

**CLAIMS DEPARTMENT
ROBIN WILLIAMS**



ROBIN WILLIAMS 1951 - 2014

Robin Williams was one of the defining comedians of the last three decades. His frenetic style helped change the way that stand-up was presented in the US, and then parlayed that into a career on television, and later in film..He was one of the funniest men of all-time. I have no hesitation saying that.

Depression. Substance abuse. He committed suicide. I've dealt with depression, and many of those around me have fought it as well. It's a shame that so many talented people have to fight it, and sometimes, it wins. That's the greatest shame.

This issue is dedicated to his memory and looks at his career in as many forms as I can come up with...



**ON LOCATION:
ROBIN WILLIAMS
– LIVE AT THE
ROXY
(1978)**

This was where I first saw Robin Williams. At this point, he wasn't a huge name, but was on one of his first major tours. This special was played for years and years on HBO, often teamed with one of the other comedy specials, or Eddie Murphy's *RAW* or *Bill Cosby Himself*, or one of Whoppi Goldberg's specials. I must have seen it five or six times in its entirety. It was hilarious, and I couldn't have been older than 7 or 8 when I was watching it. I'm pretty sure we also had it on video tape as well.

And to this day, I can recite one of the gags by heart. After 10 or so minutes of working the audience, of climbing into the balcony, of making jokes, nesting them within other jokes, of doing 'quick impressions', of frantic flailing, he tells the audience he has to go backstage. He emerges in a jacket and a pair of dark sunglasses with a harmonica, and a jangly piano starts playing. He then starts the Beverly Hills Blues. It's as funny a bit as you'll ever hear. The line that has always got me heaving in laughter – 'Woke up the other day, ran out of Perrier.' I've loved that bit so hard, and re-watching it made me laugh just as hard as I did when I first saw it all those years ago. I was young, too young to understand a lot of the humour, and not nearly old enough to

"OH NO. I'VE LOST YOU. I'VE GONE TOO FAR, TOO EARLY, TOO QUICK. I'M IN THE LAND WHERE NOTHING'S FUNNY NOW."

know that the language he was using was course but not funny because it was course, it was funny because it was expertly delivered.

There was also a wonderful section where Robin goes into a Mr. Rodgers like character and says that he "has to tell the children that they're all going to die of radiation."

What's hilarious is that he loses it. He loses the audience, and like Lenny Bruce before him, he goes into comedy that just isn't all that funny. He breaks from his character, he goes slow and gentle, and while it shows range, it doesn't engage the viewer, and the club goes quiet, until he emerges from it and the audience showers respect on him with applause while he's doing one of his quick changes. Of course, he comes out the other side funnier, hotter, revived. You're left with the Robin Williams that you remember. He even drops a line to the audience while he's doing a Nadia Comaneche translation bit - "Don't give up yet. It gets better."

This is an impressive record of a time when stand-up was growing in stature. In the 1980s, there was a boom, where thousands of comedy clubs opened, where guys like Robin, Steve Martin, David Brenner, Eddie Murphy, and Whoppi Goldberg could tour clubs and huge theatres and sell them out. Comedy albums had been gi-

ant, and Robin was a big part of that. He was on fire, and pulled in viewers to the clubs, and at first to television.

At the time he did this special, he had just started doing *Mork & Mindy*, which would turn him into a huge star. The first two seasons were big hits, after that, because of terrible choices by ABC's management, it hit the skids. The fact is the show wasn't great. I re-watched a lot of the episodes a year or so ago and it was really poorly written, shot exactly like every other sitcom of the time. There as almost nothing to make it special.

Except for Robin Williams.

He had an energy that you seldom found at the time. Watching the comedy special, you can see how wild and far off the beaten path he was, and it's obvious that he was held back a bit as Mork, though he was insanely over-the-top for TV at the time. It only makes sense, if you think about it. He had to make a name for himself in the clubs, and that meant giving it everything. You don't have to do nearly as much to get over on TV. While Mork is what made him a Hollywood star, really the legend of Robin Williams was made on stage, especially in the shows like *On Location: Robin Williams – Live at the Roxy*



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ROBERT ALMAN'S POPEYE (1980)

I was 5 in 1980. I was a cartoon junky. That's the best way to put it. Everyday I'd watch cartoon in the morning, then I'd go to Kindergarden and come back to watch cartoons. Saturday was about cartoons all day. I'd watch *Loony Tunes* and *Merry Melodies* and Disney cartoons and on and on. If I was lucky and home during the day, I might catch a few 1930s toons on *Dialing for Dollars*. It was a great time. In those days, there were four characters I loved more than any others. They

were Donald Duck, Felix the Cat, Betty Boop, and Popeye.

Now, Popeye, that spinach-eating sailor with the odd speech impediment, was a major favorite, and my Mom and Dad were both huge movie fans. We'd go every week, and I'm not sure how, but we always seemed to know when there was a sneak preview of any film. Mom got us tickets to see the new Robert Altman film one evening in 1980, and I was so excited because it combined the actor from my favorite TV series, *Mork & Mindy*, with my favorite director (OK, I didn't know how to articulate that at the time, but of the first video tapes we owned, three were Altman films and I'd watched them dozens of times each), and my favorite character. It was huge.

At the time, the film was largely panned. It did OK at the box office, wasn't a major hit, but it more than made back its money.

That's a shame because I really believe that it is something special.

The story is about as basic as you can get – a stranger is looking for his Poppa, comes into Sweethaven where he encounters a family who rent him a room. He falls for their daughter, Olive Oyl, finds a baby, Swee'pea, and then his daddy, all while running afoul of Bluto, the local town tough. It's a sweet story, and there's so much color to it. The sets and the cinematography are wonderful, and it's obvious that's where much of the money spent on this production went. At 20 million, it was a big budget venture for the time. The costumes are a bit more sedate than you'd expect, especially after so many years when movies like *Dick Tracy* have sort of trained us to expect blown-out colors, but they seem so thoroughly realised. It's not just a film adaptation of a

comic strip, it's a re-imagining in the best possible way. You can take massively unrealistic situations and characters and turn them into something that can exist in the real world.

The first thing I should note is the music. It's Harry Nilsson, and thus amazing, and the songs are lovely, if not spectacularly presented. Let's face it, Shelley Duvall doesn't have the best voice in the world, but on the song *He Needs Me*, the light uncertainty of her voice plays perfectly with the content. The two best ensemble songs, *Everything is Food* and *Oh, Sweethaven*, are both the kind of songs that don't get much attention, but they stick with you.

Of course, Robin Williams is excellent as Popeye. He nailed the voice, and the mannerisms, and when he gets to play off of Poopdeck Pappy, played by Ray Walston, it's obvious that he can hold his own with one of the greats of stage and screen. When he is acting opposite Shelley Duvall, who I truly believe was the only woman who could have played Olive in 1980, they have a sort of chemistry that you don't find in pairings like this anymore.

The thing is, Williams is not Mork in *Popeye*. He's something different. He's both more extreme and more subtle. In fact, he's more perfectly in character. Mork was something of a caricature, but his Popeye is a full character. He is a man living in the world that was built around his performance, and it's devastatingly beautiful. Robin Williams' finest performance? Naw, not by a mile, but one of his most thorough, without doubt. His singing's only OK, his physical stuff, exceptional, his commitment, beyond compare.

Of course, it's not just his movie. There are so many excellent secondary performances that



it retains that ensemble spirit that Altman always presented. Even in scenes with over-lapping dialogue, the characters all come out, each presented with an eyes towards establishing this world they've created. Paul Dooley as Wimpy is excellent, as he is in just about everything, and James Cromwell as the Tax Collector is really good. In fact, when I re-watched it, I came back to him as the character who helped us establish the reality of this surreal world. Nothing is more concretely real than taxes, and the way that Cromwell played him, stiff and overly-upright, was perfect. Walston was excellent, Cole Oyl, played by Broadway's MacIntyre Dixon, was another memorable performance, though he doesn't do much to move the plot, and he's written to do one thing over and over, it works.

