

Comic actor and performer Robin Williams, dead at 63

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Comic performer and actor Robin Williams, 63, was found dead at his home in Tiburon, California on Monday, apparently as the result of suicide. According to various sources, Williams suffered from bouts of severe depression and had struggled with alcoholism and drug addiction at various points in his life. He had open heart surgery in 2009.

The news of Williams' death has evoked genuine sadness throughout the United States and beyond. But his death calls not only for sadness, but also for anger. Once again, the brutality of American society has claimed the life of another immensely sensitive and beloved artist. The loss of Williams follows by only several months the tragic death of Philip Seymour Hoffman. Several years ago, the actor Heath Ledger died before he had reached 30. A comprehensive list of major American artists whose lives ended due to some form of suicide—whether deliberate or accidental—would contain hundreds, if not several thousand, names.

Invariably, when death is the result of suicide or drugs, the media refers to the deceased's "personal demons," as if the cause of the tragedy lay in the psyche of the individual. But the terrible frequency of such events demands a social explanation. One cannot avoid the conclusion that an artist of Robin Williams' caliber was especially vulnerable to the blows delivered relentlessly by the existing social setup—with its endless glorification of all that is base and rotten (that is, its adulation of the rich and their values)—to a human being's innate sense of decency. The fate of Robin Williams—for all its poignancy—is a highly visible manifestation of the extreme distress in which so many millions of Americans live.

It is difficult, in the immediate aftermath of Williams' death, to write a critical appraisal of his life and work. One is inclined to avoid saying anything that may appear unsympathetic, let alone harsh. But a significant element of Williams' tragedy is to be found in the immensely difficult conditions in which he worked. Robin Williams was an exceptional talent whose career unfolded at a time when there were few opportunities for his art to find adequate expression.

He burst into prominence in 1978 on the television comedy *Mork & Mindy*, as a genial, playful alien, and remained in the public eye until his death. By all accounts, he remained a generous, unselfish and relatively modest individual to the end.

Aside from continuing to perform as a stand-up comic, Williams appeared in dozens of films, the best known of which include *Popeye* (Robert Altman, 1980), *The World According to Garp* (George Roy Hill, 1982), *Moscow on the Hudson* (Paul Mazursky, 1984), *Good Morning, Vietnam* (Barry Levinson, 1987), *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, 1989), *Awakenings* (Penny Marshall, 1990), *The Fisher King* (Terry Gilliam, 1991), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (Chris Columbus, 1993), *The Birdcage* (Mike Nichols, 1996) and *Good Will Hunting* (Gus Van Sant, 1997). He won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for *Good Will Hunting*.

Williams was born in Chicago in July 1951. His mother was a former model from New Orleans and his father a senior executive for Ford Motor Company, responsible for the Midwest region. Williams' family moved to Bloomfield Hills, Michigan when he was a child and he attended Detroit Country Day School. Later, the Williamses shifted to the Bay Area, where Robin Williams would make his home for much of his life.

He studied acting at the Juilliard School in New York City, where he was one of two students accepted into the Advanced Program by famed producer John Houseman. He left the school in 1976. Two years later, Williams appeared in an episode of *Happy Days* as "Mork from Ork" and the popularity of the character led to *Mork & Mindy*, which ran for four seasons.

Williams was capable of extraordinary feats of comic intensity. I suspect many people who first saw him on television or in performance in the late 1970s will recall thinking there was something almost supernatural in his ability to generate characters, voices and situations in a breakneck, dizzying, absurdist sequence. Williams made "free association" into a fascinating and sometimes exhausting art form. On this score, he remains almost unapproachable.

It is a measure of Williams' gifts that they prompted Bill Irwin, a remarkable comic performer and improviser in his own right (with whom Williams appeared in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in 1988), to make this comment following Monday's announcement: "I was on stage with him in 'improv' a few times and only for a few seconds in all that time did I feel I was anywhere near being a partner or an equal player. Most of the time I thought 'Robin will see this through.

