

Mork. Doubtfire. Keating. The Genie. And... Patch Adams. This Oscar-winning funnyman has had his share of professional and personal ups and downs. But the merry-go-round goes on for **Robin Williams**.

“Your career is cyclical,” he muses, **“I’ve still got to drum up business..”**

When *Total Film* strolls into Suite 514 at London’s Mandarin Oriental hotel, Robin Williams’ publicist is bouncing around the room mid-

flow, telling a mildly amusing story about late, legendary comedian George Carlin introducing him to Mrs. Carlin with a backhanded compliment: “This is Chris – he’s a *big* fucking help.” Williams smiles at his flack’s story, then says softly, “When I used to see George at AA meetings, he’d go, ‘Hey Robin, how ya doing? Cunt.’”

Cue the room busting out in peals of laughter, not because it’s the most hilarious thing he’ll say that day, or even in the space of the next 30 seconds, but simply because it’s Robin Williams and he is, as we all know by now, *The World’s Funniest Man*. (Effusive soubriquets trail Williams like groupies: he’s also *The World’s Hairiest Man* and, this month, the *World’s Greatest Dad*.) The funny title (earned long ago) and his CV evoke an idea of Williams as an unstoppable dervish of stream-of-consciousness comic genius, machine-gun quips and hollering punchlines. All of which is true. But what’s eye-opening, and gives *Total Film* pause walking in to greet him, is actually how subdued, quiet and pensive the

San Franciscan is when he’s not performing for public, peers or presidents. Ask a question and he’ll give a smart, thoughtful reply – then disappear in a nanosecond down some loony comic tangent that fizzles out as often as it makes a relevant point. It’s clearly hardwired into his being.

But although he’s returned to stand-up in recent years (a gruelling profession, he admits – he had to have open-heart surgery last year after his latest tour finished), it’s Williams’ film career we’re here to talk about. After studying theatre at Juilliard, and honing his wild improvisational skills on the ’70s nightclub circuit, he made an inauspicious debut in Robert Altman’s studio botch-job, *Popeye*. Fortunately, he picked up the pace in 1982’s *The World According To Garp* before *Good Morning, Vietnam* and *Dead Poets Society* launched him as a fully-fledged movie star.

In the early days, Williams brought his antic jesterhood to bear even in dramatic roles – his Oscar-winning turn as Matt Damon’s kindly shrink in *Good Will Hunting* being a rare exception. He also showed a penchant for maudlin-drenched indulgence that often left audiences puking on his treacle. But as his ’90s box-office muscle waned, so did his schmaltzy jaunts and the actor began exploring his darker, creepier side in the likes of *One Hour Photo* and *Insomnia*.

There’s always been a hit-and-miss aspect to Williams’ career but you can count his latest film, Bobcat Goldthwait’s *World’s Greatest Dad*, as one of

the former. It marks a welcome return to jet-black comedy for the 59-year-old, and sees him playing a high-school teacher who copes with his vile son’s death by auto-erotic asphyxiation by faking a suicide note that casts him as a misunderstood poet. So as we settle down on the plush sofa, Mr Williams... tell us, you’re funny how?

You’ve known Bobcat for 30 years. What do you admire about him?

He was always fearless. Like, he used to talk about Stallone, saying that he did all these *Rambo* movies but during Vietnam he got a deferment because he was teaching girls’ gym classes in Switzerland. Stallone sent him a message saying, “If I ever find you, I’ll kill you.” I went, “You have such balls.” And he still does, even with his films.

How did you come to be involved in *World’s Greatest Dad*?