Other than Robin and Shelley, the real star was Bill Irwin.

The man is the quintessential non-painted clown. I knew him from the Pickle Family Circus. We saw them every year and he was one of the three major clown. He was awesome, easily the most memorable thing to do with the circus, and when they came to Santa Clara, they'd do a pre-show program where kids would be able to do these short classes. I met him, he did a clowning demo, and I was so happy to see him on screen. It was maybe a year after I'd done the class that I saw Popeye and Bill on-screen. It was amazing, and he was a amazing. I don't think he said a word, but physically, he inhabited the character fully, and his physical stuff was so clean, and

big, filling the entire screen even when he's playing in the background. Something as simple as trying to pick up a hat and kicking it down the road brings simple laughs, which allows us to interact with Williams' comedy. It's table-setting, as it were.

Watch Popeye today, not through the eyes of trying to figure out what went wrong, but with an eye towards the film as its own thing. Nothing will compare with the strip or the carttons, but on its own terms, it's a remarkable film. It is an attempt by Robert Altman (and, of course, Paramount studio head Robert Evans) to take the Altman style, with all its over-lapping dialogue, character interaction, and fluid camerawork, and apply it to comic book-esque material. No one, and I mean NO ONE, has managed to accomplish what Altman did with Popeye. They've tried, Dick Tracy was possibly the best failed attempt, but they miss a key ingredient every time. In the case of *Popeye*, it was an amazing cast who didn't lean into the comic world, but who played within it and around it. You could say they pulled back, but really, they walked in and pulled elements out, put them on display for us. Williams himself is the best example of that. Yes, he was fully Popeye, but he was neither the cartoon Popeye nor the strip Popeye. He was the perfect Popeye for the movies, and a large part of why it holds up better today in an age when we're used to comic adaptations. Like Robert Downey, Jr. in *Iron Man*, he gives the character a life beyond the extreme, and that is what makes the movie.

POPEYE IS A SIGNIFICANT SPIRITUAL ENTITY. HE IS GOD-LIKE; HIS DEFORMITIES NOW MORE A SIGNAL OF HIS SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY THAN A CORPOREAL EXHIBITION OF SOME CHARACTER FAULT. FORGIVE THIS ANALOGY BUT, HE'S LIKE YODA—UGLY ON THE OUTSIDE BUT ONE OF THE BADDEST MUGS IN THE UNIVERSE.



THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP

This film went over my head. I was too young. Just too young. Going in, I can remember that I was excited to see a movie starring Mork again. I loved *Popeye*, and I was so excited to get to see another movie with him in it. I also knew that my Uncle Wayne's friend was in it. Wayne worked at the UCLA Music Library with John Lithgow's wife, and he knew John a little. We got Christmas cards from the Lithgows when I was a kid, which was also a cool thing. So, we went to see it.

Now, having watched it once or twice since I was a merely 7 years old, I can say that it's a really good film. Robin Williams's performance is solid, he is at the height of his acting craft here,

“YOU KNOW, EVERYBODY DIES. MY PARENTS DIED. YOUR FATHER DIED. EVERYBODY DIES. I'M GOING TO DIE TOO. SO WILL YOU. THE THING IS, TO HAVE A LIFE BEFORE WE DIE. IT CAN BE A REAL ADVENTURE HAVING A LIFE.”
~ FROM *THE WORLD ACCORDING TO GARP*

even more so than when in *Dead Poets Society* or *Good Will Hunting*. The performance was over-looked, I think, and unfairly. Robin Williams proved he was a serious actor here in a movie that got a lot of attention for its supporting cast.

And this is what I've got to say about that – all my respect for the struggles of the Transgender community come from *The World According to Garp*.

There is a character called Roberta Muldoon, who used to be Robert Muldoon, who happened to have been a star football player. Now, I grew up in a semi-strange situation. I was around gay people all the time, homosexuality wasn't weird to me as I was growing up. It might be generational, it might just be that I grew up in Silicon Valley in the 1980s. There was nothing strange or shameful or bad about being gay to me. But I don't think, at that point, I had ever encountered even the idea of transsexuality. Sure, I knew about Drag Queens and the like, but the idea of living life as a gender different than you were born was new. *The World According to Garp* presented the idea with a great amount of humanity, even if it was a safe way to do it, and John Lithgow's performance was rightly Oscar-nominated.

From that performance alone, I got it. No, it wasn't the deepest exploration of the subject (that would go to Felicity Huffman in *TransAmerica*, I think), but it presented the concept so well,

that even young Chris Garcia could take something away from it, and look at the entire world a little differently.

When I was older, had a cousin going through gender re-assignment, and was starting to look into what feminism thought about MtF transsexual, I was seriously taken aback. It made no sense to me, and I remember clearly looking at *The World According to Garp* again. The main idea of it seemed to be one thing – that people live and people die, and everything that happens in-between is just a bunch of stuff that happens. It doesn't matter if you're gay, straight, whether you present as the gender indicated by the chromosomes you were born with or not. What matters is that you live, and later, you die. That's it. That is what I took away from that film, and it's the most depressingly beautiful statement I've ever managed to bring into light in my own brain.

To look slightly more at Williams's *Garp*, I do need to point out that there's one moment that really speaks to his craft. After he's discovered his wife is having an affair with a student, he pulls his kids out of the movie they're watching and drives him. He's speeding and ends up rear-ending his wife's lover's car while she's pleasuring him with her mouth. One of the kids is killed, and guy has his junk bitten off, and there's pain and suffering all around. In that scene, that section of the film, Robin Williams is easily the best

he has ever been. He embodies everything that being in that position entails. I've been there, I've seen it/felt it first hand, and this is exactly how it happens. No, not the car crash, but the suspicion, the pain, the guilt, the final resolve. In one scene, he takes you through the journey of the cuckold, gives you every emotion that you'd possibly feel and in such a way that you can not deny it. He's amazing at that moment. While there is little subtlety, this is how it feels – everything comes to the surface right before it breaks through and goes fully out into the world. It's both terrifying and heartbreaking. He puts the emotions on display, but also has to hide them, at least a little, from the kids, which if you've ever been through that situation with little ones around, ain't easy. This moment sticks with you,

and during the re-watch, I found myself recalling it again and again. It's powerful acting. Director George Roy Hill doesn't miss a beat either, and though the freeze frame on the kids in the backseat at the moment of impact is a bit jarring, it does nothing to lessen the power of Robin Williams's performance over the previous few minutes.

This is why he wasn't just a great comedian. Robin Williams was a great performer.





MOSCOW ON THE HUDSON

Think of this as the death of Mork.

In *The World According to Garp*, he was deadly serious, but Mork was less than 3 months cancelled when it came out. He made *The Survivors* in-between, and did a few specials for HBO, but he was still Mork. While his performance as Vladimir Ivanoff has a fair bit of comedy to it, there's no light to his being. In fact, he's the darkest character Williams would ever play if you discount *One Hour Photo* and *Death to Smoochy*. Vlad is just so damned Russian, and he nails all the bits and pieces. Every little mannerism is that of a Russian taken out of Russia.

