

The life and laughs of Robin Williams

by James Michael Cooper
The Varsity (TORONTO)

San Francisco — Robin Williams is a happy man. He is spending time with his young son. He is finished with drugs and alcohol. And he has finally found the right role to play after some less than ideal attempts. Williams' new film *Good Morning Vietnam* features the comedian-actor as Armed Forces radio disc-jockey Adrian Cronauer during his zany days over the airwaves in Southeast Asia. This comedy-drama is the best vehicle Williams could have asked for in order to display his rapid-fire wit and astutely crafted acting abilities.

The Varsity spoke with Williams about his new film, drugs, movies, life and dreams. With a reputation of never being himself during interviews, Williams was unusually open, forthright and down-to-earth. Despite his forthrightness, Williams did, however, fall into a multitude of characters to express his feelings. The interview, therefore, was with more than just Williams. The Varsity also spoke with William F. Buckley, Elmer J. Fudd, William Casey, Richard Nixon, Jesse Jackson, Ronald Reagan, and more.

● On acting:

"I think a lot of people can do it. To get a little Shirley Maclaine in this: if you allow yourself to open you can do it. You're just a channel. With call waiting. There are times for me when I get into a character, it just flows. I don't know why or what it is. I'm saying. It seems to be coming out and it's funny. It's a cathartic 'Whoa, strap yourself in Lumpyn'. It just seems to happen, which is great. You don't walk around all smug because the moment you do, you're screwed because it goes away."

● On the quality of his character in *Good Morning Vietnam*:

"Role combines two worlds that have been separate for me. I guess it's part of the Julliard fixation that acting will be one thing and comedy another. So to combine them is a conscious effort."

● On playing the character of Adrian Cronauer:

"People ask how much character this is. It's only about 5% character and 95% me. It's very little character. That's why I didn't talk to Cronauer and do a lot of research to try and create a character. I said, I know it's a man's name but it's basically me."

● On embellishing Adrian Cronauer's real life experience in Vietnam:

"Some people have had a difficulty by saying 'Well it's his life but it isn't. It's a dramatic vehicle. We took the seed of his idea and made it something else. We made him even more outrageous — a kind of composite deity for the whole war."

"Later on things got really crazy. Guys were doing radio shows out of field radios. They'd set up radio antennae between trees and broadcast some pretty outrageous and obscene shit. And when the authorities tried to pinpoint them, they'd move the station. So it was pirate radio. There was one broadcast I heard when this guy was on acid going (in freaked out voice) O.K. here's another song if it doesn't come at me. So in the film, we took license with the period."

● On working in radio:

"I sympathize with deejays sitting in that small box. I have friends who do radio and it's incredible because unless they have live

"Time is the most precious thing at this moment."

audiences like on some of these radio comedy shows they don't know what rocks. It must be very hard knowing it just goes out there.

(In rapid AM discjockey voice) "That's why they just keep going. They keep throwing it out there and it doesn't matter. I've never done radio, but in my past comedy tours I've done radio voice routines. I did the Howard Stern show. It's fun, but it's like fiberglass underwear: it's a strange sensation. He gets strange people calling in. When I was there a

guy called and said (In a moronic voice) 'Hi, did you ever pork Mindy?'"

● On the mix of comedy and sorrow in the film:

"I think it was necessary. It was originally supposed to be a straight-out boffo comedy and I said I don't really think we can; the issues is too painful. Some people reviewed it and said we could have gotten even more painful. Because it was a pivotal year in the escalation of the war, we felt we had to have a darker side to the film."

● On working with director Barry Levinson:

"It's a great experience because Barry's so relaxed. Even if things get bad. One day a generator blew up and he was just like Gary Cooper. (In Cooper's voice) Yep. There it goes. It's gone. I don't think we'll be needin' that one again."

● On the amount of his improvisation in the film:

"The English classes were open. The radio, obviously, was a free-for-all. With the classes, Barry just let it go because the actors spoke limited English and if you just went line by

"It's like doing an Inquisition musical."

line, the way it was written, it gets pretty stilled. And so you have to play off them. In the scenes with the girl, sometimes we would improvise a little bit, but not much. She spoke some English but not a lot. Also, you don't want to be improvising a language she doesn't understand since then you'd be using her as a brunt of your improvisation rather than working with her. If you want to use a percentage, maybe about a third or a half during my dialogue is improvised. Of course, some of the credits were improvised."

