

# The hidden pain of a man alone

More than ever, Kiwi men are seeking help to get in touch with their feelings. In the wake of the release of the Australian movie *Men's Group*, **Phil Taylor** reports on the trend to get touchy-feely

**W**HAT WOULD John Mulgan have done had he been around today? Hard to imagine the author of the classic novel, *Man Alone*, letting it all out at a men's group. Then again, how times have changed.

Mulgan's was the era of the great wars. His book is often misconstrued as a kind of celebration of the Kiwi bloke going it alone, getting offside with the law and women, and making a fist of it on his own terms.

It wasn't. He took the title, for example, from a line in Ernest Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, 'a man alone ain't got no bloody f\*\*\*ing chance'.

When, in the 1970s, a 19-year-old Rex McCann searched for male support a decade after the death of his father, all he found was anger management groups. That wasn't what he was looking for.

McCann, 52, became a pioneer of what might be termed the men's work sector. He has a masters degree in social ecology, is the author of *Fatherless Sons*, founder of the Essentially Men Network, and ran his first workshop three decades ago.

Essentially Men held a special screening of *Men's Group* last week. I did the same, watching an advance DVD copy at home with a few old friends. Our verdict — challenging, compelling, important. It is also outstandingly done but escapism it ain't. If your preferred viewing is cheap thrills and car wrecks, avert your eyes. Mind you, there are wrecks.

The film gives an insight into the lives of six men; strangers who meet once a week to talk. What ensues is so raw that at some early screenings some of the audience berated the makers for getting involved in these men's lives and not following through when clearly they needed help. "We had to point out," director Michael Joy told Infilim.Com, that "all of these men are, in fact, actors."

The film's producer John L. Simpson says the movie came of a fascination with the Australian male culture. "We wanted to make a film that was sometimes touching, sometimes devastating, sometimes uncomfortable, but always grounded in the truth."

McCann attests to the authenticity of the stories the film tells. Though he found the way the group was run was more "rough and ready" than in reality, it works as a device that enables the film to reveal "the hidden pain in men's lives and the potential for transformation that comes of speaking into the silence".

The Aussie and Kiwi male have much in common. "It's never been part of the manly script to be able to show

your feelings," says McCann. "It's not what we have required of men. We've required them to protect, to provide, to fix things, to make things happen."

"You didn't get access to the male club by showing your vulnerability. You got access by hiding your vulnerability and showing your competence."

The traditional male has many wonderful qualities — service, loyalty, integrity, an ability to focus on the task at hand, to take responsibility, to do their community's bidding. But the suppression of emotional life was, says McCann, "one of the flavours of men's oppression".

Mulgan valued those qualities in World War II Kiwi soldiers and as a war hero (he won the Military Cross, for strikes against German communications in occupied northern Greece) may have embodied them.

After nine years in Britain, Mulgan met up with large numbers of New Zealanders again at the Battle of Alamein, where Mulgan fought with the British infantry. "It was like

coming home," he wrote of that meeting. "They were mature men, these New Zealanders... quiet and shrewd and sceptical... Everything that was good from that small, remote country had gone into them, sunshine and strength, good sense, patience, the versatility of practical men."

Whether he or they suffered consequences of suppressed emotions is guesswork. Mulgan himself overdosed on morphine on Anzac Day 1945 in what is regarded as a suicide.

"A man who is unable to express his vulnerability bottles up his emotions and is isolated at some level," says McCann. "That isn't healthy. [It's linked] to negative health statistics, to suicide, stress-related diseases, heart related diseases and the breakdown of marriages and relationships with children because these require communication to succeed."