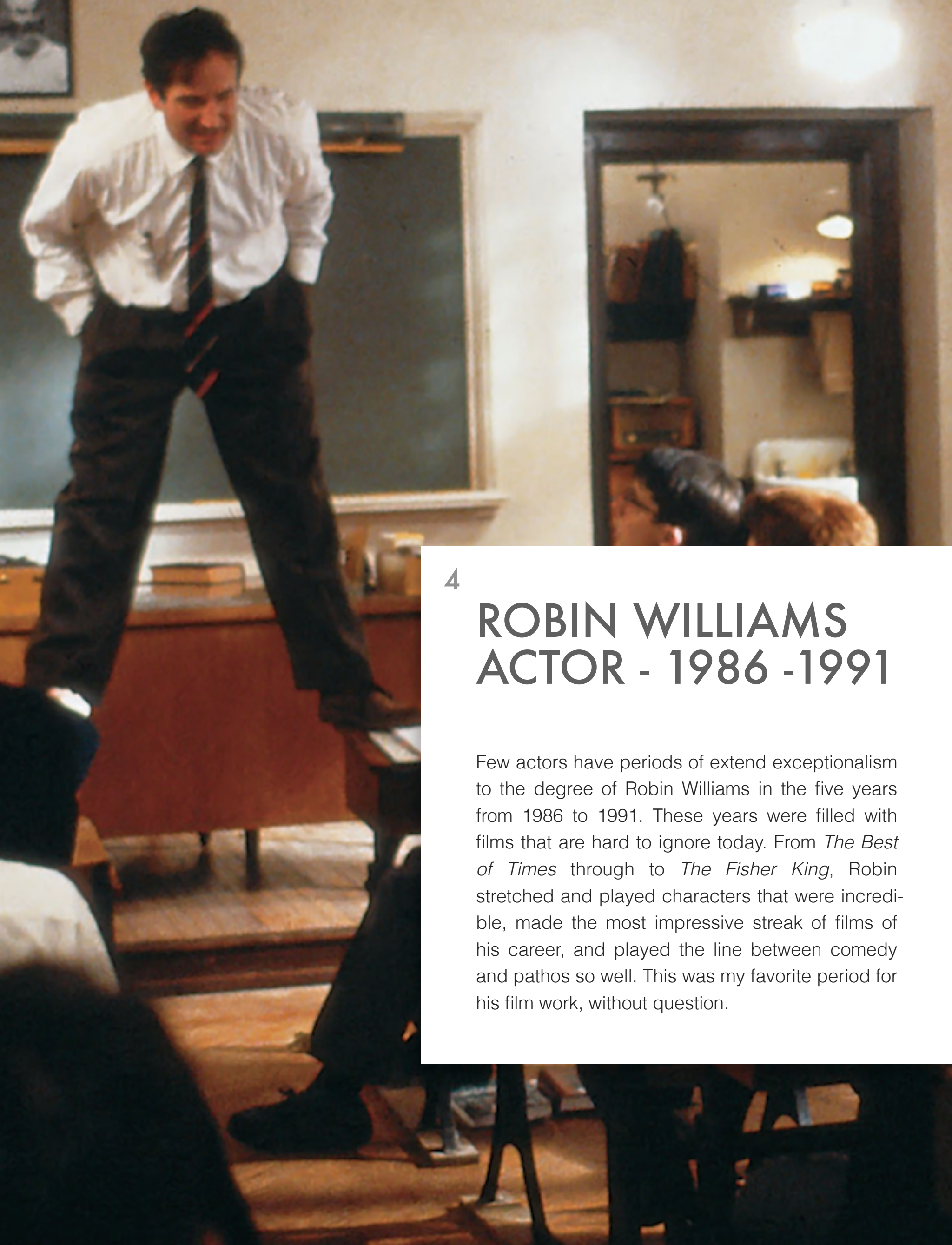
His performance in this film is very good. It's not T.S. Garp-good, but he really embodies the character. His interactions with Maria Conchita Alonso are perfect. One thing that he certainly learned from years of stand-up is timing, and while some say that acting is reacting, I'm more of the opinion that if you can time it right, hit the notes, you're well on your way to getting it. Robin hits every note, knows when a pause should end, when he should expand on it, when he should search for the right word. It feels like the most honest performance he ever gave.

THE TALE OF THE FROG PRINCE

3 FAERIE TALE THEATRE - THE FROG PRINCE

It wouldn't feel right talking about Robin Williams without mentioning one of my favorite performances. *Shelley Duvall's Faerie Tale Theatre* was my favorite as a kid, and *The Frog Prince*, with Williams' charisma inhabiting the title character, was incredible. I've watched it a hundred times at least. Eric Idle wrote, directed and narrated, but it's Robin Williams who pulls it together. Teri Garr is good in it, as always, but she's endlessly helped by Robin's commitment.





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ROBIN WILLIAMS ACTOR - 1986 -1991

Few actors have periods of extend exceptionalism to the degree of Robin Williams in the five years from 1986 to 1991. These years were filled with films that are hard to ignore today. From *The Best of Times* through to *The Fisher King*, Robin stretched and played characters that were incredible, made the most impressive streak of films of his career, and played the line between comedy and pathos so well. This was my favorite period for his film work, without question.



THE BEST OF TIMES

If there is something that I can understand, it is the desire to fix the errors of ones youth. *The Best of Times* is all about that, with Robin Williams playing Jack Dundee, an Insurance salesman who made the biggest mistake of his life by dropping a perfectly-thrown pass in the biggest football game of his life. It's a story that has happened to many folks. Ask Bill Buckner what it's like to boot the key moment. The desire to go back and change things is immense and eternal.

Williams is great, it's straight comedy, and he's not called on to go much over-the-top, which helps. He lets Kurt Russell, a fine comedic actor who has never gotten his due, have all the glory. While the film's a solid, mid-80s comedy, and while it's not the most memorable comedy of the decade, it was so solid, and while it was a comedy, it also didn't play into Williams' storied techniques. He's acting, not relying on wild energy, but working with his acting talent. He did go to Julliard after all.

Watching it today, it holds up better than so many other 1980s comedies, and certainly better than the other Kurt Russell comedy of the same period, *Overboard*.



GOOD MORNING VIETNAM

Before I get into Robin Williams' exceptional performance, I have to mention the soundtrack. It's one of the best of the 1980s. I'd put it slightly above *The Big Chill*, and maybe right on par with *Pulp Fiction*. It's an incredibly evocative soundtrack. I wasn't around in the 1960s, but I feel like I knew what the decade sounded like. It plays with time a bit, but it also sets things up in a way that you know not only what you're listening to, but where and when you are.

OK, now let's talk about what this movie means in the career of Robin Williams. This was a period piece, as the soundtrack would tell you, but it wasn't also a character piece. The entire movie rests upon the shoulders of the single character – Adrien Cronauer. Williams had carried movies before, *Moscow on the Hudson* was far more of a schlepjob than *Good Morning, Vietnam*, but here he hits his notes brilliantly, particularly in the way he interacts with Bruno Kirby. He does buddy stuff with Forrest Whitaker really well, and the dramatic stuff is really smartly played.

But no one gives a damn about anything but Williams' on-air radio stuff.

“What is inspired about *“Good Morning, Vietnam,”* which contains far and away the best work Williams has ever done in a movie, is that his own tactics are turned against him. The director, Barry Levinson, has created a character who is a stand-up comic - he’s a fast-talking disc jockey on Armed Forces Radio during the Vietnam War, directing a nonstop monologue at the microphone.”

~Roger Ebert

It's brilliant, it really is, and he's perfect for the role. Why? Because even though he's giving an energetic performance, he's also holding back. For a guy who made his name based on the kind of frenetic performance you saw in his specials. It wasn't like he was holding back, he was playing a character with a different style, and while he could tap into the energies he played with when he was on-stage, he gave his on-air work a completely different vibe. It works, and he was rightly praised for it. The quick impressions he did were very cool, but they weren't the same as 1980 Robin Williams on HBO. He had evolved his craft to the point where he's not required to go back on his old techniques and methods. That's such a huge part of moving his craft forward.

