

'The Creative High' Portrays Reality of Artists' Addiction and Recovery

By Noma Faingold

Luis Canales, a choreographer and performance artist, whose stage name is "Strobe," opens the documentary, "The Creative High," with an improvisational, cathartic piece on a bare stage. He is in a white leotard covered with painted-on blue veins. At one point, he is tangled up in red yarn, struggling to break free. Soon white powder is poured over him while he is curled up on the floor. When he moves, the powder explodes into the air. Then rain-like water showers over him in slow motion.

"It was meant to show the different phases of addiction," said Canales, 36.

"The Creative High," directed by Adriana Marchione of Noe Valley and produced by Dianne Griffin, a longtime resident of the Outer Richmond, follows nine artists with widely varying styles in their individual paths of recovery. The project, which began filming in 2016, will have its world premiere at the 24th San Francisco Independent Film Festival (SF Indiefest).

Canales, who used to live in the Sunset District and now lives in the Ingleside, admitted that while shooting the performance a few years ago, he was still using meth, as well as a few other drugs.



Producer Dianne Griffin (left) and director Adriana Marchione of the documentary "The Creative High." Photo by Noma Faingold.

"I was coming down. I was at my worst point," he said. "I was depleted. I felt terrible about it. I told Adriana and she said that being in that state made it authentic."

For 53-year-old Marchione, who has been in recovery for 28 years, it was important to portray the subjects of "The Creative High" in a truthful way, no matter how the struggle looked. Her background as a dancer, photographer, expressive arts therapist and educator dictated her sensitive,

non-exploitative approach. Each person's background, story in addiction and recovery looks different. In most cases, it is hopeful.

For example, Marchione related to the way Ralph Spight, a San Francisco-based rock musician, talked about writing songs sober. She had to include a scene in the 75-minute film when Spight said, "For me, songwriting is, on the one hand, great. I love it. But 90% of the time, it's f---ing torture." "That scene spoke to me. It showed that addicts, who are creative, have a very loud inner critic," Marchione said.

In the film, Spight also describes how he evolved in his post-alcoholic creative life.

"I have these mash-ups of emotions that were never possible before," he said.

Longtime documentary producer Griffin, 64, who was born in Kansas City and grew up in Chicago, has been in recovery for decades and is a practicing Buddhist. She came onto the project early and described her collaboration with Marchione as "transformative."

Her role was largely to provide a structure to the storytelling, specifically dividing the film into three chapters, featuring three subjects each. It was also Griffin's idea to weave in artistic drone shots.

"I pushed for those because the film had so much emotional closeness. It opened things

up, so you could rest for a minute," Griffin said. "The drone shots also say, 'I'm more than my addiction.'"

Both Griffin and Marchione were heavily involved in the editing of the film.

"How I look at the world is put into this piece," Griffin said. "Knowing how art can change your life, it's our vision."

The close collaborators view the subjects in the film as collaborators, as well.

"We developed a trust with each of the subjects, but it took time," Griffin said. "We wanted to develop close relationships with them so they could trust us in telling their stories."

Canales, who went to rehab in November 2020 for four months, was extremely open in the film about his personal history, as he is in his art. His mother died of a heroin overdose when he was an infant. His father fled the scene and was killed a short time later.

"He hung out with a lot of dark people," Canales said. He was adopted (along with his biological brother) by a woman in the Los Angeles area who saw the story on the local news.

His brother was abusive once he found out Canales was gay. He finally felt relief when his brother went to prison for life.

Canales studied photography and dance at San Jose

State University and moved to San Francisco in 2011, where he was first introduced to meth.

"I lived in a say-anything, do-anything atmosphere," he said.

His drug use became chronic, and his creativity suffered.

"I could feel my dreams dying while I was performing," he said.

Since he completed rehab last spring, Canales, who is also being treated for bipolar disorder, is taking advantage of every recovery resource available, including a therapist and group therapy. He clarified that he follows a "harm-reduction model" of recovery.

Canales has a full-time guest experience job at Club Fugazi. He is also creating new work and performing (as COVID parameters allow).

Marchione has plans to bring "The Creative High" to treatment centers and mental health organizations with screenings, talks and workshops.

"This film is about reclaiming creativity in recovery," she said.

The world premiere of "The Creative High," will be shown at the 24th San Francisco Independent Film Festival, on Feb. 6, at 7 p.m., at the Roxie Theater and will stream for the duration of the festival, Feb. 3-13. For more information, go to sfndiefest.com.



In "The Creative High," which premieres at SF Indiefest this month, San Francisco-based rock musician Ralph Spight discusses his experience with alcoholism and his post-alcoholic life as an artist. Courtesy photo from Adriana Marchione.



San Francisco choreographer and performance artist Luis Canales (stage name: Strobe) is one of nine subjects featured in the documentary, "The Creative High." Courtesy photo from Adriana Marchione.