

C I N E M A

Not So Sick

Masochist Bob Flanagan was also a suffering hero

HE COULD HAVE EMERGED FROM Jesse Helms' darkest nightmare of an NEA-performance psycho: a guy who nails his penis to a board and calls it art. Yet Bob Flanagan, masochist with a cause, might win the sympathy of any stony conservative, for he was one of the longest-lived survivors of cystic fibrosis, a lung disease that takes most of its victims in childhood. His daft wit even turned his affliction into a *Mary Poppins*-style ditty: "Supermasochistic Bob has cystic fibrosis/ He should've died when he was young, but he was too precocious / A lifetime of infection and his lungs all filled with phlegm/ The CS would have killed him if it weren't for S&M/ Hum-diddle-iddle-iddle I'm gonna die..."

Since Kirby Dick's *Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* displays all of its subject's creative carpentry skills, it is not for the faint of stomach. (When the song *The Hammer of Love*



WHAT ABOUT BOB? Facing up to death

starts playing, go out for popcorn.) But like the 1994 *Crumb*, this deadpan documentary transcends its sensational topic. Flanagan's artful self-mutilation, and especially his corrosively comic descriptions of it, amounted to a heroic decision to take the punishment that God or nature meted out to him into his own hands.

His long relationship with the dominatrix Sheree Rose is a ferocious metaphor for any intense, complex liaison. Whatever welts she inflicted, whatever pain he endured and enjoyed, they surely deserved and loved each other. Flanagan's most poignant work of art—the culmination of a life in agony—is his death at age 43. It is recorded here with a grace that nearly matches the blithe heroism of a man most viewers might, at the beginning of this funny, disturbing, stirring film, have too quickly labeled sick. —By Richard Corliss