

The pharmacist of film

ROB WIPOND

Over 20 years, Bruce Saunders has built Movie Monday into one of Victoria's most enduringly popular arts events.

The police looked uncomfortable the night they came to Movie Monday. We'd just watched *Crisis Call*, an absorbing, emotional documentary exploring often volatile, sometimes deadly encounters between Canadian police and people with severe mental health problems. After the film, host Bruce Saunders introduced us to two Greater Victoria police officers whom he'd invited to share their perspectives and answer audience questions.

One important point, though, in case you don't know: The weekly film event Movie Monday takes place in a 100-seat theatre located at Royal Jubilee Hospital's Eric Martin Pavilion, formerly the psychiatric hospital and today still home to various psychiatric services. Probably at least half the audience that night was comprised of people who had a mental health diagnosis or knew someone who had one, including Saunders himself, diagnosed as bipolar. The ensuing discussion revealed a lot about the challenges faced by all sides, but at times it understandably took provocative, tense turns.

Afterwards, one of the local police officers contacted the Vancouver Island Health Authority to complain that he'd felt "attacked" at the "poorly moderated" event. Rumblings circulated that VIHA might pull the plug on Movie Monday. Saunders anxiously contacted other audience members to write up their own observations of the evening; however, the most important letter came unsolicited: The other local police officer dropped Saunders an email saying he was recommending his department purchase the "excellent" documentary, and adding that he was impressed by Saunders' "community-minded devotion" and felt "very good" about how "the police perspective was appreciated" by the Movie Monday audience.

"You don't always have witnesses to your dealings with police," says the 63-year-old Saunders to me with the kind of light-hearted smile that can only come years after things long since turned out okay. "Luckily for me, there were a lot of witnesses that night."

In truth, it's always easy to find plenty of witnesses who'll express their support as the charming, daring, stimulating series approaches its 20th anniversary in June.

"It's an institution that enriches our community," says Drew Barnes, VIHA's coordinator of mental health rehab services. "Bruce is really well respected in the community, and I think a lot of people have admiration for the passion and creativity that he puts into this."



Bruce Saunders

PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

Barnes enjoys Movie Monday as "just a great film experience." However, the frequent presence of films and discussions related to mental health is central to VIHA's long-standing support. "What a great vehicle for opening discussion about mental illness," says Barnes. "And what a great way to reduce stigma and to explore mental illness in a forthright way."

Mark Clarkson agrees. Clarkson, diagnosed with bipolar, has been so inspired by Saunders' efforts he's become a regular volunteer helper. Clarkson suggests it's particularly valuable that Movie Monday is held in the (now-former) psychiatric ward where ex-patients and the general public can congregate. "I grew up in this town, and we'd tease kids, 'You should be in [the Eric Martin],'" explains Clarkson. "So I like the idea that it's a way of dealing with the stigma of mental illness, just having the movie there at the Eric Martin."

Barnes also suggests Saunders is providing "healthy watching" for our entire community. "I sort of see Bruce... as a pharmacist for movies," says Barnes. "Bruce I believe has the capacity to prescribe movies in a way that may generate hope, or support people in recovery."

"Basically, I show films I like," says Saunders less calculatingly, noting that his mind has never lent itself well to the prolonged concentration required for reading, but can easily get "swept up" in a good story with captivating audio-visuals. "I try to mix it up intentionally, so that it's entertaining as well as thought-provoking. My territorial focus seems to have become recovery stories and inspiring and hopeful stuff. But then sometimes you just want to show something that's fun." The post-film discussions, he says, emerge naturally. "When you show a film at my venue, there are a lot of people who will engage with the hypothetical or the vicarious experience that they just had. And it's almost boggling how much people open up when they've just seen someone doing something similar or opposite to what they would've done."

Whether emotional pharmacist or simply fan, Saunders has built a unique, popular regular event, one that operates effectively and entertainingly in the creative spaces between art, community dialogue, and mental health. Even with a less-than-stellar film or presenter, there's often a feeling in the room that one is still participating in something valuable for our community by giving space for lesser-heard voices and perspectives. It survives partly thanks to VIHA, the Canada Council for the Arts, and other donors giving Movie Monday

SAUNDER'S PERSONAL STORY reveals much about why Movie Monday is important not just for him, but for our mental health system and our whole community.

a \$30,000 annual budget to pay for film rights, guest expenses, and a stipend to Saunders, who does everything from finding and booking films and guests, to event promotion, discussion facilitation, and room clean up. Admission is free or by donation—making it certainly the most accessible regular movie night in town—and there's a small concession that even has popcorn from a cinema-style popcorn-maker.

Film fare is enormously diverse, but there are definite emphases on artistic and independent films, documentaries, Canadiana, and stories involving people facing psychological challenges like psychosis, depression, or autism. Saunders admits that in the early years sometimes only his family attended, but nowadays the theatre is half to completely full nearly every week with audiences as diverse as the characters that grace the eight-by-twelve-foot video-projection screen.

