

# Medicine on the big and small screen: *Crutch*

Therese Jones, PhD, and Lester D. Friedman, PhD, Movie Review Editors

## *Crutch*

Starring Bill Shannon

Directed by Sachi Cunningham and Chandler Evans

Rhino Films, Distributed by Bullfrog films

release November 13, 2020. Running time 98 minutes.

Reviewed by Lara K. Ronan, MD, FAAN

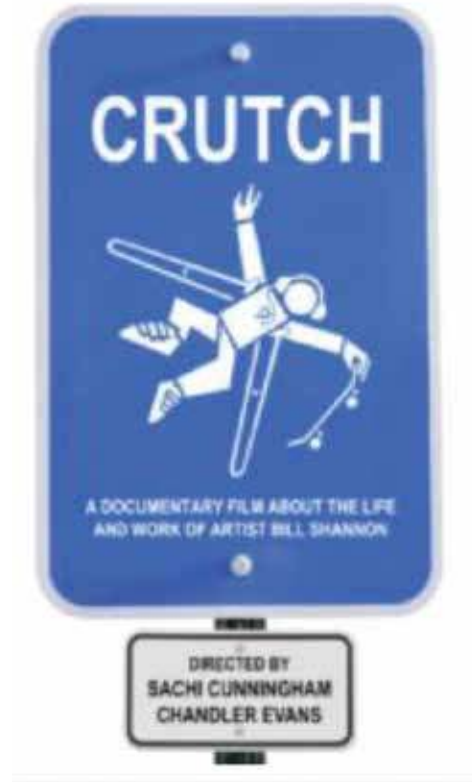
The trailer for the documentary *Crutch* suggests that it is about skate punk, break dancing, disability, and the provocative performance artist Bill Shannon. *Crutch* is about truly seeing someone as a complex and multi-faceted human. It chronicles the unique career of a multi-faceted artist who has established a novel dance lexicon and a body of work that provides insightful commentary of societal responses to disability. As a medical educator, I found this documentary to be a master class in developing skills to look beyond superficial biases about disability, potential, and achievement. Too often first impressions and intrinsic biases about physicality and disability frame our interactions, limiting our ability to connect, appreciate, see, and hear each other. For physicians, this framing serves only to fundamentally compromise our ability to provide compassionate and competent medical care.

The film opens with Shannon stating his impression that, “There’s this thing that I will never be considered in the dance world as simply a dancer. I will always be looked at as an anomaly.”

This opening salvo brought back a clear memory I have of the doctor discharging my infant son from the hospital following a lengthy neonatal intensive care unit stay. “Treat him like a normal child,” he said with a serious furrowed brow. Those words informed my parenting approach as he grew up with a body that was differently able, not dissimilar to the disability affecting Shannon. Like Shannon, my son has never wanted his physical limitations to define who he is or what he can accomplish.

Shannon’s art and his relationship with his body crystallizes into a unique voice. His work is unusual, for sure. Not very often will an audience witness a virtuoso dance performance that incorporates two aluminum crutches into a choreographed hip-hop/breakdancing/skateboarding piece. Shannon’s style of dance is irrepressible.

“The Art of Weightlessness,” the title of one of his many performances, is an incredibly appropriate description of his dance that expresses a joyful freedom from his bodily



limitations. He glides across the floor seemingly without contacting it, hovers, tilts, freezes, and moves about his bespoke supportive frame in defiance of gravity.

As success grew though, Bill Shannon felt that his reviewers deeply misunderstood him and his work. He became interested in exploring how people experienced him, and began to build a body of work that toggles between art and sociological research on disability. He notes that reviews have usually included the words disabled and disability in the first sentence.

He became interested in exploring how people experienced him and began to build *Crutch* which crosses between art and sociological research on disability.

Shannon the filmmaker explores how others interact with him as a man on crutches.

*Crutch* explores a process wherein Shannon uses performance in public spaces to examine spontaneous interactions. His film excruciatingly presents people spontaneously pulling him up off the ground, trying to support awkward and ridiculous postures, inhibiting his movement with their help, and completely misinterpreting his

capabilities. Viewers witness the types of help offered to the disabled, and how well-meaning people are unaware of the exhausting impact of their words and deeds on the disabled. Many viewers will recognize themselves. And we are embarrassed to have to admit we also do these things.

While the dancing is enjoyable and entertaining, Shannon's ability to educate me is paramount. He uses his dance and performance talents to expose the assumptions about people with a physical disability. His masterful trilogy "Window, Bench, Traffic" is an insightful example of the cumulative, well-intentioned microaggressions committed by individuals on those they consider disabled.

As a neurologist, I thought I had some insight into the weight of disability, but I freely admit that I learned a lot from Shannon about my own assumptions about who needs help and how my reactions to someone can be harmful. Equally illustrative to me as a medical educator is that Shannon has codified, named, and demonstrated the typical and predictable arc of responses an abled person has when confronted with someone with a physical limitation. I found an astute researcher of human social behavior.

I am not a dancer. I cannot review the technical proficiency of Shannon's dance and choreography. I can only comment on how his dancing makes me feel—I felt grateful to have experienced his work. It seems that this is a common response, judging by the faces of children he

works with at a summer camp for children affected like himself by Legg-Perthes disease, by the comments of other dancers and choreographers with whom he has worked, and by his family and friends interviewed for the film.

The internal reaction and emotions of learning to live in a body that is not what you want it to be drives Shannon's creative work. He says, "Dancing, it's all in your head. No matter how healthy you are, your body is limited. Once you get that through your head that your body is limited, that dancing is in your mind and not in your body, you are pretty much free as a dancer."

Shannon explains that he does not want to inspire others, rather he wants to express himself. However, he does inspire because his work is thoughtful, creative, unique, and revolutionary. Poppin' Pete of Electric Boogaloos says, "This man right here is an inspiration to all dancers."

Many CME events ask physicians how we will use the information we learned in practice. I cannot recommend this film highly enough using that metric, because I have been inspired to use Shannon's lens in my doctoring to find the whole person in any body.

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