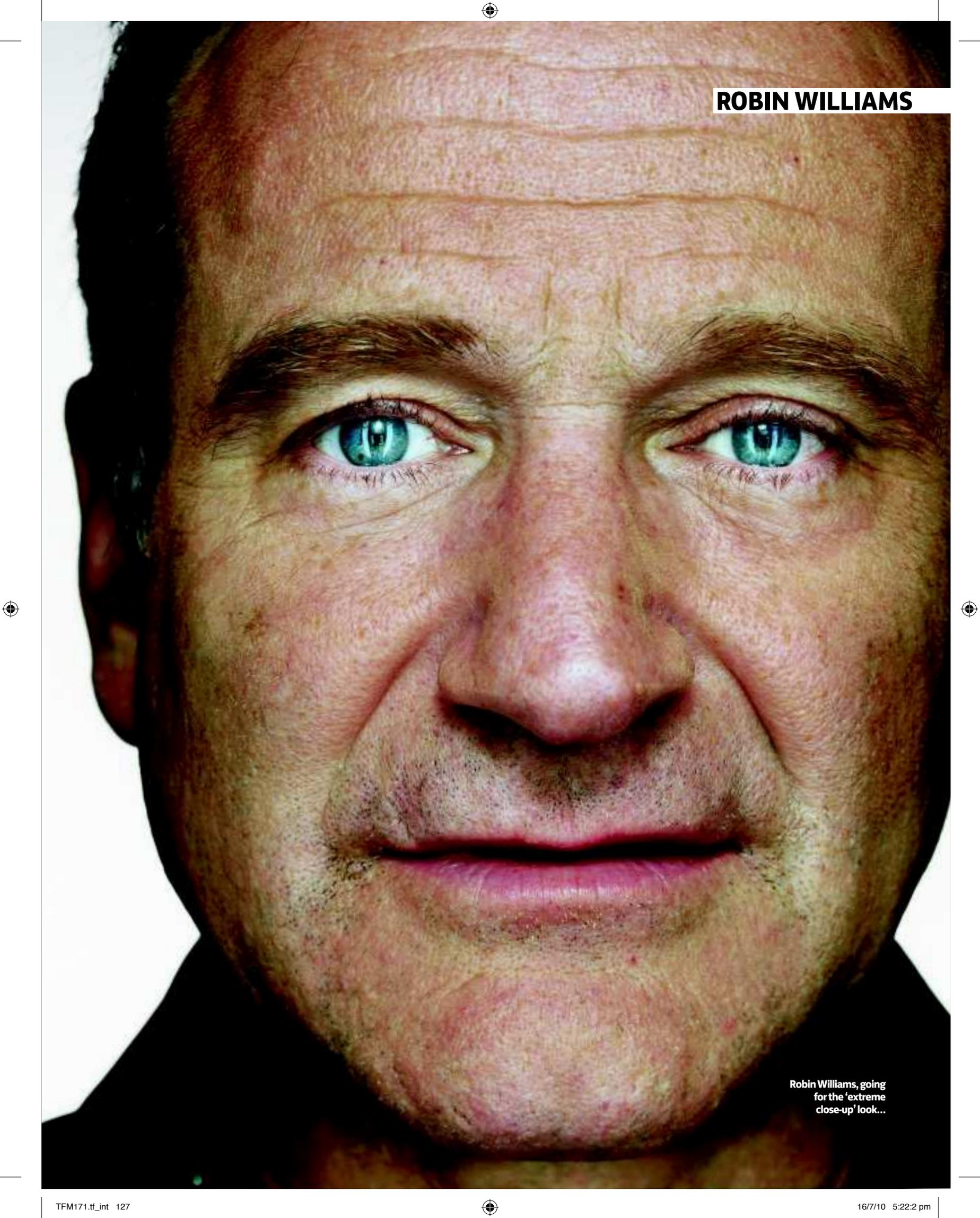
He sent it to me and I said, “I’ll read it and if there’s a small part, I’ll try and help you out.” I read it and went, “Umm... I’d like to do the main guy.”

He hadn’t written that role with you in mind?

I think he wrote it with him in mind. Not that he’s had any experience with all that stuff. It’s just the idea of a guy... the truth is, he and I both, when we’re not performing, are kind of quiet. So playing a guy who’s awkward in certain situations – done that! Done the research.

Did you have any input into the character?

No, there wasn’t a lot to change. The main thing was just to inhabit the idea that this is a guy >>



ROBIN WILLIAMS

Robin Williams, going
for the 'extreme
close-up' look...