While Movie Monday isn't the only local place to see films supplemented with group discussions, Saunders is in rarefied company in how creatively he goes about organizing events. He goes to great lengths to bring in (or at least get on speakerphone) producers, directors, actors, and others connected to the films, and frequently reaches out to local professionals, educators, activists, and others whom he thinks might learn something valuable from, or offer something valuable to, a particular viewing and discussion. He brought in an indigenous drummer from Nunavut for the showing of *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*. He convinced a local collector to park a rare model car from the *Rain Man* road trip outside the theatre. He tracked down the troubled autistic child featured in the documentary *The Boy Inside*, who then came here as a young man years after the film was made and spoke eloquently.

It's this inclusivity and creativity that impresses Ben Ziegler, who's been a semi-regular attendee for many years. Ziegler says he comes mainly just to see good, lesser-known films. "They often touch on different characters and different 'states of being,' shall we say," comments Ziegler. "They really portray characters maybe not quite in the mainstream, and if you're open to it, it can be very inspiring." A professional collaboration consultant and mediator, Ziegler also respects the casual atmosphere for discussion created by Saunders, whom he feels is always working to be inclusive, patient, and non-judgmental. "It's more than just a movie, it's a community place, it's a place for conversation, often on what I think are very relevant topics," says Ziegler. "In many ways, [Saunders] is very much a leader."

Such accolades are a source of pride for Saunders, but he puts them in perspective: After two suicide attempts, he says, "I'm just surprised that I'm still here." And his personal story reveals much about why Movie Monday is important not just for him, but for our mental health system and our whole community.

IN THE EARLY NINETIES, SAUNDERS was twice hospitalized at Eric Martin. With a loving wife and two children, a house, and a successful gardening business (which he still runs today), the native Victorian can't explain why he tried to kill himself by sitting inside his car with his leaf blower running, and again four years later lying in his basement under a tarp with a running lawn mower.

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“I’d been struggling most of my life,” he says. Saunders points variously to contributing factors over the years such as dropping out of UVic’s art program, his sister’s suicide, a series of surgeries, and Victoria’s dismal winters when he wasn’t working. “I didn’t quite know what the problem was. Mostly depression...I was just getting discouraged, depressed, and frustrated that I wasn’t able to figure it out.” But while sitting one evening in the psychiatric ward in 1993, there came an unexpected twist in the plot of Saunders’ life.

“We’re sitting there in our little dressing gowns before bed, and we’re watching a TV movie with a bipolar guy with a shotgun pointed at his hostage’s head. And there’s this SWAT team taking a bead on this guy, trying to get him through the window.” Saunders face grins as he recounts the “crapola” made-for-TV tale, and finally he bursts into laughter. “We’re sitting there with our mugs of hot chocolate trying to figure out who to hope for—I had the same diagnosis as that guy!”

Saunders continues more seriously. “They actually had two televisions on either side of the common area blaring away. And you’re sitting there with your little diagnosis, trying to get your head straight. It just wasn’t a very conducive environment to getting well. And even when I was really ill, I could tell what was good entertainment and not; I could still enjoy a film.”

A fellow patient led him to the hospital’s little-used educational theatre, and the proverbial lights came on in Saunders’ head. Why not show thoughtful films that might actually make patients feel better, or learn something about themselves, or start discussions about inspired ways to address their shared challenges? And why not invite families, friends, and the general public to attend, too?

“[VIHA representatives] were generous enough to give me permission to use the theatre and try it out,” says Saunders. “Eventually I got a key, and it got easier and easier. The hospital has been pretty supportive all the way along.”

During that period, Saunders also began responding well to relatively low doses of two psychiatric drugs. “It’s a bit of a duck shoot; it took me years to find something,” he says. “I don’t have a little Bruce Saunders test control group and me, but it seems to have kept me in a pretty functional zone most of the time...It’s working, so I’m not changing it.”

That said, he firmly believes that Movie Monday has been even more important to his mental health than the medications, and this perspective has made him form some strong opinions about improving our mental health system.

“It’s been huge for me personally,” says Saunders of Movie Monday. “My attitude to life generally and my gardening job just all got a lot easier when I had this other thing that was beyond just plugging away and making the money and doing the job. This was a whole overarching creative process that I was engaged in.”

Saunders relates this to the story of the inventor Alexander Graham Bell, the author of whose biography he recently brought in. Bell’s eccentric, sometimes dysfunctional behaviour might have, by today’s mental health standards, got him tranquillized. “[A mental health



Mark Clarkson

PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

condition] is not just an illness; it’s a special way of thinking, and it can be pretty positive,” says Saunders. “There’s a creativity that people have that, if it’s engaged, can really be a huge part of their wellness program. I think psychiatry often just overlooks that.”

Saunders says he feels lucky to have had “fairly democratic doctors” who have in fact encouraged and supported his own creative approaches to recovery. But he says he’s sometimes appalled when he hears about psychiatrists taking away patients’ rights even to participate in treatment decisions, which he feels can worsen a depressed or psychotic person’s sense of disempowerment, disengagement, and isolation. “The worst thing for people is to just be put on the shelf.”