The film itself is nicely directed by Barry Levinson. He had a vision, and while it was obvious that he gave Robin a bit of rope for him to work with, he certainly made it work. He was on the beginning of the path to becoming an iconic American director, having worked his way up through the ranks in just about every other production role. You can see that he's laying back, not over-shadowing, or really over-emphasizing Williams' on-mic antics. He's playing the role of seasoned director with a cast who can easily play any side of the film.

And while it is certainly William's movie, the cast is excellent. Whitaker is also at least good, even if he can go too far (see *The Crying Game*), and Bruno Kirby was one of the best actors in American cinema. Robert Wuhl turns in a good performance, but it's Mr. JT Walsh who is the star of the supporting cast. He plays tightass better than almost anyone, and watching him in *Good Morning, Vietnam* reminds me of what we lost when he passed.

The entire production is good, and while it does serve up a little questionable history, it's a solid sight of the 1960s. It's the kind of film that when it makes the National Film Registry, something no Robin Williams film has done. I would not be surprised to see it go in this year. It's either *Good Morning Vietnam* or *Good Will Hunting*.



DEAD POETS SOCIETY AND ME

Vanessa and I re-watched it.

I haven't seen *Dead Poets Society* with another person in the room since Christmas, 1990. That's when we watched it with Gramma and the family at our place after dinner. It's a movie that means a lot to me in a lot of different ways. It's also one of the finest roles that Robin Williams ever conquered. I've re-watched it about a dozen times, always alone. It's an emotional experience for me, and Vanessa's the first person I've felt like I could watch it with. Because it's a story that is dear to me, that is close. The night we watched *Dead Poets Society* together, the night after Robin Williams died, we watched together as I typed and it all

came back to me – the movie, the feelings, my years studying with some of the Best Teachers...

I'm getting ahead of myself. Much of the rest of this will be the story of what *Dead Poets* means to me personally, about my life and the interconnections. Not necessarily the material. If you're into that, then stick with me.

I watched *Dead Poets Society* the night it opened at the Cinema 150. A group of us from Buchser Middle School walked over and watched it. It wasn't the first movie a group of us went to together, but it might have been the first date for at least a couple of us. I was there stag, and I'm glad I was. It would not have looked cool to have been on a date where I cried that much.

The story of *Dead Poets Society* is a good teacher runs afoul of the administration, but he inspires his students, and is a remarkable human being. He's railroaded off after a student commits suicide, and the end scene is among the most moving in the history of film. The students standing on their desks in the 'O Captain, My Captain' moment is amazing. It's been parodied, re-hashed, re-played, and we'll be seeing so much of it at the Oscars this year, it will be insane. I have no doubt that when he closes the memorial crawl, at least a dozen folks in the audience will stand on their seats.

And I will cry. Hard.

This year, I bawled when our friend Les Blank was shown on the crawl (the last time I was at the Century 21, sadly...) and there is no doubt I'll cry when they show Robin Williams. No doubt. The reason isn't because I was a great admirer, which I am, but because he made teach-

ers COOL. He got it, and that shows in his performance as Mr. Keating. He understood that a teacher held young lives in their hands, can mold them like clay. The Administration of the school did as well, and that's what scared them. The way Robin Williams played him, it was that he was both Super-Cool, and Super-Wise. He was what I imagine my good friend Derek McCaw is like as a teacher. He got it. And Williams understood it enough to embody it.

**This is a battle,
a war, and the
casualties
could be your
hearts and
souls.**

And a couple of years later, I under Mr. Keating by having the closest thing Santa Clara High ever had to one – Jerry Stuefloten. The man, who often had us call him 'O Captain, My Captain', was the biology teacher at Santa Clara. He was a man of forty-something years, a smart, wise, journeyed man. He was easily the best teacher I ever had, and probably one of the finest performers I've ever witnessed. The man was a storyteller, still is from all accounts, and he left a giant mark on me. He told a story, about the Ohlone (my tribe, it so happens...) and the way they break the bones of their dead. Applying that to a classroom duck that died was the single most moving story I've ever heard told in person. It was beautiful, and I still get misty when I think about it, even if I don't know the words anymore. There was literally not a dry eye in the house. Everyone was in tears, and like any good performer, two beats after the final word, the bell rang, and class was over. I will always remember that no body. Not nobody, but no body. There was a stillness the likes of which Time has not seen. It was incredible, and a moment or two after, we all started up, shuffled to the door, wiping tears out of our eyes, wiping our noses. It was amazing.

And it wasn't a stage show – it was the story of a teacher, and he got across his message better than any performer I've ever seen. He put it across so thoroughly, that now, more than twenty years later, I am still moved by the thought of that afternoon. A good teacher has to synthesize the roles of educator, security officer, therapist, cop, critic, so many roles. A great teacher must add Storyteller and Actor to the mix. The best teachers are all of those, and evangelist for their field, their ideas, for learning itself.

I had a few of those. I was lucky. Jerry Stueflotten, Vince Sutton, Rosanne Rasul, Sonia Martin, Ken Meschke, Marty McCann, and so many others. I was lucky. SO very, very lucky. The message of *Dead Poets Society*, and the message of almost every one of my Best Teachers, is nearly the same as that of *The World According to Garp*. Life is to be lived, or it is lost. In many ways, that's stuck with me.

Now, watching *Dead Poets Society* many years later, I discovered a strange fact – I was still one of the students, but I was of the generation of the parents in the film as far as the world is concerned. I was still sucking the marrow out of life, still a Dead Poet, but I'm no kid any more. I could only hope to be Mr. Keating, I guess. Sadly, I've discovered that I hate teaching. So, I guess I'm Kurtwood Smith, which isn't entirely bad!

Robin Williams is as good as he'd ever be in this one. Other than the obviously post-dubbed moments where Keating's doing more imitations than is necessary, he doesn't go very far. He pulls back, but again, doesn't seem like he's straining against the reins, either. He's at his most Actorly in this one, and though he doesn't have as much screentime as you might expect, he's wonderful and his performance is both nuanced and pronounced. In a way, he's Walt Whitman. He's practicing his art with incredible alacrity, and at the same time, he's putting on quite a show. He's WORKING. So hard. It's incredible, but it's all craft. Maybe that's why it's not my favorite of his performances. What really pitched the line as far as Robin Williams is concerned was his edge. It wasn't his skill, though there was that, it was that he dared to do what he did, and apologized for it, then did it one more

time! This is his safest role. He wouldn't stretch too far in this one, but it also allowed him to hit a larger audience far better. And that's not a knock, he didn't sell-out. He learned, and practiced, his craft. At one point, he craft was forming out-there characters and extreme frantic delivery. That was his Stand-up Craft. Starting from about 1982, his Craft was Acting. He could still shake it up on stage, but he was such a great actor, and he dedicated himself to perfecting that.

The rest of the cast was amazing. Kurtwood Smith, as always, was stern and tough, but with a heart underneath. Norman Lloyd might have been perfectly cast as the Dead of Welton Academy. The kids of Mr. Keating's class are all great. You have Ethan Hawke, Josh Charles, Robert Sean Leonard, and especially Gale Hansen, giving wonderful, memorable, not-quite-measured performances. They're all incredible, and though Hansen never really took off, he was the most impressive of all of 'em. Hawke was good, but obviously young and inexperienced. Josh Charles isn't given much to do, but Robert Sean Leonard is so good, and so conflicted. He, and Smith, get the showy moments. Though only Hawke became a major star, with Charles and Leonard having significantly strong careers, it is the kind of film that launches careers of top-flight actors. In many ways like Levinson's *Diner*.

