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Dance Revolves around Incest Survivors

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Before you meet the characters, you know the crimes -- eerie suggestions of sexual abuse reenacted in black and white.

A man carries a little girl to bed, his violent hands and her kicking feet creating wild shadows on the wall. There's a liquor glass, close-ups of children's dolls in the bedroom, a toy truck dropping onto the floor.

These shots are spliced together with footage from the stage, where adult survivors dance and scream soundlessly. In the background, the subjects narrate their own stories, candidly telling who molested them -- my father, my stepfather, my grandfather, my cousin -- how, and for how long.

The brief introduction does not mince words, which is how Miami filmmaker Sylvie Rokab wanted it.

It's the same reason she titled the documentary about the Broward performance group of incest survivors Innermotion -- Dance of Incest instead of the working title, Innermotion -- Liberation from Sexual Abuse.

"This is what happens," said Rokab, whose film will premiere next Saturday at the Fort Lauderdale International Film Festival. "I wanted people to know what this whole thing revolves around. You become intimate with the people's experiences right away."

Sharon Daugherty, for example, looks straight at the camera as she speaks: "The first time that I could remember my father beginning to abuse me was somewhere around age 6, climbing into bed with me, trying to explain the birds and the bees, and men and women, and did I want to touch his penis. I remember thinking, 'Something's really wrong.'"

Daugherty came upon the idea for the Innermotion performance troupe years later, while she was studying to be a therapist and directing a college dance company.

"That's when I thought, 'If I had a company of incest survivors working out issues of healing and empowerment, we could change the world,'" Daugherty said in a phone interview.

She advertised -- no experience necessary, the posters read, but you must be a survivor of sexual abuse with plenty of therapy.

This was 1990. Three people showed up the first week, three the next week and 10 the week after. The first show was open only to incest survivors, and 80 people came.

"We were floored," Daugherty said.

Their repertoire grew to encompass three shows, each of which represents a different stage of healing.

First, there was Show and Tell, where each member of the company acts as his "inner child," dressed in children's pajamas. No Silent Night tackles issues of family and holidays. In one piece, Santa gives the dancers gifts they never received as children, like support or self-esteem. They decide to find out if Santa is real by tugging on his beard.

The entire costume falls apart to reveal a mirror -- the dancers gasp, and the scene is over.

The third performance, called Open Heart Perjury , deals with survivors' dysfunctional adult relationships.

These pieces were so well received, Daugherty said, that she thought a documentary might do even more to spread awareness of sexual abuse.

She'd read about Rokab, a former businesswoman from Brazil whose interests have brought her from a documentary on gay and lesbian teenagers to her current project, which took her to Nicaragua to film endangered sea turtles.

"I'm inclined to tell nonfiction stories in a cinematic way," Rokab said, describing her approach as "poetic interpretations of life."

Innermotion lent itself to Rokab's brand of story-telling.

"They had tremendously painful experiences as children, and yet they used these experiences to make such an incredibly positive impact on society," Rokab said. "That was mind-blowing."

For four years, Rokab attended performances, conducted interviews, choreographed reenactments, trailed the dancers through meetings and road trips.

"Sylvie did a really good job of spending time with us on a personal level," Daugherty said. "That was the whole idea, to learn how to forget the camera, and we did."

Even in one-on-one interviews, where the camera's presence is clear, it seems as though Daugherty and her five dancers are talking to each other. Rokab jumps from one voice to another, with the dancers somehow finishing each other's sentences.

"She wove that tapestry together beautifully," Daugherty said.

But for Rokab, the greatest struggle was finding a satisfactory ending.

She had already started cutting her 33 hours of footage when she received a card inviting her to Innershadow's first production of incest comedy.

Rokab knew the group had started feeling stale, frustrated by the same performance year after year. Her camera had captured one conversation in which the dancers realized they'd moved beyond their routine -- they simply weren't scared little children any more.

Daugherty and fellow performer Robyn Sobrane-Peterson had actually tried incest comedy before, but it was too raw, too harsh, a flop for their small trial audience.

Now, years later, they decided to try again. They hoped comedy would attract wider audiences than their traditional emotionally draining performance.

And Rokab knew the incest comedy routine would provide her film with a conclusion, taking viewers from the dark tone of the film's opening to end with laughter.

"You can call it Hollywoodish, or whatever, but I like to end a film on a note that's positive," Rokab said. "When you finally make light of something, and laugh at it, you're there. For the film, it was an incredible evolution."