

Research News

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Project examines film, tears and history

BY FRANK NOLAN
Research Promotion

It's that time of year again. The Academy Award nominations are out, and film buffs everywhere are waiting to see if their favourite movies will get an Oscar nod.

For most of us, movies represent two hours of entertainment or escape. They make us laugh, cry, or scream in terror, but when the lights come up, we rarely reflect on why films elicit such powerful emotions.

The experience of crying at the movies is the subject of an on-going research project led by Brenda Austin-Smith, film studies. She is looking at the "weepies" produced in Hollywood during the 1930s, 40s and 50s, and examining the experiences of women who remember being moved to tears by these films.

"During Hollywood's golden age, these over-wrought melodramas were extremely popular," Austin-Smith said. "It was the one genre made specifically for female audiences, and nobody has really studied why these films became so popular, or specifically how women responded to them."

The project grew out of an assignment Austin-Smith once gave her first-year students. She asked the students to watch one of these melodramas with an older family member, and then to record a conversation that compared the student's responses to the film with those of the older person.

"The results were fascinating, and I realized that this would make a really interesting research project, and it has



Photo by Frank Nolan

Brenda Austin-Smith, film studies, is studying the emotional impact of tear-jerkers made during the golden age of Hollywood.

really snowballed from there," she said.

Austin-Smith is interviewing women aged 60 and over about their experiences of crying at the movies. She is also looking at what the lives of the women were like at the time, and the degree to which they identified

with the women on screen.

"Many of these films were very grim," she said. "Characters died of cancer, their kids were killed, families were broken up, and so on, and yet women went to see them in droves. This period was also a time of major upheaval, including things like the

Great Depression and the Second World War. Women had to be very strong, and in some cases, the theatre became the only place they could find comfort and release."

At the height of their popularity, these films featured some of Hollywood's brightest stars, and were regularly reviewed in top publications like *Variety*, *Time*, and *Life*. By the 1960s, though, they began to fall out of favour. Austin-Smith said a number of factors, from the second wave of feminism to the radical social changes of the 1960s, contributed to the notion that films aimed at female audiences were light-weight and irrelevant. Even today, in spite of the continued popularity of genre films aimed at men, like gangster films and spy movies, Austin-Smith said films aimed at women continue to be disparaged and written off as "chick flicks."

"That is likely one of the reasons that nobody has really taken a close look at the impact of these Hollywood melodramas," she said. "For the women who went to the theatres, they weren't trashy, and they weren't silly. They gave women a way to organize their emotions and to make sense of what they were feeling. The characters in the movies reassured women, especially during times of hardship when many families were dispersed. There's a history of connection associated with these films that really needs to be excavated."

Anyone interested in participating in this study is invited to contact Brenda Austin-Smith by e-mail at: basmith@ms.umanitoba.ca

Looking for ways to stop the superbugs

BY FRANK NOLAN
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How do you treat an infection that is resistant to antibiotics? How can you stop the spread of so-called "superbugs," when traditional treatments only seem to make them stronger?

Hospitals around the world are seeing an alarming increase in the number of infections that don't respond to even the most powerful antibiotic treatments. For researchers like George Zhanel, the race is on to stay one step ahead of the superbugs, and to educate the public on how to protect themselves against these microscopic marauders.

Zhanel, medical microbiology, said that even though the mainstream media has only been focused on superbugs for the last decade or so, the idea of antibiotic resistance is nothing new.

"Antibiotics were first widely introduced during the Second World War, when soldiers were dying in large numbers from post-surgical infections, and there was an urgent need to do

something," Zhanel said. "When they started using penicillin in 1944, they started to see these almost magical recoveries. Very shortly after that, however, there were already reports of penicillin-resistant organisms."

For decades, medical researchers assumed that this resistance was a purely evolutionary response, and that bacteria were adapting to the presence of the new drugs.

"Personally, I'm becoming more and more convinced that there is more to it than that," Zhanel said. "This adaptation is happening much faster than it should be if it were just the result of random mutations. These organisms really seem to be making genetic changes, and moving DNA around in what is almost an ordered fashion."

Zhanel is studying the genetics of superbugs, and he and other scientists are working at the molecular level to diagnose infections, and to develop new treatments. In the meantime, the medical community is looking at all of the factors that could be making the



Photo by Frank Nolan

George Zhanel, medical microbiology.

problem worse, including antibiotic use in humans and animals. Zhanel said public education will play a

critical role in slowing the spread of these organisms.

"A large part of the population doesn't understand the difference between bacteria and viruses, and there is this overwhelming belief that a germ is a germ," he said. "Everyone needs to know that a virus that causes a cough or a stuffy nose should never be treated with an antibiotic. There are a number of things all of us can do to slow these superbugs down, from washing our hands with soap and water, to not insisting that our doctors give us an antibiotic every time we get a cold."

On February 20, Zhanel will be describing his research at a public lecture titled, "*Infections Caused by Antibiotic-Resistant Superbugs: Are We Doomed?*" The presentation is part of the *Get to Know Research at Your University* speaker series, and begins at 7:00 pm in the Smartpark boardroom at 135 Innovation Drive. Admission is free, and everyone is invited to attend. For more information, please call Kimberley at 474-9020.

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