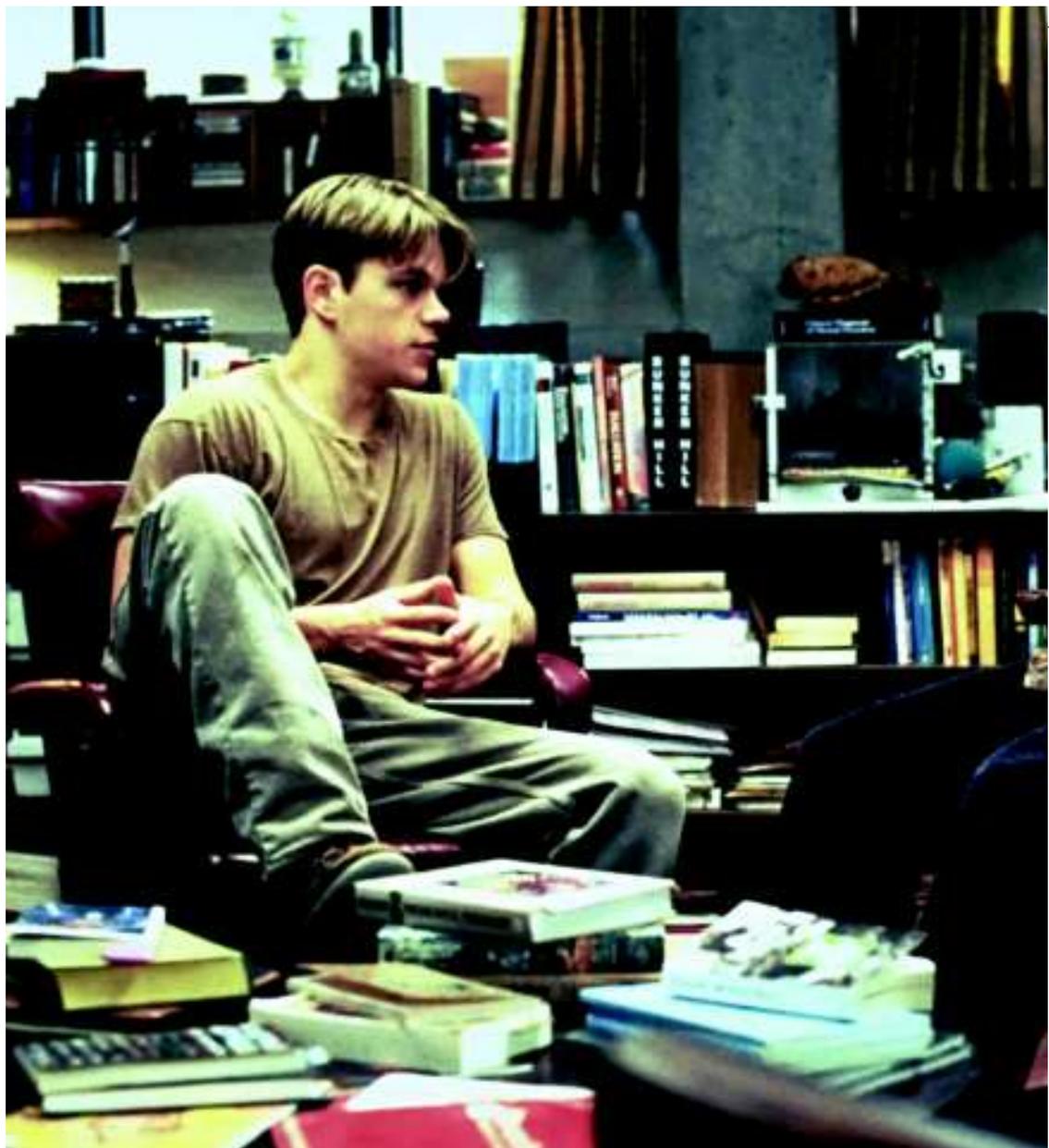
who's a bit of a failed teacher – he's kind of the opposite of *Dead Poets* – a failed father and a failed writer. Nothing's working on all those levels and then when this weird, awful event happens, things turn around.

Have you ever felt that frustration that your career is going nowhere?

Oh, it afflicts me all the time. Your career is cyclical. It'd be like [alternating his voice between belium-pitched excitement and tar-pit slowness and making a rollercoaster motion with his hand]: "Yes, everything's wonderful!" "Not soooo goooooo!" "Everything's great!" "Oh, what the fuck?!" If you're lucky, you have people who'll keep you grounded in the face of it so you don't take the highs or the lows too seriously.