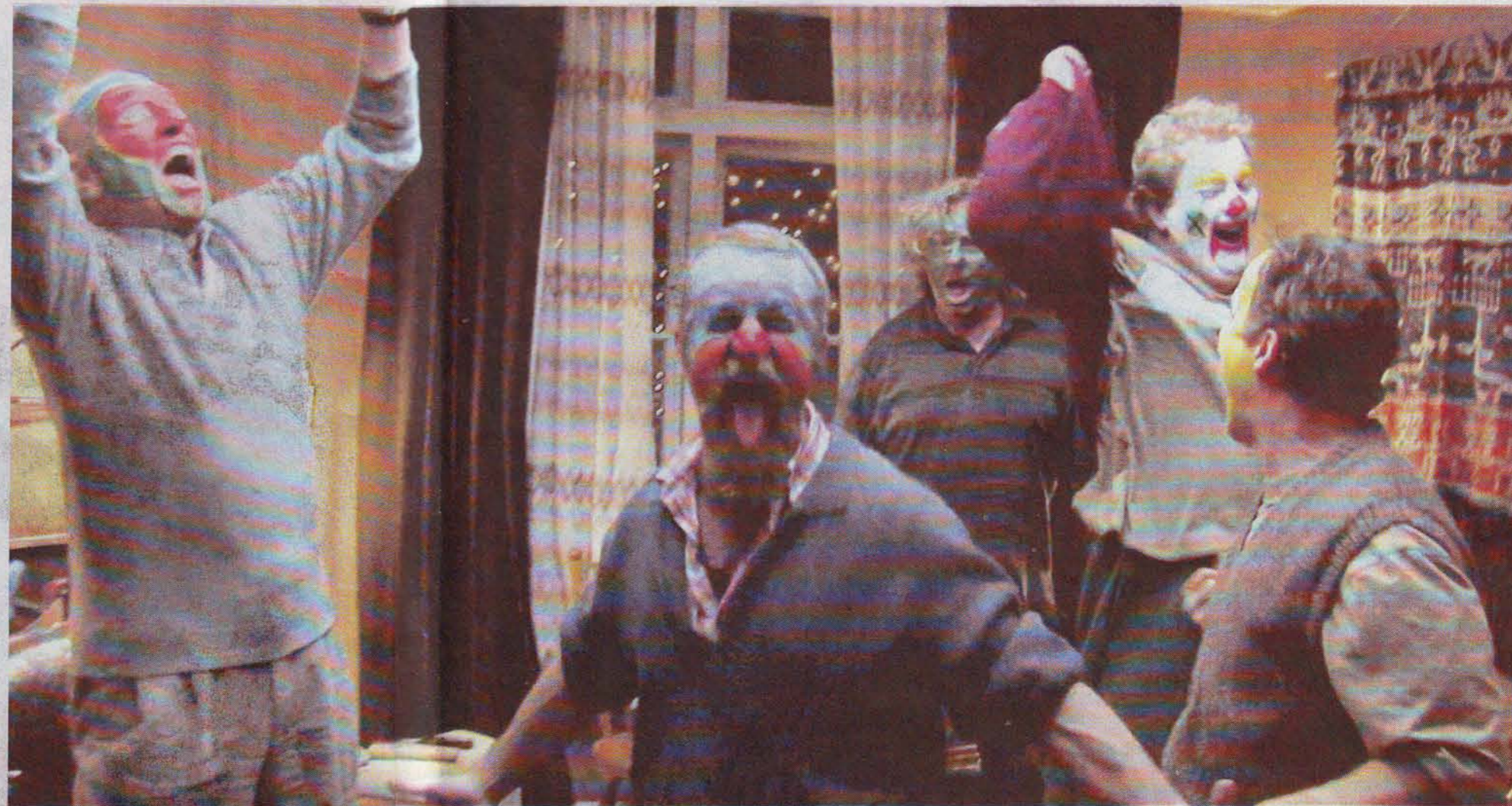
This has never been better understood and more men are doing something about it.

So who goes to men's groups? All sorts, according to McCann. Those seeking help but also those wanting to "rebalance themselves", men wanting more than the superficial talk that characterises their male friendships.

It's not so much the friendship that is superficial, says McCann, but the inability to share experiences of each of their lives.

"Sharing those experiences deepens understanding and enriches lives." That's as natural to women as it is foreign to men.

Confidentiality of the group provides safety, removing the fear of gossip that might inhibit men opening up with their usual mates. They know



BONDING: Tribal dancing in a still from the film *Men's Group*.

PICTURE / SUPPLIED



Rex McCann

## Transformation: one Kiwi bloke's journey

Damian Stansfield is 42, a rugby player, a former military man, the son of a farmer and the father of three boys. In his own words, a bit of a Kiwi bloke. He explains why he joined a men's group

Two of my three sons had grown up and left home and the third was 17. I guess I thought I'd done my job and was wondering what I was here for.