**BUT ONLY IN
THEIR DREAMS
CAN MEN BE
TRULY FREE.
'T WAS ALWAYS
THUS, AND
ALWAYS THUS
WILL BE.
~ KEATING**

I love this movie. It's one of those Hollywood films that feels like an indy. Peter Weir's direction is always perfection, and here it's sparkling. He allows the acting to take centerstage, and that's important in this film. The screenplay's not bad, but as far as message and themes go, it's pretty simple. The dialogue's only OK. I'd say it was kinda stilted much of the way through, but the way the actors interpret it, the way that Weir allows things to roll, it all adds up to one of my favorite films.

“ROBIN WILLIAMS' PERFORMANCE IS MORE GRACEFUL THAN ANYTHING HE'S DONE BEFORE [-] HE'S TOTALLY, CONCENTRATEDLY THERE - [HE] READS HIS LINES STUNNINGLY, AND WHEN HE MIMICS VARIOUS ACTORS RECITING SHAKESPEARE THERE'S NO UNDUE CLOWNING IN IT; HE'S A GIFTED TEACHER DEMONSTRATING HIS SKILLS”

~ PAULINE KAE²⁰



AWAKENINGS

Penny Marshall directed *Awakenings* with a sort of shameless optimism. It was so obvious that this film, while based within a story of fact, was constructed to make you cry. Not a single choice was made that didn't feel as if it was being done to illicit tears from the audience. Even the laughs seemed to be marinated in heavy sorrow. And yet, I loved it.

Why? That's easy, Robert DeNiro. He's good in everything, but his performance here is unbelievable. He embodies the master thespian, and so thorough was his performance that to this day, when I think of catatonia, I automatically pull up the image of him in *Awakenings*.

Sadly, this is Robin Williams acting well, but the material leaves him a little one-note. Of course, he's playing against DeNiro, which can't be easy. He's the backbone of the film, and while it's not a great film, it's a thorough look at the phenomenon and one of the better medical films of the last thirty years. I only wish a director who understood how to make a film feel more balanced had taken the material. Still, I fell for it. It moved me exactly like it was supposed to.



THE FISHER KING

I won't even try to give a realistic review for *The Fisher King*. I won't. It's too hard to do without going into deep moments of introverted nostalgia. It would be like reliving the pain from an old wound, but a wound that you terribly miss. *The Fisher King* occupies a special place in my heart and soul, and it always will.

This is a story of how thin our shells are. We're eggs, and we're held together by shells that can take a fair bit of pressure, but a crack is enough to compromise the entire structure, leave us exposed. Parry, played by Williams, has had his shell cracked, and then mostly put back together again. He's off, that's obvious, and it all started with the beating death of his wife. Jeff Bridges plays Jack, a shock jock whose acerbic diatribes indirectly led to Parry's wife's death. This leads to a series of adventures between the two where they explore each others pain and sorrow, as well as try to make things right. Jack is trying to ease his own suffering by helping Parry out of his.

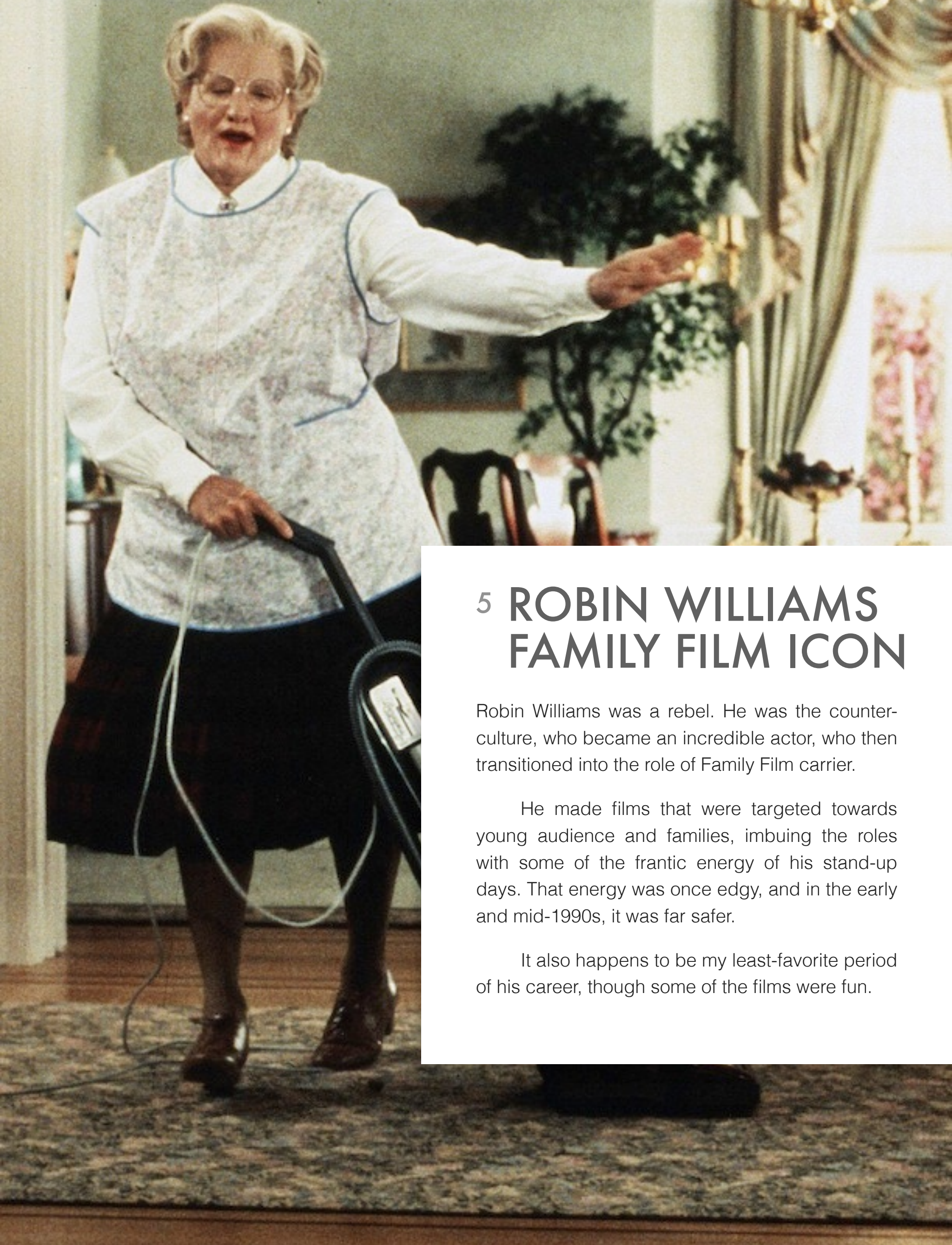
This is the other side of the coin that Williams plays in *Good Will Hunting*. He's got the character down, and he's working in a slightly more manic mode than his previous few films. On the

other hand, he's also still in his most Actorly mode, and it helps give a greater humanity to Parry. Jeff Bridges plays his role incredibly well, though it is Mercedes Reuhl as Jack's girlfriend that really steals the show. She is so radiant that she manages to draw the audience to her and away from Jack, which is a feat when you've got an actor as smart as Jeff Bridges involved.

Terry Gilliam's direction is solid, and the shooting is amazing. It's a marvelousl photographed film. The editing is notable for being very tight, There's no wasted shot, and each shot has been trimmed to the bone. It makes for a film that both moves well, but that also flows in and out of dialogue. I found it to be a technical masterpiece, like many of Gilliam's films, and the acting really set the audience up to take the journey of a rather slip-shod screenplay.