So while Saunders believes drugs can help, he now believes more strongly in broader “psychosocial rehabilitation” (PSR) approaches to mental health. PSR focuses on providing social supports and art, education, work training, and other opportunities that empower people in developing their own recovery strategies.

“I value support groups, peer support, peer advocacy, peer mentorship, employment,” says Saunders. “I see people coming in out of the cold and finding out that there are ways of coping, there are resources that we who’ve been through these experiences can help others to access. You feel less isolated and often more hopeful. Best case is, the lights kind of come on, and you think, ‘Okay, I can cope with this; these people are, and these are good people.’”

Saunders’ description is actually a good explanation of how Movie Monday itself “works” for some people. For example, regular attendee Wayne Cruickshanks has a bipolar diagnosis, and I ask him how he’d describe Movie Monday’s films and discussions, especially those revolving around mental health issues. “Reassuring. Validating each other’s experiences. Learning from each other,” responds Cruickshanks. “It’s really great. I don’t know what we’d do without Bruce.”

Cruickshanks also values how Saunders frequently helps his peers get a leg up in other ways. “He’s very encouraging to our community,” says Cruickshanks. “Once, Bruce invited me to show my photography...So I had a little slide show before the movie. That meant a lot to me.”

All of this is why Saunders says he wishes more mental health professionals would come out for events like *Crisis Call* or *Open Dialogue*. The latter film is about an encouragingly-successful Finnish approach to emergency mental health interventions that involves multi-disciplinary teams meeting with families in the patient’s home for wide-open group discussions. Saunders constantly posters in places mental health professionals frequent, and reaches out to many personally. He once even ran a promotional offer of free popcorn for mental health professionals. (“It flopped,” Saunders says, but then promptly promises free popcorn for any mental health professional who brings a page of this article to Movie Monday.)

“I’ve always felt that there’s a firewall between the professional mental health system and peer-driven events like Movie Monday,” says Saunders, wondering aloud if many professionals regard Movie

Getting the most health out of summer

Monday as just an “amusing little sideline” to real treatment. (Psychosocial rehab is actually foundational to most BC “best practices” mental health guides; however, in practice, our mental health system supports drug-centred approaches far more than PSR approaches.) To this day, Saunders still encounters Eric Martin staff who don’t even know Movie Monday exists. “It’s really difficult to find ways actually to interact with the system. It’s pretty resistant. ‘Treatment resistant,’ I think is the term,” says Saunders, deliberately employing the phrase psychiatric professionals use to describe people who don’t want psychiatric drugs.

Nevertheless, Saunders doesn’t want to sound complaining so much as inviting. “I’m interested to have both sides listen to the other side,” he says. “I don’t think we need to be as polarized as we are. And if we’re not as polarized, then we might find some central, common ground that would be good for everybody.”

THE *OPEN DIALOGUE* SHOWING in May proves to be a classic Movie Monday event. During the discussion, Saunders names several mental health professionals he personally invited who haven’t shown—seemingly less to shame them publicly than to reassure interested audience members that he hasn’t given up. Nevertheless, the people who are here, ready and open for dialogue, make up what Movie Monday is really all about, and that quickly becomes obvious to everyone. An invited medical researcher provides her perspectives of the scientific literature on the techniques described in the film. A director of a Vancouver peer-run mental health organization describes the feedback she heard when presenting the film publicly several times. Saunders finds ways to acknowledge and validate each person’s perspective as audience members variously criticize the film’s amateurish production qualities, emphasize the challenges of dealing with people who hear telephone poles talking to them, and hail emergency interventions that involve communicating instead of forcibly tranquilizing. A few audience members just seem to want to be heard for whatever they have to say—and appear genuinely more at peace once they are.

Later, chatting by the concession, I ask Bruce’s wife of 39 years, Laurel, what Movie Monday has meant to Bruce, and to their family. “It saved his life,” Laurel summarizes simply.

I pick up Movie Monday’s program before I leave. Late May/June events include a documentary about Canada’s genius (and prescription drug-addicted) pianist Glenn Gould, Philip Seymour Hoffman and Christopher Walken starring in a feature about a psychologically derailing string quartet, Victoria’s Uminari Taiko drummers playing live ahead of a documentary about a Nagasaki-based group of developmentally disabled drummers, and Movie Monday’s June 17 anniversary party accompanied by a film about elite players of Rubik’s Cube. The inspired, colourful madness of the line-up makes me laugh, and I imagine a lot of spirits have been lifted here over these past twenty years. Perhaps more than one life has been saved.

For more information see www.moviemonday.ca or call 250-595-3542.



Rob Wipond discloses that Bruce Saunders once paid him \$50 to screen Rob’s short, satirical videos, and yes, that may have biased Rob when evaluating Movie Monday’s inclusivity-fun-factor.

Summer is here and while the Island weather may be unpredictable there’s lots about the season that is not. We know that the sun will come out, we’ll kick off our shoes, we’ll be more active—and we’ll need more hydration.

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Above: Mojanda sandals by Juil footwear