

## ROBIN WILLIAMS: It's Complicated

by David Misch

In medieval Italy, a man consulted a “doctor of the mind.” “I’m always unhappy,” said the man. “There is no joy for me and it’s been like this since I can remember. I feel I have no choice but to take my own life.” “Do not despair,” replies the doctor. “There is a jester in the city named Calveri and they say he is the merriest man alive; no one can view his performance and remain melancholy. Take my advice and go see him immediately.” “You don’t understand,” says the man. “I am Calveri.”

The “sad clown” is as much a stereotype as the comic who’s “always on” and it’s wrong... but not entirely. David Steinberg had a joke: “Stereotypes all have an element of truth. For instance, some Jews are good with money. Some women are terrible drivers. And some Chinese all look alike.”

Does misery love comedy? Scientific literature on the mental state of comedians is shockingly sparse. Of course, all comics whine miserably that all comics are whiny and miserable. (Also sexually indomitable, though that may be confirmation bias.) But there’s no reason to believe it’s true: the offstage comic temperament ranges from Richard Lewis’s numerous neuroses to Steve Martin’s mannerly maturity.

And then there’s Robin Williams, who – offstage and on – seemed to arc through every persona imaginable: manic speedball, hyper-intelligent analyst of science, politics and culture, intermittent addict of multiple substances and fluids. Asking where his truth lies beggars the question; Robin contained multitudes. (That’s Walt Whitman, read a book.) The vast and variegated characters he brought to life clearly came from somewhere. Though I’m not paid (or remotely qualified) to psychoanalyze, my GPS says “Within.”

It’s terrible that Robin’s life and legacy will be defined at least partially by his suicide. “Why?” people asked, including many who knew him. Some had clues, but only partial, because there were so many factors: the cancellation of his TV series, the fadeout of his film career, cardiac surgery, a history of depression, a relapse of alcoholism, diagnoses of dementia and Parkinson’s.

That last seems especially potent because Robin craved speed – literally for many years and figuratively his whole life. In any room he was the fastest, physically and mentally. To lose that, to stumble, to fumble for a quip; the prospect must have seemed like death in itself.

No celebrity, no one, is entirely what they present to the world but the concept of a suicidal Mork is cognitive dissonance personified. My brief working and slight relationship with Robin gives me no special insight into who he really was, but there is one thing that I think contains clues. Robin was far more than comedy but his love – need? – to make people laugh was, I believe, central to his identity.