From your very first film, *Popeye*, it seems you were determined to carve an eclectic path on screen. And yet Altman's film took a hammering...

Totally. The weird thing about *Popeye* is it was like *Ed Wood* by the end. They pulled the money because *Heaven's Gate* had just happened. The special effects had left by that point, so Shelley [Duvall]'s in the water with an octopus with a mechanism that's been taken out. So she's going, "Heeeelllppp!" and the thing's falling off her and she's having to put it back on her, like [reaches over to his left arm and throws it over his shoulder] "Heeeelllppp!" Robert Evans, who was coked out of his tits at the time, said, "Howarewegonnaendthemovie? I don't know how we're gonna end the movie..." I joked, "Well, I could walk on the water like Jesus." And he went, "Yes! Let's do it!" And that ended up being the end of the movie... It was a perfect storm of addiction and alcoholism and craziness but I wouldn't trade the experience. They used to say that working with Altman is like getting pushed off a cliff: you may not know what you're doing but you'll do some interesting screaming on the way down.



'Popeye changed my idea of "You're going to be a star!" It humbled my ass up really quick'

Did *Popeye*'s failure change your attitude about the kind of film actor you wanted to be?

Well, it certainly changed my idea of, "You're going to be a star!" That went right out the window. It humbled my ass up really quick. For some people it's a sweet movie but I know what it was and what it wasn't, and it didn't work all the way through.

In the '80s you made quirky films like *Moscow On The Hudson* and *The World According To Garp*... Did the studios ever try to shoehorn you into the broad comedy vehicles that made Eddie Murphy a star?

I don't know what they were trying to do – it was me just trying to keep working. Thank God I got offered *Garp* and *Moscow On The Hudson*... But it was *Good Morning, Vietnam* and *Dead Poets Society* that kind of kicked the door open in terms of dramatic

roles and really revived it for me. That was thanks to Jeffrey Katzenberg – they used to say that he waited outside Betty Ford to offer actors roles that would jump start their careers. Both those films kicked it into gear for me. Being offered *Dead Poets* was such a gift but then to have it directed by Peter Weir... They wanted to change the name and change the whole movie to be *Mr. Keating's Way* and he went, "No, we signed on to make *Dead Poets* – let's finish that movie."

Those projects made it clear that you could tackle strong dramatic material.

I trained as an actor. That's why I went to Juilliard. Even a movie like *Mrs. Doubtfire* is character acting – it's like puppeteering. Inhabiting this female character and making her real and funny sold the

movie. But at the same time you're talking about divorce and saying don't use your kids as cannon fodder, treat them with love and maybe you can get through this. Some people were horribly offended by that and other people went, "Thank God, that movie got me through my divorce."

When you won the Oscar for *Good Will Hunting*, did you see that as the ultimate affirmation?

It's weird – it lasted for about a week, maybe two. For the first day it's like, "Yay, *Good Will Hunting*, way to go!" A couple of days later it's, "Yay, that movie you won an Oscar in..." And then a couple of weeks later: "Hey, Mork!" It was sweet but it didn't change perceptions other than the fact that whenever you're advertised, it's [deep-throated trailer-man voice], "Academy Award winner..." It was created to be part of the marketing process.

Does it mean anything to you personally?

It meant a lot because doing that movie was a great experience. Working with Gus and Ben and Matt was a gift. Did I walk away going, "I'm proud of it"? Yeah. Did I go, "Now I'm acknowledged for being a great ac-TOR"? No, I went, "I've still got work to do." You've still gotta go out and find work. A lot of the time in people's careers, the work goes away after you win it. I've still got to drum up business.

After that, you had a run of films like *What Dreams May Come*, *Patch Adams*, *Bicentennial Man*...



Shrink wrapped: Williams counsels Matt Damon in *Good Will Hunting*.

Patch Adams made money. *Bicentennial Man* didn't make money and should have been done CG. *What Dreams May Come* could have been extraordinary but then they got anxious and started to have test screenings, which you can't do for a movie like that. That's how we ended up with this weird ending that was just, "Whaatttt?! Why did you do that?" That's a movie that people either love or despise. Yeah, there was a series of movies that just went, "And... Thank you."

