

Bad endings

Lately I've become really conscious of bleak endings in movies about people who have mental illnesses. It's true that too often we do have nasty endings. But films are fiction and stories can be told without the quick and tidy jump off the bridge or rooftop, the hanging, the overdose....it happens often enough.

I think that when screenwriters don't choose more positive endings for their protagonists, we, as people with illnesses that come with a fair dollop of hopelessness built in, are encouraged to accept suicide as an appropriate end. Movies have a very persuasive role in our world and it's important to realise what we're being taught.

MM events like ORDINARY PEOPLE and DEAD POET SOCIETY dealt with suicide as did ROLLERCOASTER, TASTE OF CHERRY, ABOUT A BOY, MR JONES, and even THE FULL MONTY. In fact most films that approach mental illness realistically appropriately demonstrate that suicide is an often-present threat.

But the implications of how movies handle the topic of suicide struck me when the filmmaker and psychiatrist, Dr David Dawson, recently gave us a look at his new feature, DRUMMER BOY. It is a story of a young man becoming ill with schizophrenia. Typically he was on the run, paranoid, confused, unable to cope with the torment. It's an engrossing journey, but he sends him off the top of a building in the last frames, falling backward to his death. Damn!

I was incensed that this film had become another in the genre I have dubbed "Schizophrenia Snuff Films". Dr Dawson's earlier film called MANIC had a similar outcome. Another, a British film CAN YOU HEAR WHAT I'M THINKING starring Judy Dench and her husband as the parents of a young man, almost an identical plot had our protagonist filling his pockets with stones (Virginia Woolf style) and walking into a lake. Bummer. We don't need that!!

A new film at this year Vancouver Film Fest, SEE GRACE FLY, sounds promising (not?). The current choice in UBC's Frames of Mind series is equally dismal: REVOLUTION #9 "...desperate attempts to get him help are frustrated by the Kafkaesque

workings of the American mental health care system - leading to tragic results." Oh no! Here we go again.

Dr Dawson made the point that we must realise how dangerous these illnesses are. But, please, not by knocking off the person we've spent the last hour and a half getting to care for. In GIRL INTERRUPTED, a secondary character succumbs, but we see that our main, empathetic character survives, even wrote her story from her middle age.

The people around us from doctors, parents, kids, neighbours, fellow workers, friends don't need to learn from popular entertainment that suicide is our inevitable outcome.

Some "true" stories like SHINE and A BEAUTIFUL MIND are somewhat embellished but were breakout films that inspired many to look at mental illness in a whole different way.

AN ANGEL AT MY TABLE, Janet Frame's biography, is one of the most honest films, ending with a humble writer's lifestyle after a harrowing early life of madness and positive adventures too. We're impressed with her resilience.

During the discussion with Dr Dawson following his film WALTER I brought up the statistic that I've learned from various schizophrenia presentations that people who have the illness as young adults tend to improve as (and if) they reach middle age. He hadn't heard of that. I like what else he had to say but this piece was missing.

IT'S IMPORTANT! That's the kind of message that should be in the forefront of presentations of films on this topic, not a tidy death. The whole support system around people challenged by a mental illness should be building a hopeful outlook into their treatment plan.

I was nearly one of those fatalities. But having survived and finding my life turned around as I never imagined it could when I was suicidal, I now seek out positive models of success to support my recovery. I can see the power of movies in our society. From those perspectives it's clear we've got to be careful what templates we put out there for people balancing on the edge.

I'll be showing THE HOURS for Mental Illness Awareness Week in October. We'll be talking about it. Maybe in context of our presentation we can balance the "inevitable" aspect of suicide with some hopeful alternatives. It's a challenge.

David Dawson
Sept 22/03