I've got shitloads of mates. I still play rugby and I go and have a beer with them. But I wanted more and I wanted to talk to some people about it. Going to my mates, they might think I'm a bit of a blouse — harden up, sort of thing. We talk about sport, work, the news, but not about what's really going on.

My dad was a farmer, pretty stoic. Great man but you scrape your knee and it's 'harden up'.

Last year [when he decided to do an Essentially Men course] there was so much happening. The kids were leaving and I wasn't communicating well with my wife. We've been

together forever, we met when we were 12. It wasn't that my wife wouldn't listen, because she's bloody good, but it's about how I went about showing my feelings. I was so set in my ways. I was doing the typical bloke thing. We say what we think, not what we feel. I didn't want anyone to get inside me but I was getting churned up.

I came across the brochure and thought 'shit, how many kaftan [and] sandal-wearing tree-huggers are gonna be at this?' But I read it, liked the topics and posted a cheque before I could chicken out. For the next six weeks I shit myself.

I was pretty apprehensive. But I got myself there, walked in the door on a Friday and there were 28 there. Cell phones were banned, car keys were handed in. You could talk as

much as you wanted but no small talk. No politics, no sport. It was about being able to air it without being judged, and being listened to. We were helped with how to do that. It was quite gruelling. Yeah, there were

**It's okay to show your feelings, you are actually a better man for it.**

DAMIAN STANSFIELD

tears. The problems that were in peoples lives ranged immensely.

Three of the 28 dropped out, either because it wasn't what they were looking for or they weren't ready for that. After that four-day course, the 15 of us from Auckland went to sessions for five weeks run by Essentially Men

and then were ready to organise our own group.

Ten of us meet Tuesday evenings. We talk about what's been going on in our lives. Real stuff that you normally wouldn't share. What's going on at home? What problems do you have with your partner? All those things that are getting you rattled but also what may have excited you.

It's changed me immensely. I mixed with similar types and I didn't really pay too much notice to anyone I didn't think was in my square box, so I didn't get to know anyone who didn't fit my picture of a mate. In my group of 10 there would be one other who is like me. I've realised there is more to us as men. It's okay to show your feelings, you are actually a better man for it. It's still tough, you don't change the

behaviour of 40 years overnight, but my wife and most of her friends have noticed remarkable changes. For example, the other day one of my sons did something that wasn't right. I'd normally get pissed off and have an argument. Instead, I took a different approach and said 'I want to talk to you about this and I want you to know how it makes me feel'. And I got a completely different response. He's opened up tremendously to me.

Even my rugby mates. They still shake hands and that's a barrier that says 'don't get too close' as much as anything. But while I shake their hand, I'll give them a bit of a hug. It's natural. It's telling them that they're a good bastard, that their friendship means something. That's what it's all about."

that if they share stuff it's not going to be used against them, says McCann.

"We, as men, are particularly sensitive to that because the whole process of growing up as a teenager is the systematic putting down of any weakness.

"By the time you are an adult man you are well and truly trained into that. You are not going to talk about the tender side, the vulnerable side for fear

of it becoming the butt of male humour."

The result is many men don't risk real talk. The goal of services such as Essentially Men is to help men build into their lives significant male friendships where that silence is removed.

That helps not only the men but their children, says McCann, because

it is accepted that fathers opening up is the key to better fathering.

"The script is radically progressing. My father's job was to provide, to be the head of the household. Fathers of that generation grew their [sons] by pruning them, so they didn't get too big for their boots. These days it is realised that what young men need is their praise, the language of their love, their

touch and their support."

McCann sees reason to be hopeful in transformations he witnesses almost daily through his work. "We have had decades now of negative scripting about men. I never bought into that. I know that most of men's isolation and negative behaviour is based on wounding that hasn't had a chance to heal."

Transformation?

"Shit you look different," says the bombastic Alex at the end of *Men's Group*, to Moses, the man who had always run scared.

Says Moses to Alex, "so do you".

*Men's Group* is screening at Rialto cinemas. See review, *TimeOut E3*. [www.essentiallymen.net](http://www.essentiallymen.net)