He knows what he's doing.' And he can see in my eyes that I'm looking to him and he'll shepherd us through to some safe conclusion. I'm playing Robin's game and he will take care of me."

At the same time, Williams' manic delivery and his obsessive desire to please or win over an audience, which seemed to know no bounds or restraints, suggested a fragile mental state. One had to wonder what life was like "offstage," if there ever were such a thing, for such a personality. How could he possibly be satisfied with everyday life, everyday conversation?

Looking now at some of the early Williams performances, one is struck by a couple of things. First, they do seem rather dark for the most part. The performer seems to be skating on the edge of a precipice, perhaps afraid to look down. Second, all in all, one has the impression there was somewhat less there than it initially appeared. The very brilliance of the verbal and physical careening tended to conceal the relative lack of a sharp or incisive point of view. The comic could literally put himself on all sides of a subject, almost simultaneously. To what extent was he aware of this? It's impossible to say, but one has the sensation at times that Williams did not dare slow down for fear the audience would discover a certain emptiness, a certain lack, at the core of the show.

When he was obliged, by age and health, to perform at less than "land speed record," the difficulties with and gaps in Williams' material became more obvious. For an example, see his 2009 "Weapons of Self Destruction" comedy special, taped in Washington, DC. He relies far too much on sophomoric lewdness and social commentary of a very generic sort. It is not a performance designed to seriously offend the powers that be. It even grows tedious.

In terms of his acting, it is not Williams' fault that he appeared in films during perhaps the weakest three decades of Hollywood's existence. None of the films cited above is especially important. None of them is particularly telling about American life or society. Sadly, even if one considers the overall body of work of a number of the better directors—Robert Altman, Paul Mazursky, Peter Weir, Barry Levinson—the films featuring Williams are among their poorest or most problematic. They tend to be works, whether comic or not, that deal with various (and for the most part secondary) forms of eccentricity or alienation.

It is also not primarily Williams' fault, and indeed at times it almost seems unfair for someone of his explosive and unsettling abilities, that very few of his films or performances displayed or pursued a consistent and *genuine* non-conformism. In fact, he was widely reproached at a certain point in his career for the sentimentality of a number of his films. Memorably, in John Waters' black comedy, *Cecil B. DeMented* (2000), a band of underground cinema terrorists assault a suburban cinema where *Patch Adams: The Director's Cut* is playing, a reference to the cloying 1998 film starring Williams as a medical student in the 1970s.

Whatever Williams may have thought he was doing, his numerous appearances before the troops in Iraq and Afghanistan helped lend credibility to those neo-colonial wars. In 2005, Williams told *USA Today*, "I'm there for (the troops), not for W," referring to Bush. But military sites, official and unofficial, were singing his praises after his death, and that is not a healthy legacy.

A difficulty in having something substantial to say about American society, including its endless wars, was not unique to Williams. It was a widespread phenomenon, as the generation of former radicals and protesters to which he belonged largely turned to the right, often enriching themselves in the process.

He seems to have been a compassionate and caring individual, but the general circumstances and atmosphere, as well as his own individual situation, were not conducive to making a social commitment or sticking one's nose out. Under the best of conditions, the American entertainment industry proceeds like a giant sausage maker, grinding up everything that comes within its grip. Nothing is so never-failingly destructive in the US to the sensitive human personality as great success.

According to reports that may or may not be true, Williams was particularly depressed by the failures of his most recent television series, *The Crazy Ones*, which was cancelled after one season, and his most recent feature film, *The Angriest Man in Brooklyn*, which received bad notices and did not last long in theaters. And there is always the danger in Hollywood, with its built-in short attention span, that even the biggest of yesterday's stars will end up forgotten and abandoned.

Robin Williams was a remarkable artist and his work will be remembered. As conditions change and social consciousness—inspired by a new mass movement against capitalism—breaks free of the existing constraints, a new generation of actors will be provided with creative material of a quality that the last decades denied Robin Williams.



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