

ROBIN WILLIAMS: It's Complicated

by David Misch

In medieval Italy, a man consulted a “physician 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. Comic David Steinberg had a bit about prejudice, noting stereotypes have an element of truth: “Some Jews are good with money. Some Blacks have rhythm. And some Orientals all look alike.”

So 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 sad clowns are the norm; 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 varied 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

*Actually, it’s not: a survey found that people with “humorous partners” have more intercourse. Read the full study at <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/147470491401200507> but be warned: it’s very long and it goes deep.