

# Chemsex: sensationalist film or useful warning? | Daily Xtra

## Vancouver Queer Film Festival screens film on London's gay sex and drugs scene

Published on Mon, Aug 8, 2016 5:20 pm.

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A still from the VICE film *Chemsex*, which screens Aug 14 at the Vancouver Queer Film Festival, followed by a panel.

*Chemsex*/VICE

Whether in bathhouses or back alleys, dance floors or dark rooms, gay sex is frequently intertwined with drug use.

From standard mood enhancers like alcohol, pot and poppers, to harder drugs like coke and ecstasy, the places we meet and fuck are swimming in stuff that releases sexual inhibition, enhances pleasure, or just makes it easier to strike up a conversation with a handsome stranger.

A recent film produced by VICE offers a glimpse inside a subsection of the Venn diagram where sex and substance use overlap.

Created by two straight filmmakers, William Fairman and Max Gogarty, *Chemsex* looks inside London's PnP scene. Currently making the rounds at festivals, the 83-minute documentary centres on the work of 56 Dean Street (a clinic focused on gay men's sexual health and drug use) and features candid interviews with patients, along with scenes of them shooting up and banging away at bareback parties.

Responses to the film have been largely positive, describing it alternately as "gritty" and "scary." But what value do the film's more sensational elements have? Do they draw necessary attention to a public health crisis? Or is it just another way to demonize queer sexuality?



I have my own histories with substances and sluttiness. As a teen raver in the 1990s, I swallowed and snorted my way through countless weekends in warehouses around suburban Toronto.

In my 20s, I discovered bathhouses and had plenty of chances to push my sexual limits. But with the exception of pot and alcohol, drugs never really entered my sex life. To gain a better handle on what's valuable and what's problematic with the film, I've enlisted the help of three acquaintances, smarter on the subject than I.



A still from the film's trailer. **(Chemsex/VICE)**

Sam's in his late 20s, but began experimenting with drugs and hooking up with guys when he was still in his teens. He works nine to five, so he limits his activities to the weekends, and usually only once or twice a month at that.

As far as drugs, he's mainly into Tina and MDMA, with a little bit of GHB on the side. He's never slammed (party-circuit parlance for injecting drugs), admitting he's been too scared. But he's become more curious about

trying it lately.

He's currently HIV-negative but prefers bareback sex and went on PrEP over a year ago. He does larger group scenes occasionally, but usually goes for one on one meetings.

"I was actually kind of shocked by the film," he says. "I didn't realize that slamming was such a big thing. It's a good warning for people to keep perspective and be careful about what they get into. I've tried a lot of different drugs and figured out after a while that there's a line with everything you don't want to cross, and the movie is really about guys who've crossed that line. There's a lot of self-destructive behaviour in the gay community and it's good to be aware about your own limits. I hope people see it and it helps them to be more cautious with their decisions."



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A still from the film's trailer. (Chemsex/VICE)

A freelancer in his late 30s, Marc parties most weekends. Poz for more than a decade he's watched the gay community's perception of HIV shift from intense fear to a more relaxed approach, as treatments have improved and PrEP has become available.

He's dabbled in all sorts of drugs: Tina, GHB and ketamine, being his favourites. He's mostly been snorting or swallowing, but has recently started occasionally slamming.

"Telling people not to do shit never stops them from doing it," he says. "We need a harm-reduction approach for drugs and sexual health. I like to really lose myself in sex, and drugs are part of how I get there. But if I'm going

to go there, I want to do it with people I trust. If you're in a room full of strangers and you go unconscious are they going to call an ambulance or just toss you out on the street? I think that's important to think about."

As for the film, his response is more sceptical.

"I think it's just kind of a sensational look at a small part of a population who feels like they've lost control," he says. "I would have liked a more balanced approach that shows how people can mix drugs and sex in less risky ways through harm-reduction. But I also think it's a specific area that's under-funded in public health, so if the film gets people's attention and makes them care about the problem its worth it."



A still from the film's trailer. **(Chemsex/VICE)**

At nearly 50, Bruce has been active in the gay scene for more than three decades. He used to frequent bars and bathhouses, but now mostly hooks up at people's places.

He ends up in some kind of group scene most weeks. Drugs are almost always present, though he doesn't indulge every time. He's mainly into Tina and MDMA, staying away from G, having "seen too many bad things." He tried slamming once, but found it too intense.

He was diagnosed with HIV a year ago, which made him more cautious with drugs.

"It made realize that I need to go easy on my body as far as drugs because they can have a big impact on your immune system," he says. "I still party but I keep it in check. It hasn't changed my sex life much, except now I don't feel guilt about barebacking."

As for the film, he sees it as objectifying gay men's sexuality for consumption by the straight world.

"Society is largely indifferent to gay men's health or people struggling with addiction, unless they're finding syringes and condoms in the park where they take their kids," he says.

“There’s something very voyeuristic about the film that is cloaked in the idea of concern. Any concern the straight world has about gay sex is normally used to try to police and control us. There are people struggling with all kinds of addiction that the broader public don’t give a shit about. It’s just that adding gay sex to the mix makes it titillating.”

**Chemsex**

*Sunday, Aug 14, 6:30pm*

*SFU’s Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, 149 W Hastings St, Vancouver*

[queerfilmfestival.ca/films/chemsex/](http://queerfilmfestival.ca/films/chemsex/)

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