You were accused of being deeply schmaltzy during that phase of your career, both in choice of material and your own performances...

Sometimes that's true but also in the face of that, I did movies like *One Hour Photo*, *Insomnia*, *The Final Cut*... They were not sentimental. In *One Hour Photo* you have a character that's almost like a high-functioning autistic. It was very freeing. To find those characters – that's the gift. You have to go out and pursue them.

But looking back at that earlier phase, do you see yourself as a strongly sentimental person...

Like oh my God, sometimes...

...and were you seeking out syrupy material?

No, I think they just came my way and I inhabited them. Am I? Yeah, I think that I can be. I can be very [*in a gooey child's voice*], "Oh look, the kitten!" You kind of go, "Why are you that weepy?" And >>

ROBIN WILLIAMS

Five star turns

We look back at Williams' most memorable performances...

#1



GOOD MORNING, VIETNAM (1987)

★★★★ His first major hit and first Oscar nod, it's no coincidence that Williams estimates this was "the first role that calls upon me to do what I do best – me". Hitting the Saigon airwaves as anarchic US Armed Forces Radio DJ Adrian Cronauer, Williams lets his tongue off the leash with some dizzying monologues. Sheer genius, if only for the scene where he dubs himself questioning Vice President Richard Nixon on the state of his testicles: "They're soft and shallow and they serve no purpose."

#2



ALADDIN (1992)

★★★★ Let's face it. Do you remember the character of Aladdin or who voiced him? No, of course you don't. Because Williams – a man born to do 'toons – steals the show as the Genie. A pity it all went sour, after Williams took the role for just \$75,000 on the promise that Disney wouldn't use his voice to sell merchandise. They did, and a bitter row between Williams and the Mouse House ensued. In the end, after a public apology, he came back for second sequel *Aladdin And The King Of Thieves*.

#3



MRS DOUBTFIRE (1993)

★★★★ With the gags as broad as Mrs Doubtfire's hips and the laughs as big as her brassiere, Chris Columbus' cross-dressing comedy gave Williams a blockbuster-sized hit. OK, we admit his Scottish housekeeper – actually, a divorced father dressing up to sneakily get access to his kids – was actually about as convincing as those ladies Matt Lucas and David Walliams do in *Little Britain*. But, hey, it was a helluva lot better than his next Columbus film, *Bicentennial Man*.

#4



GOOD WILL HUNTING (1997)

★★★★★ As college professor-turned-psychiatrist Sean Maguire (no, not that bloke who was in *Eastenders*), taking on Matt Damon's troubled blue-collar genius as his case, *Good Will Hunting* showed Williams at his most complex, moving and honest. Culminating with the unforgettable and heartbreaking scene where he gets Damon to repeat over and over "It's not my fault" before he breaks down in floods... It was lump in the throat stuff. No wonder he won his only Oscar to date.

#5



ONE HOUR PHOTO (2002)

★★★★ The same year he essayed a quietly menacing killer in Chris Nolan's *Insomnia*, Williams brought us the sinister Sy Parrish in Mark Romanek's *Peeping Tom* for the Snappy Snaps crowd. "It was time to add some dark colours to the palette," says the actor, and boy does he do that – keeping his goofball antics in check to play a photo clerk who develops an all-consuming obsession with an all-American family. "Would I play another villain?" he says. "Fuck yeah... If they offered me one."

sometimes you have to go, "Fight it! Don't go weepy, fucker!" I think that's where you have to look at something and go, "Hmmm... Did I go too far?"

Do directors ever steer you away from that?

Oh, they do. I mean, they don't have to – I steer myself away from that. But that's why for me, the most fun recently is to do animation. You know the chances of being that way are diminished. Even with *World's Greatest Dad* – that's a brutal scene when he finds his son. People find themselves being very emotional during it. I went, "Thank God – you can't deal with the loss of a child and go, 'Hey!'" [Williams gets up and starts doing an exuberant, Fosse-style dance routine.]

