionals for his audience. He has also asked Saunders to speak on the panel.

When it's his turn, Saunders will probably admit that though no movie is perfect, Hollywood has done the mental health community a great service with *A Beautiful Mind* because it educates while it entertains. “Better education and knowledge leads to a better society,” says Saunders. “It's got to.”

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