

Williams' road to success-joyful & tortured

By GENE SISKEL
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Robin Williams readily admits he's made a lot of bad movies. But even he can't deny he's made a winner this time.

"Yes," he said, "even the little devil on my other shoulder is saying, 'Nice going.'"

The film is "GOOD MORNING, VIETNAM" in which the quicksilver comedian plays an irreverent Armed Forces Radio disc jockey assigned to Vietnam in 1965 just as the "Conflict" is turning into a war.

The highlight of the film is about 20 minutes of Williams on the radio, improvising phony interviews with everyone from an artillery man with a record request ("Play anything, but play it LOUD!") to a fashion designer who hates camouflage uniforms ("When you're in battle you should wear something that says 'clash!'").

Those two lines alone should be evidence that the manic Robin Williams you know from TV and concerts has finally done it right on film.

"For me," he said, speaking by phone from his Northern California home, "Good Morning, Vietnam" was an opportunity to finally put on screen what I've been doing elsewhere for so long.

There have been so many articles about me having this incredible energy on stage but not in the movies. And it's been true.

Part of the problem is that I just waited for projects to come to me. Some of them weren't very good. And I may have done one for the money or whatever.

Part of it, too, may have been my drama training at Juilliard (the prestigious arts school) where comedy was one thing and acting was considered something else, at least by me.

I became sort of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Jessel."

But after crashing and burning in a series of bad films in the mid-80s, "The Survivors," "The Best of Times," and "Club Paradise," Williams had the good sense to put himself in the hands of Barry Levinson, a sensitive but strong director ("Diner," "Tin Men").

The result is that Williams' trademark spontaneity is expressed within both a story and setting that are as compelling as his humor.

Williams' character, Adrian Cronauer, is named after an actual, though less irreverent Vietnam DJ, who did begin his popular broadcasts by screaming, "Goooooooooooooood Morning, Vietnam."

But even though Williams was given a script for his on-radio scenes, Levinson allowed his star to improvise and then refine those improvisations. Levinson edited them into what amounts to a series of the "Best of Robin Williams" monologues.

In between the jokes are the sights and sounds of American soldiers in and around Saigon. There's also a love story between Williams and a young Vietnamese woman. It starts out funny, with him chasing her down the street, throwing one-liners, and wrangling a

date in which she's chaperoned by her entire family. But the film is more than a series of jokes, and their relationship ultimately reflects the futility of the war.

The result is a movie that looks at Vietnam through a cocked eye, finding humor amid the horror, reminding us most of "M*A*S*H" (1970).

Williams' road to his current success has been both joyful and tortured. Currently separated from his wife of nine years, he says his greatest pleasure is his son, Zachary.

"The child amazes me. He's an adult. He sees me and says, 'Good morning, Robin,' and I'm the one who can't speak. We'll go to a restaurant, and he'll say, 'I'll have a Caesar salad.' How does he know about Caesar salads? Do they teach that in school?"

And even though he continues to make jokes about drugs, Williams, who was with John Belushi the night he died, now admits he was addicted to both alcohol and cocaine. And he was willing to talk about it.

"I didn't go to the Betty Ford center," he said. "I clawed the ceiling in my own home. People assumed I used cocaine to get myself up for my act, but actually the opposite was true.

"I used coke and booze to distance myself from other people. I'd get loaded and stare out a window for hours. People would leave me alone. 'He's smashed better not touch him.'"

Williams was born in Chicago on July 21, 1951. His father, who died only three months ago, was the midwest regional manager for Lincoln-Mercury, and the family moved back and forth between Chicago and suburban Detroit. "We lived in Chicago until I was five or six, moved to Detroit, and then we came back to Chicago when I was ten. At first we had an apartment at 38E Elm St., but we moved to Lake Forest and then to Libertyville, where we lived right down the road from Adlai Stevenson."

So his family was well-to-do. "We were 'OK-to-do,'" Williams said. "Strange people there (WASPish voice): 'We were all right. I was 16 before I got my first Mercedes Benz. I had to work all summer long just to go to Europe. Life was a bitch. We'd wake up some mornings with just one case of champagne. Damn it all. Sounds like the Lake Forest blues, (singing) Mmmmmmm, woke up the other day; I'd run out of Perrier. Damn. Get me the Sharper Image catalog, quick."

"Sure, now everybody will hear that I lived in Lake Forest and will think I knew the Armours and the Swifts. No, but I met their kids, and they weren't too tightly wrapped."

Sent later to private boys' school in Detroit, Williams himself was tightly wrapped. It was only before his senior year in 1968, when his family moved to trendy Marin County, Calif., that young Robin began to unwind with the much looser California crowd. The good vibrations from the summer of love in San Francisco were still around.

Robin was admitted to the

highly regarded Claremont (Calif.) Men's College, where he majored in political science. But his grades suffered, and Robin's father told him he might as well go to the College of Marin where at least his family wouldn't waste Claremont's expensive tuition. It was at the College of Marin that Robin fell in love with acting and learned about improvisation with the San Francisco performance group known as the Committee.

Thanks to a lucky high draft number, he missed serving in Vietnam and was able to continue his education in the theater, winning a full scholarship to Juilliard. During his three years there, however, his cut-up comedy often frustrated his teachers, including John Houseman. In 1976, he returned to California to pursue what came naturally, stand-up comedy. Two years later, he achieved enormous success on national television as the free-spirited visitor from another planet in "Mork and Mindy."

In 1980, he starred in his eagerly awaited first film, Robert Altman's "Popeye." Though the whimsical picture had its admirers and, contrary to industry legend, did make money, it did give Williams' TV fans what they expected or wanted. Yet throughout his spotty film career, his best work has been with strong directors such as Altman and George Roy Hill ("The World According to Garp") and Paul Mazursky ("Moscow on the Hudson").

