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'Dead Poets Society'

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Robin Williams is a Chips off the old block in the quirky comi-tragedy "Dead Poets Society." He's almost as serenely eccentric as the archetypal teacher everybody remembers, that rare educator deserving of apples.

What "Stand and Deliver's" Edward James Olmos did for logarithms, Williams aims to do for iambic pentameter in this lively blackboard melodrama. It's a literate though strained uplifter, a not altogether compatible coupleting of Rocky Balboa and the Bard. It's the Robin Goodfellow that you know and love, mischievous as ever but more controlled.

Set in 1959 at a stuffy New England prep school, the movie concerns the interaction between regimented students and their dedicated new poetry teacher.

More than a breath of fresh air, he is a tempest stirring up the dustbunnies at the musty Welton Academy. "You can call me Mr. Keating ... or Captain, my Captain if you're more of a romantic," he tells his class of petal-cheeked rote learners. Then through inspirational antics and much laughter, he persuades the youngsters to loosen their school ties.

The story shifts gracefully from the joys of Keating's classroom -- "I was the intellectual equivalent of a 98-pound weakling. They would kick copies of Byron in my face" -- to focus on the theatrics of a group of his students, seven boys who dare to "Carpe diem, seize the day," as he has bidden them. They form the Dead Poets Society, a secret cabal who read their own and others' verse in a spooky,

Director: Peter Weir

Cast: [Robin Williams](#);
 Robert Sean Leonard;
 Norman Lloyd;
[Ethan Hawke](#)



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dripping cave. Shortly they are defying their parents and the school authorities, becoming not the Metropolitan Club members of tomorrow, but incipient anarchists. Well, this won't do at all. Marching to one's own drummer proves near-impossible when the approval-givers have got the drumsticks.

Though set when flower power was about to bud, Tom Schulman's screenplay seems to address the compliancy of '80s babies and would, but doesn't quite, give directions to Robert Frost's road less traveled. The good news is that all these youngsters could read the map, as could the actors -- this is not the brat pack hoping to up their IQs by wearing glasses, but a dazzling ensemble of persuasive newcomers.

Standouts are Robert Sean Leonard as the victim of a domineering father who wants him to be a doctor; Ethan Hawke as his roommate, a second son who suffers from parental neglect and a lack of self-worth; Gale Hansen as a rebellious poet who sustains a beating from the headmaster but retains his principles; and Josh Charles as a tenderfoot who uses poetry and newfound chutzpah to win the girl of his dreams... .

Director Peter Weir is drawn to converging themes and cultures -- cop genre violence and Amish pacifism in "Witness," for instance. Captured by John Seale's singularly lovely cinematography, Weir's trademark landscapes point out the limitless horizons -- an armada of Canada geese is startled into flight just as the boys, gangly as goose necks, are startled into self-awareness. This contrasts beautifully with the stone cloisters and the mortarboard stiffnecks who rule the school.

Usually, Weir finds some subtle harmony between polarities, often some mystical Eastern rationale for all things sweet and sour. But here he and the author rely on contrivances of plot and villainous caricature to sort out the nature of sheep and lions. It's the Weir of "The Mosquito Coast," not "Gallipoli," the clumsy albeit entertaining Weir. This time he's taking the road more traveled.

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