

Nothin' funnier than schizophrenia.

Once again Hollywood has found that mental illness references are always good for a laugh.

I was vexed by a line in "America's Sweethearts" last weekend. John Cusack, who's character had a "breakdown" over seeing his ex-wife going out with another guy, says something like (and I'm not willing to sit through it again to get it just right) "Don't worry about me being alone, I have schizophrenia" Of course we all get the joke - split personality...he's always got company. Most of us got the reference.

There was a good amount of hilarity - again the misunderstanding, about what is often a terrifying and disabling condition, was perpetuated. And once again schizophrenia was confused with multiple personality or dissociative disorder.

I mulled it over and last Monday, when I had a near full theatre for my Movie Monday event, I broached the topic. I explained the reasons I felt it was detrimental to the acceptance and understanding of people experiencing those conditions. Put it open for comments.

A young woman, a regular, asked "Well what is schizophrenia then? I thought it was 'split personality'". I described as best I could the difference from what I've learned presenting films and attending workshops and lectures on both topics over the last eight years - schizophrenia being a brain disorder, a thought disorder, often involving visual and auditory hallucinations. Dissociative disorder has a different root usually involving childhood trauma or abuse that causes a person to invent other selves as an adaptation to the

pain. Both can be very scary and disabling conditions, not laughing matters and it's not helpful that they be used and confused by films like this and others (like "Me Myself and Irene") for cheap laughs.

As if on cue a young guy in the back row piped up with "I have schizophrenia. I hear and see things that aren't there, but I always know who I am. I'm John."

It was a cool moment. A great learning moment for everyone who was there. After a bit more discussion ninety people had a clearer idea of a couple of conditions that the pop media is determined to confuse. Then they were engrossed in "Traffic" one of the best and most popular films Hollywood has produced recently.

I am convinced though that "schizophrenia" is a poor name for that condition and should be renamed - as "manic depression" has been renamed "bipolar illness". The media just can't stop using it in situations like "The B C Government has a schizophrenic policy" I'm tired of sending off letters to try to get them to stop using the term in that context. After all, it comes from a root meaning "split". Lets find a better word for the illness.

Bruce Saunders Aug. 9/01

Pat Donaldson, Exec. Director of BCSS
Victoria Branch got back to me:

Hi Bruce

I agree wholeheartedly that I also get tired of hearing about schizophrenia as a split personality.

I will pass this on to one of our media watch people so maybe they can respond to it. It was good to hear that as a result of the movie a discussion ensued that may have clarified the illness to some. Keep up the good work.

Pat