Opinion
Culture



Joy Robson, Wade Robson, Michael Jackson, Chantal Robson and Dennis Robson in 1990 (HBO/Dan Reed)



by Rose Pacatte

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @srrosemovies

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

March 9, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The documentary "Leaving Neverland" — produced and directed by Dan Reed — is a slowly spun, gently told tragedy that premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January.

While the filmmaker makes good use of archival footage, there are no untoward images. It is the testimony of the two men, Wade Robson and James Safechuck, who accuse pop music legend Michael Jackson of sexual abuse when they were children, that is graphic and impressive. Their narratives are delivered in certain, unambiguous tones drenched in a dark sadness, humiliation, anger and conflicted regret. The men look strong but they project fragility.

This is an unadorned documentary, with straight-on shots of Robson and Safechuck, their mothers especially, fathers and siblings, as they narrate what happened and how they became part of Jackson's inner circle that made the alleged sexual abuse possible.



Wade Robson, in "Leaving Neverland" (HBO)

Jackson, who died in June 2009, was and continues to be a gigantic celebrity; Robson and Safechuck and, by extension, their parents and families, are ordinary people,

ordinary fans, attracted to that celebrity. But once they met, did Jackson seduce them, or did they fall prey to Jackson's cult of celebrity, built by an adoring, unsuspecting, uncritical public? As the film tells it, it was certainly a combination of the two.

It seems that wherever you look in the world today, there are allegations of sexual abuse within families, the Catholic Church, Protestant churches and faith communities, schools, the military, colleges, the entertainment industry and corporations. The documentary about news monger and alleged sexual predator "Divide and Conquer: The Story of Roger Ailes," is horrific and validates further the #MeToo movement within the entertainment industry.

But compared to Jackson, few people know and, dare I say, care about Ailes on an emotional level. They didn't grow up listening to his music. The soundtracks Jackson created continue to permeate the culture.



James Safechuck, in "Leaving Neverland" (HBO)

As I watched "Leaving Neverland," I grew to believe these young men. I watched with foreboding the mothers' descent into a false security created by celebrity and attention, parading as caring. Yes, they honestly but so naively believed that Jackson cared about them and their sons, and even when it became clear they were being replaced, they held on.

The tragedy of Jackson's lost childhood and broken relationship with his father are well-known, even if denied. One wonders what made Jackson invite young boys into his bed with their parents' consent? What kind of pied piper was he? Because even this is too much to fathom.

I asked one of our sisters, Pauline Sr. Nancy Usselmann, if she would watch this film (four hours long, in two parts.) As a musician and dancer as well as a lifelong Jackson fan, I didn't think she would see it because it could change her perception of him. Though her reply shows she is conflicted about the allegations, she surprised me. She said she will watch it.

"I'm still going to like his music because you cannot deny his talent," Usselmann said. "Art is experienced by the observer and each person brings their own experience to the art to create meaning. It is the beauty in the art itself that touches us, not the flawed humanity of the artist who created it."

"Leaving Neverland" is not really a documentary as we have come to expect; this is a one-sided narrative with many voices. It will not seem fair to fans of Jackson because he is not here to once again defend himself.

On the other hand, the people in the film are risking more than they are gaining by going public with this quietly compelling story of childhoods suffocated by abuse — and I am including Jackson's childhood too. His was sacrificed on the altar of fame and fortune by his parents and the recording industry machine that exploited his talents. We may never know the complete truth, but parents be warned.

The human persons in this story exist with deep emotional scars. I hope they get the help they need to be free from what happened to them as children, so they can flourish and fulfill the promise of their youth.

I hope the parents find a way to be at peace for their role in this tragic, immoral tsunami they never saw coming. I hope that parents will watch this film and learn

how sex abuse occurs and how predators groom victims and the grown-ups who care for them. And I hope that everyone who sees this film will understand more about the destructive cult of celebrity.

[Sr. Rose Pacatte, a member of the Daughters of St. Paul, is founding director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies in Los Angeles.]

Advertisement