Recovery Lite

Lillian Thiemann takes a trip to see Sandra Bullock in 28 Days, where it hits her that AA doesn't stand for Academy Award.

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In Hollywood, there are two styles of moviemaking about drug and alcohol abuse. The one I call Do Drugs and Die includes gritty, romantic films like *Trainspotting*, *Leaving Las Vegas*, *Jesus' Son* and, going further back, old favorites like *Reefer Madness*, *Man with the Golden Arm*, *Valley of the Dolls* and *Barfly*. What these movies have in common are characters who lead wild lives and come to a very cool, tragic end. When I was a kid, my friends and I used to love to get high on pot and watch the maniacal piano player in Reefer Madness, a propaganda movie that was specifically designed to deter people from smoking marijuana but that had the opposite effect on everyone I knew. It was empowering for an active dope fiend like me to watch films that reinforced the drug subculture's creed of live fast, die young and leave a good-looking corpse. (Only nonaddicts ever seemed to get the opposite message.)

Some HIV positive people that I know still love these movies, maybe because they can identify with the way phenomenally glamorous and tormented stars physically deteriorate before their very eyes.

The new theme in drug- and alcohol-abuse movies first showed up in 1994 with *When a Man Loves a Woman*, in which Meg Ryan and Andy Garcia play a married couple struggling with the wife's alcoholism and then recovery through Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), and hit its stride in last spring's Sandra Bullock vehicle, *28 Days*. Here the focus is entirely on recovery from addiction. The point of the new genre is not so much how cool drunks and druggies are, but the challenges they face in trying to get and stay sober while finding their way out of the messes caused by their substance use.

Even in these "sober" movies, sexy stars are in evidence, but now you get to see the process of deterioration in reverse. Soon after When a Man Loves a Woman came out, I started noticing rock stars and actors thanking their "Higher Powers" at awards ceremonies to audience applause, or discussing their rehab experiences in the Enquirer. Characters in AA are becoming more common on television shows, too, even blockbusters like *NYPD Blue*, *Law & Order* and *Party of Five.*

If a friend hadn't insisted that I see *28 Days*, I never would have checked it out.

After catching previews on TV, I dismissed the movie as a portrait of an upper-middle-class, white party girl who could afford to go to the Betty Ford clinic after wrecking a limo while drunk. The thought of watching her go through such a privileged process of recovery held no interest for me, since that's not my experience or the experience of any HIV positive dope fiend I know. And once the lights went down, it was pretty clear that the time I had spent in urban detox and recovery, surrounded by African Americans, gay men and lesbians and people with AIDS, didn't have too much in common with the white doctors and suburban teens of *28 Days*' Hollywood-style rural rehab.

Yet once I looked past the movie's comical chanting and rope climbing, I could see the cornerstones of a real recovery process: denial, bottoming out, acceptance, willingness to change, coming to terms with the damage you do to your loved ones, and sober decisionmaking, all of which I could relate to.

I long ago stopped going to movies like *Trainspotting* because, now, with several years sober, watching someone stick a needle in their arm, even in a movie, is too distressing. But until Hollywood decides to make recovery movies with regular, gritty characters that seem real to me—maybe missing a few teeth, or even infected with HIV or hepatitis C—I'll skip them, too. When Bette Midler played a Janis Joplin–like rock star in *The Rose*, her character seemed real: a tough but fragile diseased addict who looked like people I knew; she was compelling, not just pretty. Why can't more recovery movies follow characters like her?

Still, I can't be too critical. If Hollywood produces a new round of recovery movies that make people more comfortable with the idea of getting sober, that would be a great thing, though my cynical side tells me that a distorted AA sitcom is more likely, one where all the characters, played by Ally McBeal look-alikes, never leave the room. Whatever hap-pens on the big (or small) screen, AA will go on as it has for more than 65 years—with or without an Academy Award—one day at a time.

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