Speaking of animation, when Disney hired you to *Aladdin*, your brilliance paved the way for A-list voices to dominate animated movies...

Well, it was the first idea of hiring comics to be funny in the characters and, for better or worse, that kicked it into a whole other gear. Now you see them hiring comics for everything – and it's great and I know every comic who's done it loves doing it. It's a brilliant gift. Mike Myers said, "You can fuck around for 40 hours and then they'll draw it! Fuckin' right!" Or I can be a penguin, a Hispanic penguin, which I would not be offered in real life. I heard recently that Andy Serkis is opening

Is it coincidence that your 'dark period' – *One Hour Photo*, *Death To Smoochy*, *Insomnia* – coincided with your first stand-up tour in 16 years in 2002?

That was actually an economic decision. But also, the 2002 tour was almost an emotional response to 9/11. Whoopi Goldberg and I performed in Washington not long after 9/11 and people treated it like we were breaking a siege. The value of comedy then – it was like, "Come on, man, we can't take it anymore..." And then we got eight years of Bush – how am I going to medicate my way through that? The recent tour started off as an economic thing and became, "Wait a minute, there's a lot to talk about." But initially it was purely economic: movies weren't coming in so let's go back out on the road. Thank God I have that outlet.

Do you still enjoy it?

I enjoy it but it was rough. And now with the heart surgery... I wondered why halfway through the tour I was going, "I really feel kind of bad..." and they went, "You have a blown valve." It's pretty crazy to go back out, especially now. It's like the Chinese curse – may you live in interesting times.

Do you ever think about where your comedy fits in now alongside Judd Apatow and the Frat Pack?

I don't know where it fits in but thank God I evolved so at least I can still get a chance to make



'I had a great time working with Spielberg and it was wonderful to be in something so huge'

a school in London called Imaginarium for people to act in CG movies. He created the greatest CG character in Gollum and that will be the future – it's better to not be terrified of it.

Would you be tempted to create a CG character like Gollum?

Tempted? I'd be going, "Sign me up now!"

Why don't you drop Peter Jackson a line about *The Hobbit*?

Oh, please. Dildo Baggins... "Who are you?" "Freudo." To do a character like that would be a gift. With the technology now, anything's possible and especially with my love of science fiction... They were talking about doing [Isaac Asimov's] *Foundation* at one point and the character of the Mule would be amazing. It's the idea of creating characters that the greatest make-up artist in the world couldn't do justice to without CG.

a comedy with Bobcat that I don't necessarily fit in. As long as I can find work with people as interesting as Bob, I'm in.

Do comic actors go in and out of fashion more than dramatic performers?

I think so. But the ones that stay in fashion – it's not even fashion, it's just the ones that are still funny. Will Ferrell is always funny to me but does he necessarily always make movies that are big? But he's fearless, he's not afraid to be totally goofy and at the same time very sweet. And Jonah Hill – he's really good. The two of them are great in exploring that type of out-there behaviour, but at the same time making it believable and scary.

You mentioned Altman earlier – what's it like to work with auteurs like Chris Nolan or Steven Spielberg?

Well, I didn't work with Steven on one of his auteur movies. When we were doing *Hook*, he

made no bones about wanting to make that into this big action spectacle. But I had a great time working with him – he was a great friend and it was just wonderful to be in something so huge. For me, I just loved the fact I got to fly. Even the guys flying me were going, "We can't do another take!" But to work with someone like Chris Nolan or Mark Romanek or Bobcat is wonderful. And Gus Van Sant – he's more of an auteur guy. You realise you're not acting and that's what he wants. He's like, "Just talk, just say it – you don't have to worry." And after a while you think, "Oh, I'm not acting – cool!" And then all this *behaviour* comes out, where you can be awkward, strange, all the other dysfunctional stuff we are as humans.

You and Spielberg both took a drubbing for *Hook*...

Yeah, but I talk to people who watched it as children and loved it. It was made for them. They

MARTIN SCHOELLER/AUGUST, KOBAL, ALLSTAR, GETTY

Lifeline

1951 Williams is born in Chicago, to a former model and a senior VP in the auto trade.



1973 Accepted into drama school Juilliard, where he befriends soon-to-be Superman Christopher Reeve.



1978 Turns *Happy Days* cameo into ultra-successful spin-off *Mork And Mindy*.



ROBIN WILLIAMS

Munchausen was notoriously difficult...