● On working in front of an audience for years and doing movies with no live audiences:

"It's like having sex in a wind tunnel: you tend to get beaten to death by your scrotum."

● On spelling "scrotum":

"Scrotum. From the Latin word meaning strange luggage."

● On making a comedy with the Vietnam war as a backdrop:

"It's a little scary as a concept. It is a touchy issue still. It's a very painful issue. You can still see a lot of people wandering around the streets that are from Vietnam. When we did *Comic Relief* we were told some of the homeless are Vietnam vets. So it is a delicate issue. It's a fine line you walk and hopefully you find something that will work for them too. You have to be careful doing a Vietnam comedy. It's like doing an Inquisition musical. What are you going to say?"

● On Williams' prior box office disappointments and their subsequent home video rental success:

"None of the films have done well at the box office. I think a lot of movies have a second life, which is incredible. Some great films that no one went to see in the theatres can now be rented. Cable started that off. In some ways it was too much and people had negative reactions to them and would yell No more. When *Popeye* was on cable, it was a scary thing to see, especially when it's on ten channels. I have a copy of *Popeye* to sober me up when I need it."

● On *Popeye's* commercial failure:

"It was a big film that just didn't pay off because they literally ran out of money and they didn't have the special effects that should have been incredible to pay off. If you're going to lay off to the very end of the movie and say, now he eats the spinach, you



should have things that will really blow people's socks off. And they didn't have them. They had this one Italian man making arms and a little Italian woman pumping air into my hand. The first arms looked like they were from Chernobyl. They were like the Michelin Man's rejects or the Elephant Man Home Game. I would move and then they would fall off. I'd clutch my fist and break through the rubber."

"It was six months in Malta with people who speak louder than Ethel Merman."

● On premonitions of the failure of *Popeye*:

"I had a premonition that things weren't going well. It was a hard, hard time. It was six months in Malta with people who speak English louder than Ethel Merman."

● On dreaming in colour:

"I dream actually with playback, which is fun. Freeze frame too — a scary concept but you can get it installed. What are my dreams like? Well, what about the Holland Tunnel in a fur coat? Since I stopped doing drugs five years ago, my dreams are pretty vivid."

● On his drug and alcohol use:

"I never drank before a show. I would drink afterwards: that was the main problem — to come down. Or sometimes I did drugs to keep going. Performing is a drug so you don't need a lot. I would try performing on cocaine and it was ridiculous. It's like being a hemophiliac in a razor factory. You can't perform on cocaine."

● On Williams' inspiration:

"I don't worry about losing my inspiration now that I don't do drugs or drink anymore. For me now, it comes in spurts, but it's not like this fast pace making your whole life one big open heart surgery. Maybe it's like spurring out or like a bowel movement. Perhaps it's cosmic diarrhea."

● On being in therapy:

"It's to function a bit better. And that helps. At first, even the psychiatrist would say, I'm a little worried that if I make you

better that you won't be funny. I was a little worried about that and then I realized there are two types of energy: fission and fusion. You can sometimes gain greater energy from putting things together. And then people said you could be comfortable talking about drugs or other painful memories."

● On writing his own screenplays:

"That would be the next step. Time is the most precious thing at this point. Time with my son or time doing anything. Time gets consumed as things start to pick up. You literally just find yourself going 'Wait!'"

● On directing:

"No, because I don't really think I could tell someone: that's not good, and they could go, 'What about *Popeye*?'"

● On losing his hungry, aggressive edge:

"Putting your ass in front of people in stand-up helps a lot. That and doing odd projects like the drama *Seize the Day* gives you the drive when you're not as hungry."

● On his favourite movies:

"I rent a lot of strange things. I'm a stone-cold science-fiction junkie so I'll rent any science-fiction movie even if it's the shittiest one in the world. *Sluts from Venus*. That's a great movie too, especially when they get to Uranus."

● On his Oscar acceptance speech:

"Sure. Thank you. I'd like to thank the little people. Especially all the William Morris agents. You can't even worry or think about that."

● On his 4 1/2 year old son Zachary:

"He's wonderful. Sometimes I think he gets possessed by the spirit of a 45-year-old Jewish accountant. I took him to this hotel in Hawaii and he walked down the stairs and said 'Oh, the buffet looks exciting. He's one of my best friends. He borrows money, but he pays back.'"