

Therapy is boffo box office

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Bruce Saunders isn't one of those guys who exclaims "Thank God it's Friday!" at the end of the week. The Oak Bay movie buff and landscape gardener's motto is the opposite: "Thank God it's Monday!"

For the past 15 years, Saunders, diagnosed with manic depression (now usually known as bipolar disorder), has organized free Monday night screenings of provocative, carefully selected films with discussions at a tiny theatre in Royal Jubilee Hospital's Eric Martin Pavilion.

Movie Monday, his therapeutic labour of love, is Victoria's most inspiring cinematic success story.

"We manic depressives can imagine great things," Saunders, 58, jokes. "You have to be lucky enough to have the stability to have the components in place. I had a nice theatre, a job that supported me and a wonderful family and other compadres."

His film series idea was hatched in the spring of 1993 when he was being treated for depression and a suicide attempt. Irked by "crazy-making" trashy talk shows and violent TV programs shown in his ward, he sought a creative alternative.

Saunders discovered a 100-seat theatre with a video projector at Eric Martin and began showing films for patients and consumers of mental health services before going public. Eager to demolish the stigma surrounding mental illness -- one lamentably perpetuated in Hollywood movies like *Me, Myself and Irene* -- his aim was to show films that realistically depicted conditions such as bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and other illnesses.

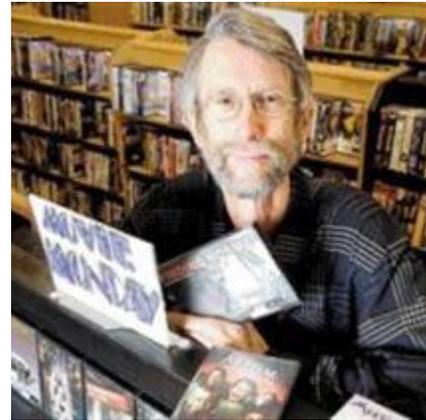
With support from the audio-visual department, Movie Monday was up and running. Today it's funded by the Vancouver Island Health Authority, Canada Council and sponsors, donations and popcorn sales (at 75 cents a bag).

It began June 14, 1993, with an audience of eight for a showing of *Cannery Row* -- to be re-screened during Monday's 15th-anniversary event featuring cake and a phone-in Q&A with writer-director David Ward -- and took on a life of its own.

Mental illness-themed movies including *Shine*, *Benny and Joon*, *Girl, Interrupted* and *A Beautiful Mind* have since been augmented by catalysts for social change such as *Fix* and *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*, a steady stream of mainstream fare and an increasingly impressive emphasis on Canadian films, many that might not even have opened here.

His eclectic film series is distinguished by the creative spins Saunders puts on the presentations. "When people gather for film entertainment a lot of other cool things can happen," he says.

When Saunders screened Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*, the filmmaker's father, Joseph Egoyan, provided a historical



CREDIT: Debra Brash, Times Colonist
Bruce Saunders has teamed his highly successful Movie Mondays with a special selection of videos at Yo Video, in Oak Bay.

perspective on his son's meditation on the 1915 Armenian genocide. Other guest speakers have included Dr. Dean Brooks, the superintendent of Oregon State Hospital, who was a technical adviser and played a psychiatrist in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, Oscar-nominated screenwriter Stewart Stern (*Sybil*, *Rachel, Rachel*) and Atanarjuat director Zacharias Kunuk.

Tentative future guests include Richie Mehta, director of *Amal*, and Bruce MacDonald (*The Tracey Fragments*).

The lanky and articulate film buff has also produced a series of Reel Madness festivals and collaborated with University of British Columbia department of psychiatry's Dr. Harry Karlinsky, whose *Frames of Mind* film series in Vancouver was inspired by Movie Monday.

His euphoria from sellouts of high-impact film events has been dampened by disappointment over low turnouts for other films, he says.

"My mood still goes up and down," he says, then quips: "If you don't come to my movies, I'll get depressed."

Speaking openly and with a sense of humour about mental illness is part of the healing process enhanced by his revolutionary film program, Saunders says. To make it even more accessible, he recently partnered with his local video store, *Yo Video*, which set up a library of titles with community value -- "a kind of Movie Monday to go."

As hard as he tries to destigmatize mental illness, Saunders can't convince everyone to go to the Eric Martin theatre. "I still run into people who say, 'If I go into a psychiatric hospital they won't let me out,' " he says, laughing.

"People shouldn't be scared. It's about discussions, ideas and good films. Every time I put one on, I learn new stuff."

As beneficial as his initiative has been, he realizes he still has an illness to manage.

"It's never lost on me, the miracle that I now have this great privilege of presenting the pick of the film industry to vibrant, engaged audiences -- downstairs in the same institution where I was once so absolutely without hope."

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BOX OFFICE: Movie Monday

When: Most Mondays, various other nights

Where: Eric Martin Pavilion theatre, 1900 block, Fort Street

Cost: Free, or by donation

Special event this Monday: 15th anniversary, featuring a screening of *Cannery Row* and Q&A session with David Ward

Future screenings: *River of Life* (June 23), *Louis 19: King of the Airwaves* (June 30)

Info: www.islandnet.com/mm