Such a personally important film for me. It affected me greatly, and not just because of the performances. It was the idea that Parry was being set upon by The Red Knight. Parry, in his eyes, was protecting The Holy Grail, and The Red Knight was his tormentor. He's not real, The Red Knight. He's a product of Parry's imagination. He's the foil of his entire life, and he's not real. How like me is that? It's one thing to visualize a Red Knight as being the force opposing you at every turn, but for most of us, we're hounded by our own thoughts in less literal armor. I completely identify with Parry, which is a bad thing I guess. I understand what it is to look at the world and know that there's someone out to take what I've been charged with protecting, and that's the scariest thing of all.

“There's three things in this world that you need: Respect for all kinds of life, a nice bowel movement on a regular basis, and a navy blazer.”



5 ROBIN WILLIAMS FAMILY FILM ICON

Robin Williams was a rebel. He was the counter-culture, who became an incredible actor, who then transitioned into the role of Family Film carrier.

He made films that were targeted towards young audience and families, imbuing the roles with some of the frantic energy of his stand-up days. That energy was once edgy, and in the early and mid-1990s, it was far safer.

It also happens to be my least-favorite period of his career, though some of the films were fun.



HOOK

I took Jennifer Bushard, Sheila Djurovich, and Dennis Harvey to see Hook at a preview. We all got t-shirts. I wore that shirt a LOT when I was a Junior and Senior. I took Jennifer to the Sadie Hawkins' Day Dance and we both wore that shirt. It was the start of a beautiful relationship.

Hook is a re-telling of Peter Pan with Robin playing Peter, Dustin Hoffman playing Captain Hook, and Bob Hoskins playing Shmee. The rest of the cast was really good too, especially the kids who make up the Lost Boys. It was a really good little movie, and Robin got to play the old Robin Williams after Peter realised that he was the Peter Pan. It's a good performance, one of his better non-dramatic performances. Dustin Hoffman, as Hook, is just about as good as you can be playing Captain Hook.

The problem isn't the acting, it's not the shooting, or even the script. It's freakin' Steven Spielberg. it's nearly a simpering mess when it comes to it. The movie happens in drips and drabs when Williams isn't on-screen, though the scenes with Hoffman and Hoskins were so much fun. The film just feels so incredibly sappy almost the entire way through. Yeah, Williams gives a fun performance, but from Julia Roberts' Tinkerbell to the way Peter's kids react to everything just makes me feel diabetes coming on. It's awful, though the film's not bad, it's just so sappy.



ONE GENERATION'S REBEL IS THE NEXT GENERATION'S GENERAL

The idea that Williams, once an edgy comedian who wouldn't blink at dropping the f-bomb in one of his routines, would become one of the most bankable stars in G- and PG-rated films isn't too weird. Think of all the other stars who have crossed over like that. You have some actors who are known for their tough guy roles who go comedy (Sly Stallone only got it right once, though, in *Oscar*) or women who are known for their motherly roles going all sexual, or vice versa. The idea that Robin Williams would become identified with a generation as a performer in films geared towards family audiences makes a lot of sense when you consider the times.

Yes, this is another 'MTV ruined things for EVERYONE!' article.

You see, Robin Williams was Mork, but the generation that was young when *Mork & Mindy* was on (Gen X, which I am a young member of, it turns out) were in their 20s come 1991. It would be easy to say that they were having families and a familiar face was what they turned to, but I don't think that it's that easy. I think it was more supply side than on the consumer DEMANDING more Robin Williams for their youngin's. I think it was a recognition of the fact that kids of the year 1991 had been associated with cable television since birth. They had HBO and Showtime, so they were familiar with a faster sort of comedy, and editing, come to think of it. HBO's *Comic Relief* series of benefits that featured Whoppi Goldberg, Robin, and Billy Crystal, were big deals, and as Mom and Dad might have been raised on *Mork & Mindy*, the kids came to love Robin Williams through his performances in films like *Jumanji*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and even *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *A Night at the Museum*.

Oh yeah, and *Aladdin*.

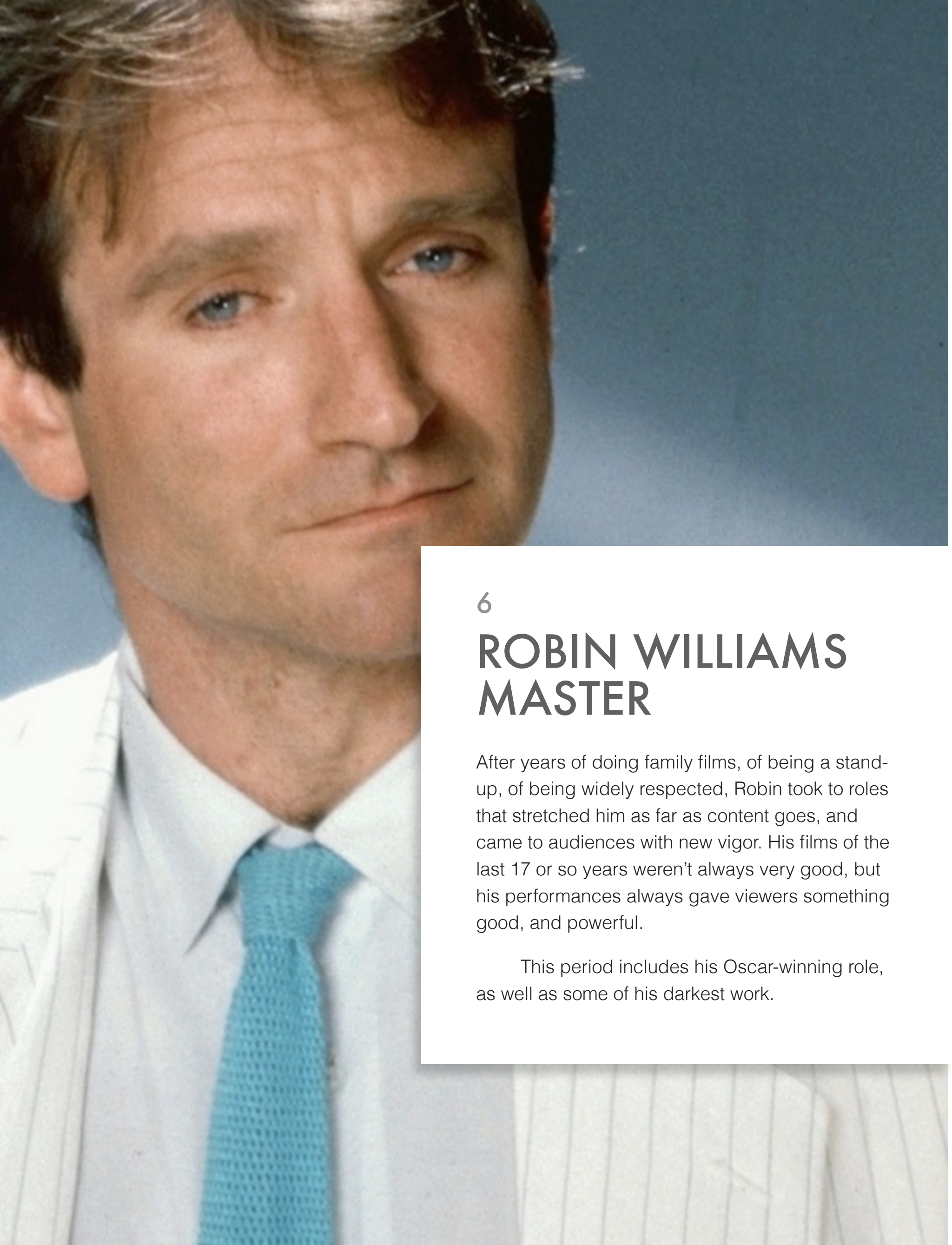
If Robin Williams had been performing for kids in the 1970s, it would not have gone over. It would have been doing this new style of frantic material to an audience that had no way of synthesizing it. Of course, the existence of it for older audiences meant that it would trickle down to the younger generations. The rapid-fire delivery of Robin had been embraced by MTV early on. The style of editing was well-suited for the channel, and you'd see it in all sorts of areas. Even MTV News was infused with that style and movement. In a sense, Robin Williams was Post-Modernism itself. He was referential, self-referential, constantly looking at the world that's come before and pushing into new lights. His comedy had a sort of timelessness to it. That is to say that it was rooted firmly in the time he was delivering it, but the way he delivered it mixed everything together, took bits and pieces out of many time-streams and mashed them together. He was able to

pull things as disparate as Peter Lorre in *M* to William F. Buckley to Bluesmen of the early part of the 20th Century. He'd throw them all together, and he'd move between them incredibly fast. Kids of the 70s weren't ready for that, and kids of the 90s had been primed for it.

