

Two draft movie reviews for CREST BD The Dark Horse

The Dark Horse(2014), the NZ feature film (not to be confused with the popular 2015 racehorse documentary Dark Horse) is a story about a Maori man who became famous for his ability at speed-chess. This in spite of, or maybe partly because of his bipolar condition. But greater than his chess skills, he was known for his initiative to inspire young people who were growing up to a troubled future in his community to reach, through the discipline of chess training, beyond their limited expectations.

Just released on DVD in Canada in July 2016, The Dark Horse, which opened in NZ in 2014, has already been winning awards and much acclaim. I've impatiently awaited its availability here as it looked like a terrific vehicle to engage my community in discussion about the many facets of this bipolar condition. It was a long wait but I was not disappointed.

The film opens with our protagonist staggering around in a rainstorm, disoriented and talking to himself, interrupting traffic in his home town. We soon learn, he is on the lam from his psych hospital. It's obviously not his first episode.

When, after another spell in hospital, he connects through a cousin with a bunch of disadvantaged kids at that cousin's drop in centre, he conceives a scheme to teach them to love playing chess.

I love stories based on real events and this one is solid. You can see the real Genesis 'Gen' Potini at <https://en.chessbase.com/post/genesis-potini-kia-ora-tautini-tonu-te-kingi>. Genesis died in 2011 but was well known in NZ and in chess circles during his life - and especially during his last decade for his work with kids. He was the subject of an award winning documentary during his life, but now through a feature film, like David Helfgott (Shine 1996), and John Nash (A Beautiful Mind 2001), a much greater audience will learn his story.

This film might be written off as a 'typical, inspiring biopic'. What makes it of great interest to folk like me, who live with bipolar, is that it carries some big messages:

- Find your bliss. Gen found that chess grounded him. It was the fascination and love of his life. When he set his sights on an inspired scheme to apply that talent, he had something to focus on, to stay well for. This was a big goal that gave him a bigger reason than 'just getting by'. Quite often we have gifts but need a way to apply that gift beyond ourselves. It can help to find our "fit" in the world we may feel we've fallen out of. It will take perseverance to get beyond the original inspiration but sharing that gift can be hugely motivating and satisfying.
- Genesis' buddy who runs the drop-in is concerned about his past record of episodes, and what it would mean to the kids if Gen goes off the rails again. Several times he stresses the word "stability". He understands that stability is what his charges need most and warns Gen several times of its importance for the program and for his volatile cousin's own welfare. It is a goal we all

need to keep foremost as the winds of life buffet us.

- Life is never straight forward. It's not just this bipolar condition we live with, it's a whole scenario; interests, abilities, years of living our experience, often developing unhelpful coping methods, family attitudes and often dysfunctions that complicate what is often thought to be an isolated condition. In Genesis's case he is aboriginal, poor, has by the time we meet him, a long history of hospitalizations. The brother who he depends on as his only chance for shelter is mixed up with a biker-like gang, where hard drinking, drugs, dominance games and a constant treat of violence are the norm. Not a good atmosphere. Our protagonist has some hard choices to make - when to step away to avoid conflict - when to face it down.

- In the 2003 documentary *Dark Horse*, Genesis says, "I live in a state of being Maori, being human, and I also live in a state of being a chess player, but I do not live in a state of being a bipolar victim. I have moments where I am manic or depressive but I do not live in a state of being mad."

However, don't be afraid this film will just be "good for you". It is a completely engrossing, deeply affecting story, with very strong performances by all, especially from Cliff Curtis, who is Maori himself, in the lead.

Two warnings: there is much coarse language and English Maori-style is hard for our ears to catch, watch with the closed captioning on .

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Touched With Fire

Touched With Fire is another feature film I'd recommend that has recently been released on DVD. I'll refer to an excellent article in BP Canada's January 2016 edition <http://www.bphope.com/new-touched-with-fire-movie-finding-the-beauty-in-bipolar/> that fully covers the development of this fictional story based on the director's experience living with bipolar, learning about its dangers, the downsides, but also its positive aspects.

Like writer/director Paul Dalio, the male protagonist, played by Canadian actor, Luke Kirby, is bright young man with a passion for rap poetry slam, even with the same performing name as Dialo, "Luna". The young woman, Katie Holmes, is a published poet and, as does happen, they meet on the psych ward and find they have much in common. The sun is her talisman. Between them they spin off into ungrounded territory as they spark and then fuel each other's creative drives. Soon they both crash, their parents and hospital authorities are convinced they are not good for each other and try to separate them. At one point Van Gogh's *Starry Night* inspires their version of a fabulous mural that covers the walls of their shared apartment. But it's not a balanced or sustainable orbit they are on.

Like me and many others on the BD spectrum, they try to come to terms with the surges of creative drive that comes with this condition. And like many of us, Paul Dalio and his stand-in, Luna, found Kay Redfield Jamison's ground-breaking investigation of this phenomenon a revelation. Her 1993

book *Touched With Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament* has an onscreen role as Luna introduces the work to his new-found soul mate. And now the film borrows the title. (when it was first released it was titled MANIA DAYS)

Apparently when Paul Dario was struggling with accepting meds, wondering whether he would lose the creative moxie that is so important to him, he asked to meet someone who was doing well on this stuff. Happily, his doctor introduced him to Jamison. What a gift!

He recreates that encounter with his champion (and mine) playing herself on screen in his film. Jamison is adamant (as she is in her work) that she is more able to be creative and productive when she uses medication. Dario's characters, like many of us, have decisions to make about how to integrate meds into their lives.

For many of us on the bipolar journey it is a struggle as there is not just a yes/no decision but much experimentation with different medications, trading off side effects. Sometimes it can take years to get it right. Jamison herself, who swears by lithium as her life saver, describes in her autobiography, *An Unquiet Mind*, being over medicated, dulled out, unable to read or work creatively as she needed to do - something that she lived to do. Happily, she worked with her doctor to titrate down and find a level that supported her in life.

There is much else to recommend *Touched With Fire*. As a presenter of films I'm always cautious of a story that is too much message and not entertaining enough to engage a broad audience. This does a great job, with lots of great production values, sharp writing, colourful and creative scenarios (hey, it was made by a bipolar guy with Spike Lee as mentor/executive producer) and two terrific actors in the lead roles.

It is the kind of film that can really open up discussion between peers on the bipolar journey and with family members. Dario treats family members with compassion and even the professionals fairly, which is unusual in these kinds of stories. No Nurse Ratchets or hysterical or overly controlling parents. *Touched With Fire* presents a balanced, multi-layered view of what at least one or two kinds of bipolar experience can be.

Highly recommended.

I'll be screening it and followed by a lively discussion at Movie Monday Sept 26 at 6:30. www.moviemonday.ca <<http://www.moviemonday.ca>>
Warnings: Coarse language and scenes of suicide attempts that may be triggering