

FILM REVIEW

Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist

(Docu — Color)

A Kirby Dick production. Produced, directed by Kirby Dick. Camera (color), Jonathan Dayton, Dick, Sheree Rose, Geza Sinkovics; additional camera, Alan Barker, Matt Levin, David Werk, Barbara Thole-Testa; editors, Dick, Dody Dorn; music, Blake Leyh; sound (Dolby), Alan Barker, Kip Gynn; associate producers, Dorn, Rose. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (competing), Jan. 23, 1997. Running time: 90 min.

Interviewers: Kathe Burkhart, Kirby Dick, Rita Valencia.

With: Bob Flanagan, Sheree Rose, others.

Undoubtedly the most wildly original and audacious documentary in this year's Sundance Film Festival, Kirby Dick's "Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist" is an uncompromising chronicle of the flamboyant poet and performance artist who died in 1996. Always brilliant, if sometimes tough to watch, this landmark docu, made with the full collaboration of Flanagan's widow, deserves to be seen on the bigscreen before hitting the global festival circuit and airing on cable and other venues for dauntless nonfiction fare.

Ambitiously embracing such existential issues as the sacredness of life and fear of dying; the relationship between creativity, anguish and pain; unconditional love and contractual marriage; and, above all, the emotional and philosophical meanings of masochism and eroticism, "Sick" is the kind of documentary that could have been made only by a person who knew, loved and respected Flanagan. And considering the toughness of the graphic material, Dick's film is impressively non-sensationalistic.

At the same time, it's not recommended for squeamish viewers.

Flanagan's longtime wife and dominant partner, Sheree Rose, reportedly had never allowed anyone other than herself to photograph her husband. By allowing Dick to film Flanagan, Rose felt she would be giving up an important aspect of her role. And by letting herself be filmed, Rose was suddenly placed in a submissive role. She clearly overcame these obstacles during the four years — and 150 hours of footage — that it took Dick to make his docu, for Rose provides illuminating commentary on Flanagan the man, their complex, mutually rewarding marriage, and S&M as a complex psycho-social-physical phenomenon.

Born in New York in 1952 with the hereditary disease cystic fibrosis, Flanagan was determined not to succumb to his illness, not to be passive. As he reveals in his narration, "In a never-ending battle not just to survive but to subdue my stubborn disease, I've learned to fight sickness with sickness." Flanagan later moved to L.A., where he established himself as an eccentric poet and original visual and performance artist.

Although Flanagan had experimented extensively with masochism and pain since childhood, it turns out that his parents, who are interviewed in the film in their Arizona home, knew nothing about their son's sexuality until the last few years of his life. Flanagan's mother recounts painfully the family's continual struggle with cystic fibrosis: Of their five children, three were born with CF, and Bob was the last to die, following his two sisters.

Flanagan makes a most comfortable, totally uninhibited subject: Because his work always included a candid explanation of his private life, the presence of the camera seems a natural extension of his performances. Flanagan's self-effacing, disarming humor — and refusal to explain or apologize

for his eccentricities — contribute immeasurably to an insightful, often riveting documentary.

In one of the most touching sequences, Flanagan is contacted by the Make-a-Wish Foundation and told of a 17-year-old Canadian girl who's close to dying from CF. A big fan of his work, her wish is to visit Flanagan, and indeed, a few months later, she arrives in L.A. with her mom. Dick's camera follows her a year later as she returns to L.A. alone to have her nipples pierced, with her mentor in attendance.

In the toughest scene to watch, one that will make many viewers cover their eyes, Flanagan nails his penis to a board, then releases the nail to show streams of blood spurting from his organ.

As if to warn the audience of what's ahead, Flanagan first talks about his outrageous act, giving viewers time to "prepare" for this never-before-seen-on-film performance, shot in ultra-close-up.

"Sick" gets increasingly somber and devastating as it goes along. There are some painfully intimate discussions that reveal Rose's unwillingness to accept that Flanagan was dying and no longer capable of submitting to her.

Rose shoots several important scenes leading to Flanagan's death. Though his death itself is not recorded on camera, there is a stunning sequence of still photos of Flanagan naked on a bed just minutes after he's died.

What's docu lacks is a broader context for the Flanagans' long-lasting marriage. There is no way to know the frequency of their S&M practices and how they related to other aspects of their lives. Rose intimates that they also had conventional sexual intercourse, but no info is disclosed as to how satisfying this was for either of them. But these are minor complaints, dwarfed against the magnitude of scope and challenging candor of a documentary that is truly one of a kind.

— Emanuel Levy