His role as the Genie in *Aladdin* was perfect for the guy who could move through material so quickly, and what's more important is that it was a Disney film during its hottest streak. Following the re-birth of the Disney animated film with *The Little Mermaid*, and then *Beauty & The Beast* making them a hot franchise, putting Robin in as the Genie was a great move. He'd had *Hook*, which did OK at the Box Office, and he'd had a couple of Oscar nominations and was probably as big a star as he'd ever be when it comes to movie stardom. The Twitter Generation would all have encountered *Aladdin* when they were very young, which is part of reason for the explosion when he passed away. Genie certainly made him for the generations that have followed.

Mrs. Doubtfire's one of my least favorite Robin Williams films. It's good, well-constructed, Williams performance is really good, not when he was under the make-up, but when he was playing the Dad who just wanted to be with his kids. That's great. The rest of it was good, though I wouldn't say it was bad. It just feels slight, and once you're beyond Williams' time under the make-up, it's nothing very special.

Robin Williams was a great actor, and he played for that. I'm glad to see that his impact on the youth was so great, and the outpouring is a testament for that.



6

ROBIN WILLIAMS MASTER

After years of doing family films, of being a stand-up, of being widely respected, Robin took to roles that stretched him as far as content goes, and came to audiences with new vigor. His films of the last 17 or so years weren't always very good, but his performances always gave viewers something good, and powerful.

This period includes his Oscar-winning role, as well as some of his darkest work.



GOOD WILL HUNTING

I can talk a lot about Good Will Hunting. It's a really good film, full of excellent performances. Matt Damon is great, and it's easily Minnie Driver's best performance outside of Gross Pointe Blank. Robin Williams is exceptional, and here it shows that he's got his best game working.

The role as psychologist Sean Maguire is written to give whoever plays it the kind of open road to make it their own. Williams plays it right down the line. There's both pathos and joy in his performance, and Robin Williams seemed to embody that idea in his life. He gets the quiet moments dead-on, and at the same time, he gives energy to the loud moments that brings

them to life. He's the kind of actor who can not only walk the line, but he can play all the way onto either side, both the drama and the comedy.

“Yeah. Well, that's what I'm saying. You'll never have that kind of a relationship in a world where you're always afraid to take the first step because all you see is every negative thing 10 miles down the road.”

Of course, there's a moment that defines it all. Sean tells Will Hunting about having a ticket to the 1975 World Series, but instead, he gave it up to hang out with a woman he had fallen in love with at first sight. That woman would become his wife, and Sean telling the story, and Matt Damon's reactions as Will, turn it into an incredible moment in the history of film. While people remember the “How you like them apples?” bit from *Good Will Hunting*, to me, no other scene tells more about what they were trying to do. The story is beautiful, moving, a bit sad, and a fair bit joyous, but it feels like a memory. It's not a rehearsed moment. Yes, it was in the script, but to Sean, it wasn't rehearsed. It was a memory, and Williams presents that perfectly. It's in that little detail that Williams excels. He makes it

feel so real, he understands the nuance, how to make it feel exactly like it's coming from a place of memory. He was so good at that, and nowhere does it show as well as in *Good Will Hunting*.

The wonderful thing about *Good Will Hunting* is that it tells a simple, predictable story where the only surprises are those found in the character work. They are so layered, so real, that they make up for everything we can see coming down the pipe. The actors are given a lot to play with in the script, and they're able to make their characters so much stronger by giving kick-ass performances. I would love to explore each of them, to spend time researching these people, especially Sean, and look into what each of them has done, how they've grown, what their failings are, where they managed to go beyond themselves. This is what the best films do: give us a taste and make us want more. Of course, it's also what makes us want sequels so badly...



2002 - HIS BEST YEAR

You can look at Robin Williams' career and find a lot of wonderful work, but never so many works clustered in one year as they were in 2002. Not one, not not but THREE of his best roles were released in 2002, and every single one of them was awesome. Not the entire movies, mind you, but the way he played the characters. Each of them very different; each of them calling for different skills. It was almost as if each called back to a previous time in his career.

The last major role before 2002 for Williams was as a voice in the absolutely lifeless film *A.I.*, which started as a Kubrick project (and would have been amazing), but ended up being made/

ruined by Spielberg. He was only the voice of Doctor Know, but it was his best, most impressive voicework, and it provided at least a little authentic heart to the simpering mess of a movie. He was coming off a few big years, having done great performances in decent movies (*What Dreams May Come*, *Hamlet*, *Jakob the Liar*, the highly underrated *The Birdcage*) and a couple of rare poor performances in terrible movies (*Jack*, and most notoriously, *Bicentennial Man*). This set him up for a big period, and while he hadn't been seen in a major role since 1999, 2002 broke him out again.

Let's start with *Insomnia*. It's a Christopher Nolan film, but it was a Nolan film from the period where he had his voice but not his mastery. That wouldn't happen until *Batman Begins*. Here, he's re-making the Swedish crime masterpiece with Al Pacino as his detective and Robin as the psychopath he's trying to catch. It's such an intelligent script, and Pacino and Williams are both great, but the film is flawed in several ways, most notably in the treatment of every other character in the film. They all feel so flat and lifeless; it's as if they're all apparatus for the pair of them to climb on.

Williams is spectacular as Walter Finch, a Crime Writer who also turns out to be a killer. He's dark, so dark. It's a part of Williams we saw once in a while in his films, but up to that point, never that thoroughly. He's so good at the role, and when you're playing off of Pacino, whose intensity is nearly equal to what Williams used to give off in his days doing stand-up, you've got to step it up.

And he does with by giving every line it's own dark undertone, but almost never rising to

the bait that is dangling right in front of him. His isn't a quiet psychopath waiting to explode. Finch is a psychopath who is smoldering after the explosion, and Williams captures that in every line.

He got a lot of attention for the role, but I remember being excited/terrified when I heard that the next movie we'd see him in was *Death to Smoochy*. It's the story of Smoochy, a purple rhino played by Edward Norton, who is the toast of children's television. The story complete devolves into a series bits about the Mob, Children's TV programming, Ice Shows, and on and on. It's a terribly constructed film, and while director Danny DeVito did what he could to pull a serviceable piece of film from it, it was a mess that I pretty much hated.

But man, was Robin Williams great.

“Oh, thank you, Mother Teresa, why don't you tell that to the angry mob outside? They want my fucking ass. I'm like a god damn toaster at Macy's; Rainbow's ass - aisle three.”

