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Huntington's Dance: Slamdance Review

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The Bottom Line

Huntington's disease gets a very personal exploration in this moving doc.

Venue

Slamdance Film Festival

Chris Furbee's documentary explores his own personal struggle with the neurological disorder Huntington's disease.

The new Slamdance documentary, *Huntington's Dance*, is not the first film in which an individual provides an in-depth chronicle of a personal battle with a fatal disease. But **Chris Furbee's** exploration of his family's struggles with Huntington's disease -- an incurable neurological condition -- is one of the most affecting. Furbee filmed over a period of 18 years, focusing first on his mother's deterioration and going on to explore his own diagnosis several years later. The movie offers a unique perspective on the ravages that this disease can take on an entire family. With graphic scenes of the illness taking its toll on Furbee's family, it will not be an easy sell for audiences, but it may find a home on public television.

Furbee tells us that he first became aware of the disease when he was five years old and noticed that something was wrong with his grandfather. As a teenager, he saw that his mother was starting to exhibit symptoms of the disease, and he fled his native West Virginia for San Francisco. But when he learned that his mother was starting to deteriorate dramatically, he returned home in 1995 and decided to film his own reactions as well as his mother's struggles. Since his parents' marriage had ended several years earlier, Furbee was left with the responsibility of caring for her. The contrast of photographs and home movies of his mother, **Rosemary Shockey**, as a beautiful young woman and later scenes of an unkempt woman

writhing on the floor are heartrending. Shockey had been a gifted artist, and even as her illness progressed, she clung to her painting and tried desperately to maintain a measure of independence. These scenes with Shockey are brutally honest but perhaps repetitive, given how much impact a few images can have.

After Furbee finally manages to have his mother hospitalized, he returns to California and debates whether he should take the test which will reveal whether he possesses the gene for the disease. (Despite many years of research, there is still no cure.) When he does decide to be tested, the candid scene where he receives the results is suspenseful and deeply moving. In the aftermath of the diagnosis, Chris contemplates suicide, but he ultimately decides to continue living. At the end of the film, he is 47, and experiences some symptoms but perseveres.

The film is essentially a video diary spanning almost 20 years, and although there are candid interviews with Chris's father and with a few of his girlfriends over the years, most of the film focuses on him. It probably does need a tighter editing hand, but it is quite compelling, enhanced by a lyrical musical score composed by Chris with several collaborators. If the film's aim is to open our hearts to victims of this and other terrible diseases, it succeeds.

Venue: Slamdance Film Festival.

Director: Chris Furbee.

Screenwriter-Editor: Herbert Bennett

Producers: Chris Furbee, Herbert Bennett, Debra Sugerman, Donatello Bonato, Otis Bess.

Executive producers: Gene Furbee, Sarah Kendall.

Director of photography: Otis Bess.

Music: Mike Furbee, Simon Kendall, Gene Furbee, Chris Furbee, Bob Shank.

No rating, 89 minutes.

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