

Pain Man

Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist
Directed and produced by Kirby Dick
A Cinepix Films release
Opens November 7

BY DENNIS LIM

It's a remarkable film that can offer a garishly blood-splattered close-up of an impaled penis and still appear wholly non-sensationalist. *Sick*, Kirby Dick's portrait of Bob Flanagan, the poet, performance artist, and "Supermasochist" who died in January 1996, is a manifesto of defiant survival and improbable self-empowerment. While it clearly owes its pathos and potency to Flanagan, Dick's documentary is as honest and complicated as it needs to be.

Far more than most artists, Flanagan suffered for his art. Or, more to the point, he translated acute, lifelong suffer-

ing into radical, life-preserving art. Diagnosed with cystic fibrosis as a child, Flanagan learned to eroticize pain; he explored, indulged, and drew sustenance from his masochism, and became one of the longest-living survivors of the incurable lung disease. "The CF would have killed him if it weren't for S&M," he sings in one of his incongruously cheery ditties.

In collaboration with his domina-

trix lover, photographer Sheree Rose, Flanagan subjected his emaciated body to ritual, sometimes public, abasement. Virtually a stand-up comic who, while stripped, scarred, sutured, or strung up, remained Mr. Congeniality, Flanagan was a serious artist with a keen sense of the absurd.

Interspersed with videos of his performances and installations (and, no less memorably, with his wheezy coughing jags), *Sick* is a poignant account of one man confronting a death sentence conferred at birth. For Flanagan, wresting control of his mortality meant laughing in its face (the audience's inevitable ner-

vous mirth is a comparable impulse). The movie opens with him announcing his own death to the camera; as the end credits roll, he sings about how it's "fun to be dead." For all the insistent gallows humor (or perhaps because of it), the images of Flanagan on his deathbed, disoriented and scared, followed by Rose's snapshots of his newly dead corpse, are ineffably sad.

Without attempting overt analysis, *Sick* provides lucid insights into the psychological dynamic of an s/m relationship. Crucially, it also debunks the myth of masochist as victim. Flanagan is probably best known for being tortured and disembowelled in Nine Inch Nails' "Happiness Is Slavery" video, but that persona is aberrational. In interviews here, he speaks of the control implicit in masochism, pointing out, "I'm more the mad scientist than the guinea pig." Dick brings intense scrutiny to bear on Flanagan and Rose's relationship, as if daring the viewer to pass judgment. For the most part, their union seems a blissfully fortuitous one, but there are signs, too, of stress eroding its foundations. With Flanagan close to death, barely able to breathe, Rose throws a tantrum: "If you loved me, you'd submit to me."

Sick leaves conventional notions of complicity in tangles, its voyeuristic, freak-show aspect balanced (but hardly neutralized) by its emphatically collaborative nature. The need for an underlying explanation is addressed most forcefully by Flanagan himself, in his torrential poem, "Why" (used here in a devastating, concluding voiceover). Equally instructive, however, are the thoughts of his parents. "I see a young man who hates his body," says Flanagan's mother. I concur with her husband, a sensible man who prefers to see his son's supermasochism as a way of telling God, "Go fuck yourself." ■



Bob Flanagan doing his Visible Man routine

KIRBY DICK