I knew at one point that things were going to go slightly crazy when he asked them to make a siege cannon and the Italian crew went off and made him a real siege cannon that weighed several tons and needed 300 people to pull it into place. And he went, "Noooo! You could have done it out of fibreglass!" "No, Terreee, look, we make-a da real siege cannon. Eet's good, eet feel and look real." It was fucking insane.

I like your socks by the way...

Thanks, they're Chinese sperm swimmers. Vasectomy socks. In memory of... the boys who didn't make it.

You said recently that you were offered both the Joker and the Riddler. Really?

Yes, and they've now made it seem like I'm lobbying to play the Riddler in the new movie. I was once offered the Joker, then they gave it to Jack Nicholson, then they offered me the Riddler and they gave it to Jim Carrey. I've been punked twice, don't punk me again! Play the Diddler? No, I can't do that! And now I get the angry people saying, "He should *never* play that part!" It's Chris' call, man. To work with him again – oh God, I'd love to, it was a great experience on *Insomnia*. But... [whispers] Andy Serkis – he'd make a great Riddler. He could be part CG and part insane.

Are indie movies the way forward?

Either way. Altman said at the Independent Spirit Awards, "Listen, all you motherfuckers are here celebrating your independence but if a studio offered you a movie, you would fucking whore out right now..." And they all went, "Yeah!"

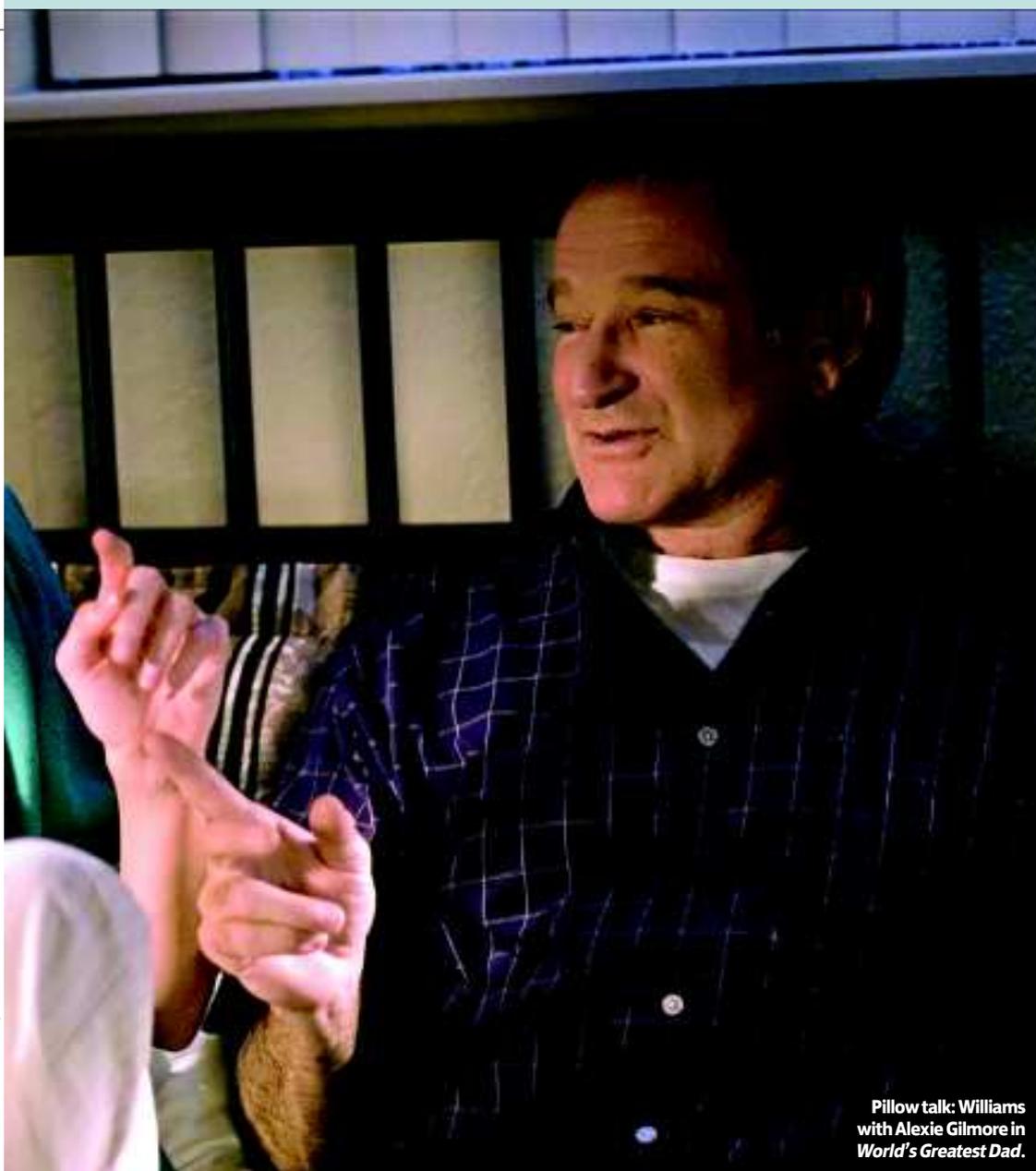
Still, surely you have freedom in indie movies that you don't on a studio project?

