

## **Masochism for Masses; Film: He was known in O.C. as a camp counselor and poster child for cystic fibrosis. That's not the Bob Flanagan you'll see in 'Sick.'**

*[Orange County Edition]*

Los Angeles Times - Los Angeles, Calif.

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Date: Nov 19, 1997

Start Page: 1

Section: Calendar; PART-F; Entertainment Desk

Text Word Count: 970

### **Document Text**

As a poster boy for the Orange County chapter of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, Bob Flanagan presented the image of an angelic teenager condemned to early death by an incurable genetic disease.

But by the time he died last year at 43, a ripe old age for someone with cystic fibrosis, Flanagan had become a very different sort of icon: a masochist who successfully courted art-world celebrity by turning his mutilated body into a harrowing existential exhibit.

"Bob's life and work raise a number of profound issues," says Kirby Dick, whose award-winning documentary "Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist" is at the Port Theatre in Corona del Mar. "Illness obviously, death, sex, love, S/M"--short for sadomasochism--"and the nature of artistic collaboration."

The 90-minute movie, which received a special jury prize at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival in January, is not for the squeamish. "Sick" documents the tortures of the damned.

Yet putting himself on view in ritualistic throes of pain administered by his dominatrix lover, Sheree Rose, enabled Flanagan to claim a victory of sorts over his disease and considerable distraction, if not relief, from its ravages.

Cystic fibrosis, which is characterized by hardening of tissues in the lungs and a malfunctioning of the pancreas, causes the body to produce a thick mucus that clogs breathing and leads to chronic lung infections. It afflicts tens of thousands in the United States and generally kills them by their 20s.

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In one of the film's more satirical moments of pure irony, Flanagan attributes his relatively long survival to the strength of will he developed cultivating his masochism. A droll Flanagan ditty, sung to the "Mary Poppins" tune "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious," is full of his typical gallows humor:

Supermasochistic Bob has cystic fibrosis.

He should have died when he was young,

But he was too precocious.

Although he reveled in his ability to tolerate physical mutilation and psychological humiliation, Flanagan, who was nothing if not an exhibitionist, still had a sense of propriety.

"He was close to his parents, but he kept his S&M secret from them for a very long time," says Dick, a friend of Flanagan's for 10 years before making the documentary. "They knew nothing about his sexuality until the last few years of his life."

In 1967, Flanagan, a Southern Californian, was selected to be poster boy for the Orange County chapter of the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation. He later worked for many years as a camp counselor in San Juan Capistrano.

The 45-year-old director maintains that he did not make "Sick" for shock value any more than he made his first award-winning documentary, "Private Practices: The Story of a Sex Surrogate," for luridness. (That 1986 film was named best documentary at the USA Film Festival in Dallas.)

"A shocking image is provocative," Dick conceded in a telephone interview from Silver Lake, where he lives with his wife and two children. "But artists and writers throughout history have dealt with shocking images."

Perhaps the most provocative "is Christ's crucifixion," he added. "Artists have depicted the crucifixion down through the ages, but shock was not the primary reason. The same is true for me."

Dick says his greatest challenge in making "Sick" was not witnessing extreme behavior up close--at one point, Flanagan hammers a nail through his penis into a wooden board--as much as "capturing the intimacy and emotion" in the submissive-dominant relationship between Flanagan and his lover.

"They felt incredible tenderness for each other, and it was very complex," the filmmaker said. "I wanted people to realize that. And I've found that people are moved by the film in ways they didn't expect."

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Dick, who met Flanagan at Beyond Baroque, a bookstore-literary center in Los Angeles, spent two years and roughly \$125,000 to make "Sick." He financed production largely through arts grants and credit cards, he says, with the film's distributor picking up post-production costs such as transferring videotape footage to 35mm film stock.

Despite its subject, the movie had no trouble finding a commercial distributor because of its reception on the festival circuit. In addition to the Sundance prize, "Sick" won the award for best feature earlier this year at the Los Angeles Independent Film Festival. It also had successful screenings at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and at major overseas film festivals in Berlin, Edinburgh, London and San Sebastian in Spain.

In Washington in October, the Smithsonian Institution canceled the second of two screenings at the Hirschorn Museum. The reason given, according to Dick, who had flown there to present the film, was that the museum's nonprofit status was being used--wrongly--to promote a commercial film.

"I don't think that's the real reason," he said. "They show commercial films all the time. I just wish the people who canceled it had taken the time to see it. Perhaps they would have reacted differently."

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At the Port, where "Sick" has played 19 times since Friday, "attendance been stronger than for our last two movies {'Red Crimson' and 'Nenette and Boni'}," theater manager Mike Peterson said.

"Weirdly enough, we've had only one person walk out. As she was leaving, she said, 'That's sick.' Someone in the box office said, 'Yes. That's the title.' "

More commonly, Peterson said, "People are kind of shocked that they were able to sit through the whole thing and that it tells the story of an amazing personality."

\* "Sick" runs through Thursday at Landmark's Port Theatre, 2905 E. Coast Highway, Corona del Mar. NR. Under 18 not admitted. \$7. (714) 673-6260.

PHOTO: "People are moved by the film in ways they didn't expect," the director says of his documentary of Bob Flanagan, above.; PHOTOGRAPHER: KIRBY DICK; PHOTO: Bob Flanagan works on an art project in a scene from the film "Sick."; PHOTOGRAPHER: KIRBY DICK

Credit: TIMES STAFF WRITER

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