

Shine scriptwriter Jan Sardi talks to Mindframe about portraying mental illness

In the world of entertainment, accurate portrayals of mental illness are particularly important as entertainment often plays a significant role in shaping and reinforcing community attitudes.

In February 2013, a survey developed by the *Mindframe* team asked 254 members of the Australian Writers' Guild to list the most memorable Australian films featuring mental illness.

The most popular film listed was Jan Sardi's Oscar winning film *Shine* (1996) that portrayed the life of pianist David Helfott, who experienced a mental breakdown and was institutionalized.

In November 2013, Kim McNaughton from the *Mindframe* team had opportunity to talk to Jan about developing the character: this included authenticity, challenges, stigma and recommendations when portraying characters with mental illness.

***Mindframe:* What were some of the things you did to ensure the portrayal of David Helfgott's illness was authentic and factual?**

Jan Sardi: "At the time I wrote *Shine*, no one, including his own doctor knew what David's illness was so I was reluctant to put a label on it.

"The principal job of the dramatist is to try to put the audience inside the skin of a character, so you know what it feels like to be them. That's what I did.

"It's a mistake to set out to write a film or play about 'mental illness'. Rather, the aim should be to write in a way that illuminates why someone behaves the way they do in the light of the challenges they face."

***Mindframe:* What were some of the challenges you found with portraying a character with a mental illness?**

Jan Sardi: "Finding a way to have the audience understand what went on in David's head and how much of his behaviour and who he was stemmed from a past which he had never been able to escape, one that kept resurfacing in the present."

***Mindframe:* In your opinion, how does the character of David Helfgott in *Shine*, challenge stigma?**

Jan Sardi: "*Shine* is the perfect example of David being stigmatised. The opening scene starts with a complete stranger (David) behaving very strangely in a restaurant, which leads the other characters in the scene to think he's just 'crazy'.

"The rest of the film then becomes an explanation of why he is the way he is.

“This is how to avoid stigma when portraying characters with mental illness.

“Understanding the reasons for behaviour is the way to remove barriers when it comes to mental illness.”

***Mindframe*: What recommendations and advice could you give to other screenwriters seeking to portray characters with mental illness?**

Jan Sardi: “Don’t treat them any differently to other characters. Make them three dimensional, with a challenge or challenges to deal with and conflicts to face in order to find their true place and purpose in the world. That’s what good drama is about.”

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Mindframe for stage and screen was developed with the assistance of screenwriters, the Australian Writers’ Guild and the Department of Health.

The free resources assist scriptwriters, playwrights and television story departments with truthful and authentic portrayals of mental illness.

For more information on *Mindframe* stage and screen and free downloadable resources, go to:

www.mindframe.org.au