Just because it's off the radar and they don't test-screen the movies because they can't afford to. The most frightening process is test screenings, where the audience can access the brakes. Barry Levinson said the greatest comment he ever read was after a screening of *Rain Man*, there was a card that said, "I kept waiting for the little guy to snap out of it."

What does the future hold? Can you imagine yourself doing a Sean Connery and retiring to a life of golf courses and eccentric comments?

[Adopts Sean Connery's Scottish brogue] "No... Just stand around and let yer hair disappear – don't be afraid to look at me: I'm a prick on legs." No, I don't want to retire and play golf, I want to keep working, doing stand-up, riding my bike occasionally and being around friends and funny people. And doing a movie when there's something interesting. They're out there but you have to look. **TF**

The World's Greatest Dad opens on 3 September and will be reviewed next issue. For more features go to totalfilm.com



Pillow talk: Williams with Alexie Gilmore in *World's Greatest Dad*.

were planning to make that movie into a theme park right off the bat and then when it didn't do as well, it was like, "Whoops!" They were rewriting that as we were doing it and that's always dangerous.

How do you view some of your other disparaged films, like *Flubber* or *Toys*, with hindsight?

Flubber was a case where they just wanted to CG it, they didn't give a shit about any of the other stuff. We're going, "You've got to care about these characters or they're not going to give a shit about the CG." And they went, "No, the CG's what sells it." And we're going, "Good luck." But I'm still proud of *Toys* because it's such a weird and wonderful movie. At the time, I think it was just so strange that the studio went, "We don't know how to deal with this." That one I watch and go, "I'm OK with the fact that it didn't kick off."

How did you find working with that other mad genius, Terry Gilliam?

Oh, he's the best. I would drive him crazy with late night phone calls on *Fisher King*, going, "What do you think?" He'd go, "I think you're doing OK – don't call me." That movie is so powerful for me: the scene of all the people dancing in Grand Central Station is one of the most beautiful fantasy scenes I've ever seen in a movie, and the idea of New York as being both heaven and hell – having lived in New York, it can be both.

His storytelling gelled with his imagination there...

Terry's an animator and if he can animate it, he thinks, "Why can't we do it?" You want them to give him a big CG movie. He's so gifted; working with him is a blast. I'm one of the few who's done it twice. When I did [*The Adventures of Baron Munchausen*...] I became a survivor of a Gilliam movie.

1980 First movie role, as the spinach-guzzling sailor in the live-action *Popeye*.



1985 Co-hosts the 58th Academy Awards with Alan Alda and Jane Fonda.

1991 A banner year, working with Spielberg on *Hook* and Gilliam on *The Fisher King*.



1998 Snags an Oscar, at fourth time of asking, for *Good Will Hunting*.



2004 Named 13th on Comedy Central's list of the '100 Greatest Stand-Ups of All Time'.