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FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

An Artist Whose Medium Was Pain

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

The body may be the temple of the spirit, as they say. But biotechnology has also encouraged us to think of our bodies purely as machines. Millions now know enough about endorphins, blood pressure, cholesterol and the effects of various drugs to talk a decent beginner's game of medical self-analysis. But the Los Angeles performance artist who is the subject of Kirby Dick's unforgettable documentary film, "Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist," specialized in a kind of physical self-knowledge many of us would rather not contemplate.

Mr. Flanagan, who died early last year of cystic fibrosis, was a masochist who cultivated the infliction of pain partly as a means to deal with this excruciating, fatal ailment in which the body produces excess mucus, making breathing difficult and causing repeated lung infections. But Mr. Flanagan, who survived until age 42, also had a lifelong infatuation with bondage, ritualized torture and humiliation that went far beyond the challenge of pain management. And in his hypnotically intoned poem listing the sources for this infatuation at the end of the film, he names everything from Cinderella and Roman Catholicism to Houdini and hardware stores.

A good portion of "Sick" consists of excerpts from videotaped performances in which Mr. Flanagan is pierced, penetrated, slashed, slapped, gagged and strung up by his collaborator, companion and lover of 15 years, Sheree Rose. Their elaborate pas de deux of dominance and submission are among the most intimate love scenes ever filmed.

SICK**The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist**

Produced and directed by Kirby Dick; directors of photography, Jonathon Dayton, Mr. Dick, Sheree Rose and Geza Sinkovics; edited by Mr. Dick and Dody Dorn; music by Blake Leyh. Shown tonight at 6 and Saturday at 10 P.M. at the Roy and Niuta Titus Theater, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53d Street, Manhattan, as part of the New Directors/New Films series of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art. Running time: 90 minutes. This film is not rated.

INTERVIEWS BY: Kathe Burkhart, Kirby Dick and Rita Valencia

FEATURING: Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose

A lifelong infatuation with torture.

In their unblinking honesty, they raise the most unsettling questions about pleasure and pain, power and submission, body shame and the relationship between sex and death. The spectacle of Mr. Flanagan's pasty, emaciated body, pierced, scarred, and oozing blood from a lovingly administered knife wound is a zillion miles away from the air-brushed, sweet-scented, Calvin Klein ideal of erotic allure.

The most notorious scene, which created a stir when "Sick" was shown at the Sundance Film Festival in January, is a close-up near the end of the movie of Mr. Flanagan nailing the head of his penis to a board. In a comic juxtaposition typical of the

film's antic spirit, this grisly ritual is accompanied on the soundtrack by a perky rendition of "If I Had a Hammer."

This attitude of lighthearted jollity runs through many of Mr. Flanagan's poems and performances and lends them a comic edge that only deepens their complexity. If there is one thing almost no one finds funny, it is acute physical pain. In one scene at a summer camp for children suffering from cystic fibrosis where Mr. Flanagan worked as a counselor for many years, he serenades the campers with an uproarious parody of Bob Dylan's "Forever Young" whose new lyrics joke about the disease's life-threatening symptoms.

Beyond the fact that cystic fibrosis (which killed two of his siblings) runs in Mr. Flanagan's family, there is little in his background to explain his erotic tastes. His parents, who are interviewed, are a seemingly levelheaded Orange County, Calif., couple who have thought long and hard about their son's predilections. A brother who is gay (and emphatically not sadomasochistic) jokes about how Mr. Flanagan outdid him when it came to leading a secret life.

As Mr. Flanagan's disease finally catches up with him, and he enters the hospital for the last time, the movie becomes harrowingly sad. Ms. Rose, his indefatigable chronicler, accompanies him and takes snapshots of her lover on his deathbed. A month after his burial, she exhibits a plastic container holding his lungs floating in the body fluid that literally drowned him.

Obviously, "Sick" is not for everyone. But for those with the stomach for it, this groundbreaking documentary glimpses more uncomfortable truths about the human condition than you will find in a dozen other films.