But Williams' bad films came in a bunch and he botched out emotionally and artistically in 1985 after he trusted, he said, his friend and fledgling writer-director Harold Ramis, who assured him he could pull together what Williams considered an unfinished script called "Club Paradise." The result was a disaster.

"My role should have been played by somebody who the audience thought wanted to look up their skirt. I should have played one of the tourists on the beach. I tried to get out of the project, but there was some heavy pressure on me to do it or be labeled 'poison' in Hollywood. So I did it and got labeled 'poison' anyway."

Talking at any length with Robin Williams is a special experience. You must tape-record his words or you'll miss 2/3's of them if you try to take notes. You quickly learn not to interrupt lest you break a freight train of thought, jokes and tree associations.

For example, talking with him about his father working in the American car business triggered a recollection about his father's anger when Robin first bought a foreign car.

"I remember I bought a four-wheel drive Toyota, and he went, 'By God, you buy American.'"

"But, Dad, they have dead rats in their engines."

"Shut up and buy American."

And that led to a monologue about voice-activated instrument panels:

"I always wanted to have one of those voice-activators, that as the car got older, the voice-activator started screwing up, sort of an

Alzheimer's Ford. You open the door and it goes (gravely, old man's voice), Ahhh, something's wrong. Look under the hood, dammit, I don't know. (Heavy coughing). Waddya bothering me for? I don't know."

"Then you could have various ethnic voice activators. How about an old Jewish guy? 'You turn it on, and it goes (heavy accent), 'Good morning, Ceil, good morning. My oyl, my oyl. Oh God, my shocks. Ceil, I'm telling you, yesterday, you took such a turn, oh, boy. Listen, Ceil, I'm sorry about all the knocking. Listen though, I'm thinking about a new crankcase. But don't go to Sears this time. I don't want to be touched by some ethnic types. There was a guy named Raoul who had his hands on me where I don't want to talk. And, please, make 'em put on a rubber glove. These days you don't know what you're gonna get, uuccchh, God love it.'"

As in conversations with most comics, however, there are moments of silence in which you are left wondering about the identity of the person you suspect may be hiding behind the jokes.

Williams was asked to reveal a side of himself that the rest of us probably would never guess. He answered after a long pause "I think a side of me, or at least an interest that I've kept hidden, is my interest in the human brain."

"I'm not into channeling or contemplating past lives, but I have been trying to study what sparks creativity in the brain and what it is that triggers leaps of thought."

I read a lot about it. I take some vitamins that I think might be of some help, but

I'm mostly interested in how a person talking with another person, or a person standing alone on a stage, can enter into a state in which he is liberated to say things and make connections he might otherwise hold back. Trying to maximize the brain without assaulting it anymore, that's my goal."

"Good, I'm glad he feels that way now," said Laurie Williams, Robin's mother, who also lives in the Bay area. Friends of Williams say one of the sources of his genius is his mother, who is very close to her son.

On a recent visit to England, Williams and his mother met Prince Charles and Princess Diana. Mrs. Williams said to the princess, "I would love to meet your husband," where upon Diana tapped Charles on the shoulder and said, "This is Robin's mother." Charles said, "You should be very proud of your son, he's brilliant." And Mrs. Williams, more proud of her son than impressed with

meeting the future king of England, replied, "Thank

you, I am, and you're a wonderful host." Robin burst out laughing as did the royal party.

Mrs. Williams said her son regularly makes her laugh by calling her up and fooling her with impersonations. "He's very good at voices, you know. He can do a little child very well. Sometimes, I'll be rushing to get out of the house, and I'll get this call (little girl's voice): 'Hello, this is Candy. My mommy isn't home. Can I come over and play with you?' And I get a patient, he's a real cool me."

'Shoot to Kill' is mediocre

By JEFFERY SINGER
Staff Writer

Veteran actor Sidney Poitier teams up with Tom Berenger, the star of Platoon in this action thriller set in the Pacific Northwest mountains.

The film opens with a diamond robbery in San Francisco. FBI Special Agent Stanton (Poitier) is called in on the case and finds out the diamonds are meant as a ran-

some in a kidnap case. The investigation sours and the kidnapper escapes. Stanton cases the kidnapper/murderer to the Pacific Northwest. There the killer assumes the identity of a member of a hiking party, led by Sarah (Kirstie Alley, Rebecca on "Cheers"). Stan-

ton insists that John Knox, Sarah's boyfriend (Berenger) aid him in the pursuit of the killer. The audience doesn't know which member of Sarah's party is the villain, and this adds a lot to the suspense of the film. The chase ends in Vancouver with an exciting climax on the ferry boat.

The beginning of this film kind of drags. Poitier recites his lines in a monotone, but

later in the film he proves his capabilities as a great actor. Tom Berenger is very good as the rugged mountain man Knox. Knox isn't very eloquent and he let's his actions speak for him. Alley is not

terribly convincing as Knox's girlfriend. I didn't really believe her as the outdoors type.

Some of the dialogue sounds very written and not spontaneous enough. A lot

of the jokes aren't funny, but there are some humorous moments with Stanton, the city slicker, out in the woods.

The cinematography of the mountainous landscape is beautifully photographed by

director of photography Michael Chapman. Sometimes the music by

John Scott was distracting to what was on the screen. At the end of the film there was a major lapse in logic that kind of made the movie silly.

I give this film two and a half stars out of four. Some parts are very exciting while other stretches of the film are dull. "Shoot to Kill" is playing downtown at the Cinema I theatre.