He played a rival to Smoochy, Rainbow Randolph Smiley. He's a disgraced children's TV host who was caught in a sting for taking money to feature parents' kids on his show. That's why they turned to Smoochy, a lesser-known performer who is practically a Boy Scout. Williams plays Rainbow as completely unhinged, and when he goes off, he's amazing. There's a scene where he's masquerading as a cabbie that's just perfect! He's so great, with total commitment to a lame bit. This opened the same day that *Greg the Bunny* premiered on Fox. That show about puppets living in the real world of Children's Television had a very similar character, but he goes in a completely different direction and totally makes it his own. There's no question that Williams tapped into his time as a stage performer for this one, and there's the manic comedy style all over it. It's like he went back to 1980 and took himself out of that time and applied it to 2002, which made for a great, and perfectly edged, performance in a film that was otherwise nearly unwatchable.

After that comes what some consider to be Robin's finest, darkest role. *One Hour Photo*. Here, he plays Sy Parrish, the developer at SavMart's in-house photo center. He becomes

obsessed with a family whose photos he's been developing for years. The obsession is that the family is perfect and that he wants to be a part of it. In fact, he has made himself a part of it in his head, which leads to messy, messy things. Williams plays him dark, dark, dark. There is no light in Sy's world other than the family. There's a lot of weight to his character, and that actually hurts the film. It's not his performance, he interprets the material flawlessly, but the material itself has been over-loaded. It's too densely dark for it's own good. That makes the movie a difficult watch, but a couple of viewings brought me around to it.

The thing about all three of these performances is that Robin Williams had the better of the material. Even when the films are good, he's taking what he's given and making it into something new, more powerful. When Williams plays it 'safe', like in *Jack*, *Toys*, and even *Flubber*, he's tiring. He will literally wear you out with schtick and energy, but not really elevate (or particularly interact with) the material. In these films, he's chewing it up and spitting it out, and while he's somewhat underplaying at moments, he's working with it and giving it good form. That's what made 2002 such a great year for him.

“AND IF THESE PICTURES HAVE ANYTHING IMPORTANT TO SAY TO FUTURE GENERATIONS, IT'S THIS: I WAS HERE. I EXISTED. I WAS YOUNG, I WAS HAPPY, AND SOMEONE CARED ENOUGH ABOUT ME IN THIS WORLD TO TAKE MY PICTURE.”

~ SY PARRISH FROM ONE HOUR PHOTO



7

THE DARKNESS

I knew from the start I'd have to do this chapter.

There was no way I could look at the death of Robin Williams by suicide without looking at what must have been one of the causes - his depression. It's something I understand, and a lot of folks I know do as well, from different angles. The hard part is finding the light in the darkness.

NEITHER HERO NOR VILLAIN - SIMPLY A HUMAN

There have been times, many in fact, that I have found myself staring into the Abyss knowing damn well that it's staring back at me. I can't explain the feeling, looking down the barrel of a metaphorically loaded gun, but it hurts. Bad. I've been through it, perhaps you have, too? It can lead to so many other problems, so much pain, and some of us do something about it, others don't, and our lives float on down the river and we fight, and we struggle, and we move, often too quickly, when sometimes all we want is to stand still.

Robin Williams was 63 years old. He had suffered from depression. He self-medicated with drugs and alcohol at times, and he hid his pain with frantic comedy, like so many others. It hurts to think that while he was making us feel so good, he was feeling so poorly.

A friend said it best on Facebook -

He was one of us. For 63 years. He tried so hard. He must have been so tired. So, so tired. I hope he can rest now. He must have been so fucking tired.

I get it, I do. I get it completely. Some people turn to a deity, some people turn to anger, I just hear Elaine Stritch in my head. "I'M STILL HERE!"

Rest now, Robin.

And a note from Violante Seraph (also from FaceBook)

Like many of you, I was at first shocked at the loss of Robin Williams. Then I held my breath and hoped it was a miserable hoax. Then I sat in shock as I tried to contemplate the lonely grey world without such a generous and radiant soul.

I realized my response was at first, rather selfish. I was losing this artist who had factored into many moments of my life. He was with me in Mrs. Doubtfire to help me deal with growing up in a broken home. He was there as the Genie to convince me that I didn't have to lie to be loved. He was there in so many other self development moments.

Then I realized, I could be doing this for other people.

So here's the deal with the plus sign.

It is a symbol of a crossroads ahead. I have put it as my profile picture, and encourage others to follow suit.

****IF YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT DOING YOUR-SELF HARM****

S T O P .

You are not alone.

You have at least one person who cares.

You can talk to me, without judgement. Let me listen. The burden that you carry, the pain that you suffer, doesn't have to be done in the dark and alone.

Give me your hand, and we will cross that road.

We don't have to be friends, and how you THINK I feel about you doesn't matter. It takes so much courage to say "Help me."

I WILL LISTEN. I WILL HEAR YOU.

And a similar note from The King of Men - Chuck Serface -

I see much discussion about Robin Williams and the devastating effects of depression, and, yes, no kidding. I've been working at Suicide and Crisis Services of Santa Clara County since 1988. We're at 1-855-278-4204 (toll-free) any time of day or night, and we accept calls from all over the world. Any talk of a quick fix is ridiculous, but as a wise friend once told me, "Dante needed Virgil, because there are some journeys we should not make alone." We might not measure up to Virgil's prowess with words, but we'll leave the light on for you nonetheless.

"NO CLINICAL DEPRESSION, NO. NO. I GET BUMMED, LIKE I THINK A LOT OF US DO AT CERTAIN TIMES," HE EXPLAINED. "YOU LOOK AT THE WORLD AND GO, 'WHOA.' OTHER MOMENTS YOU LOOK AND GO, 'OH, THINGS ARE OKAY.'"

~ROBIN WILLIAMS TO TERRY GROSS ON FRESH AIR



WORDS FROM JC ARKHAM

I purposely waited a day before posting my two cents worth on Robin Williams. Yesterday was just too raw for me. Even now, just thinking about it, I can't keep the tears off my face, it still hurts very much. I grew up with Williams. I've seen every special of his and every movie he's been in. He was one of my idols. He was so a part of growing up for me. He's made me laugh, cry, change my paradigm view of the world. When I first heard about this, I was like, "oh bullshit, this is one of those internet jokes like how we hear Morgan Freeman is dead every 6-8 months." I called Beth right away and had her look it up. Sure enough, she checked on CNN and I was just...gobsmacked. This can't be for real. This man's sense of humor got me through all the tough times growing up. It was like losing an uncle I dearly loved. There's nothing ok about this.

However, I do understand his battle with depression. I don't just say that as cliché, I suffered from severe depression for many years. Almost no one knew. Like him, I was good at hiding it (well, y'all know now). At one point it took over so much of me, I came very close to ending my life. If addiction was a part of this mix, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be here now. I got help. It was a lot of work and took a great deal of time, energy and patience on myself. Although, I feel like I'm on "the other side" of that battle now, I always have to keep in mind to keep moving forward. It hurts me profoundly to the core that he couldn't make it over to "the other side". I was on that precipice. I feel lucky I have people in my life that kept me from taking that step off. It takes a lot of pain to push you to that point of no return. I only hope wherever he is now...he's at peace. I'll miss you dearly Robin. Nanoo, Nanoo.



8 CREDITS

Christopher J Garcia wrote all the pieces not otherwise credited. A lot of his schtick was stolen from Robin Williams

The Art of Popeye on Page was by Jay P Fossett

JC Arkham is the host of the Nerdvana Podcast - <http://nerdvanapodcast.com/>

We'd like to thank Violante Seraph, Chuck Serface, and the people of Facebook and Twitter. I would also like to thank Vanessa Applegate, James Bacon, and Bob Hole. Good humans, one and all.