

Dead Poets Society ★★★★★

Year of Release: 1989

Review by Randy Parker

Country: USA

Verdict: See It

Don't let Touchstone's advertising campaign fool you: *Dead Poets Society*, "starring" Robin Williams, is anything but a comedy. The television and radio commercials make the movie sound like *Good Morning, Students*. But while the film does have plenty of laughs, it wears the trappings not of a comedy, but of a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. *Dead Poets Society* is at times quite serious and somber, and it's also without question the finest film of the year. Its riveting, gut wrenching drama had me on the edge of my seat and glued to the screen.

Dead Poets Society is set in 1959 at Welton Academy in Vermont, a private college prep school for boys where discipline almost has become an end in and of itself. The faculty has just one goal: to grind out future lawyers, doctors, and scientists. But one voice stands out amid the school's rigid, narrow-minded administration; it belongs to Professor John Keating, a Welton alumnus who has returned to the academy to teach English.

Unlike his conservative colleagues, Keating employs decidedly unorthodox teaching methods and strives to teach more than just his subject matter, which is poetry. His goal is to inspire his students to suck the bone of life to the marrow, to seize the day and make their lives extraordinary. In Keating's class, you learn passion, courage, romanticism, and—of course—poetry. You pass if you avoid conformity and find your own voice, and you fail if you neglect to live life to the fullest.

Williams is nothing short of brilliant as Keating. In the classroom, he cuts loose and shows his usual comic flair with antics like impersonating John Wayne while reading "Macbeth" aloud to his students and conducting discussions as if the class were a game show. But Williams is most impressive in the quiet, dramatic scenes which require a knowing glance or a subtle flash of sorrow. Once again, Williams deserves recognition and respect for his prowess at straight drama; he has matched or surpassed his fine work in *Good Morning, Vietnam*, *Moscow On the Hudson*, and *The World According to Garp*.

Dead Poets Society, however, is not a Robin Williams vehicle. In fact, Williams is the first to admit that the movie doesn't even revolve around his character: "I'm not carrying this film and I don't feel pressured that the whole movie rests on me. The real story of the film is the boys. I come in and I'm a catalyst, but how they react and their tribute

back is the power" (from the press kit). Indeed, most of the young actors in the large, ensemble cast of unknowns and newcomers have at least as much screen time as does Williams. The movie follows a handful of Keating's students as they get swept away by their teacher's enthusiastic spirit. They decide to reorganize "The Dead Poets Society," a secret club which used to meet in a cave (when Keating attended Welton) to experience inspiration through poetry—their own and that of the greats: Whitman, Keats, Thoreau, and so on.

Broadway stage actor Robert Sean Leonard has perhaps the meatiest role in the film. He plays Neil Perry, a charismatic young man whose membership in the society leads him to discover his passion for acting. But unfortunately, his domineering, unyielding father stands in the way of Neil's dreams. Mr. Perry wants his son to go to Harvard medical school and forbids him to engage in extracurricular activities (such as acting) which might interfere with his studies. Mr. Perry is played by Kurtwood Smith, who seems to specialize in uptight, anal retentive characters (he was the sadistic criminal in *Robocop* and the dirty D.A. in *True Believer*). Neil's conflict with his father is infuriating, tragic, and in some ways, the heart and soul of the movie.

Australian director Peter Weir has elicited exceptional performances from his entire cast. Ethan Hawke is a natural as Neil's shy and inhibited roommate, Todd, who suffers from low self-esteem. Under Keating's tutelage, Todd finally learns to express himself and to cultivate a sense of self-worth. Josh Charles is charming and endearing in a down-to-earth John Cusack sort of way as Knox Overstreet, the club's resident tormented, love-struck romantic. The "Dead Poets Society" inspires Knox to find the courage to declare his love to a cute cheerleader who attends the local public high school.

Gale Hansen, Dylan Kussman, Allelon Ruggiero, and James Waterston (actor Sam Waterston's son) round out the cast as the other members of the clandestine club. And while the film doesn't fully develop every character, each one seems complex and genuine, nonetheless. These students are much more than just stock characters.

In a radical departure from his role as Dr. Auschlander on "St. Elsewhere," Norman Lloyd evokes fear and contempt as Welton Academy's austere headmaster, Mr. Nolan. His stiff, uncom-

promising manner reflects the school's oppressive teaching philosophy—a philosophy based on the four pillars of faith: tradition, honor, excellence, and discipline. While the students admire Professor Keating's unconventional style, Mr. Nolan and the faculty react to it with shock and disapproval.

Perhaps the individual most responsible for *Dead Poet Society's* impact is Weir (*Witness*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Mosquito Coast*, *Gallipoli*). With the help of Oscar-winning cinematographer John Seale (*Rain Man*, *Gorillas in the Mist*), Weir has used the medium to its fullest. The director's imaginative camera work and Seale's breathtaking cinematography make the film absorbing and exhilarating. Weir and company shot *Dead Poets Society* almost entirely on location at St. Andrew's School in Delaware, and they have made good use of the school's photogenic qualities, such as its 2,000 acres of beautiful farmland and gloomy stone architecture. Complementing the film's su-

perb direction and acting is Tom Schulman's incredibly literate script, which is based in part on his own experiences at private school.

Dead Poets Society is virtually flawless. As you watch the movie, you keep expecting it to make some fatal blunder: to become melodramatic, to succumb to predictable Hollywood clichés, or to milk an easy laugh. But *Dead Poets Society* avoids these pitfalls. Every time you think you know where the film is headed, it surprises you by going in an altogether unforeseen direction. Even Academy Award-winning composer Maurice Jarre's score is immaculate; it is rousing without being overbearing or distracting.

And I should warn you that *Dead Poets Society* will make many of you cry or come damn close. If you want to see a crazy Robin Williams comedy, go rent *Popeye*, because *Dead Poets Society* is for people looking for an intellectually stimulating and emotionally involving cinematic experience.