

Psychiatry and the media

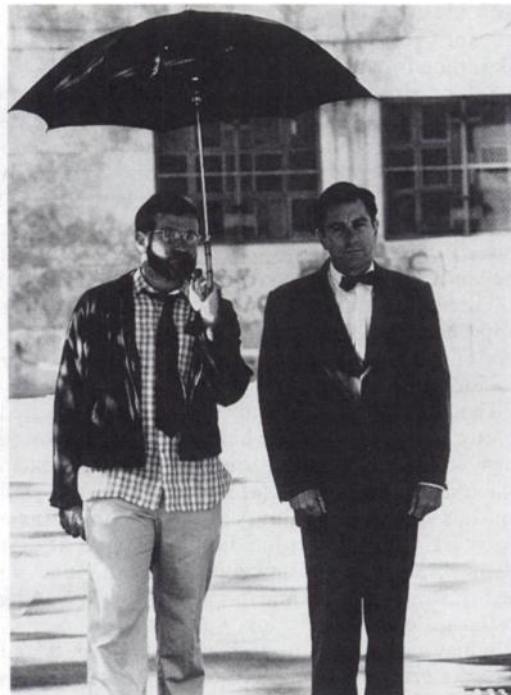
Awakenings

Starring Robert DeNiro and Robin Williams, directed by Penny Marshall

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“There is no such thing as a simple miracle”, runs the subtitle of this film based on Oliver Sacks best-selling book. That indeed is the take-home message. The story is probably familiar to most. A chronic back ward of a neurological hospital in the Bronx contains a handful of patients frozen in time and space following the aftermath of encephalitis lethargica. Enter the young idealistic doctor Malcolm Sayer, played by Robin Williams, more used to earthworms than earthlings. He brings humanity and a fresh eye to the patients' peculiar state. They seem to lack the will to initiate action but when this is prompted, they move. What else might lie hidden behind their mask-like faces? The discovery of L-dopa is the miracle which is seized upon by the eager Dr Sayer. The results are dramatic. The first patient, Leonard, (DeNiro) is literally brought to life, and the others follow. Unfortunately this proves a rude awakening. There is the painful realisation of lost youth. One patient asks a barman as she surveys a row of liqueurs, “Is it legal again?”. The strain on relationships cemented by years of dependence begins to tell. Finally the therapeutic window slams shut leaving uncontrollable involuntary movements, psychosis, and unpredictable lapses.

So why make a film of this everyday story of therapeutic zeal followed by nihilism? Firstly, the story has a mythic quality which echoes *Pygmalion*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Rip Van Winkle*. (Incidentally the producer's last film was ‘Big’, another tale of time and transposition). Secondly, physical and mental distortion provides a huge challenge to the actor, ably met by DeNiro as it was by Dustin Hoffman in his portrayal of an autistic man in ‘Rain Man’. But there is another underlying theme which is especially powerful and relevant to doctors and psychiatrists in particular. There is a notion of a sensitive poetic soul trapped in a crippled body or disconnected brain like Rilke's ‘Panther’. The appeal of Christie Brown's autobiography in *My Left Foot* and *The Comfort of Madness*, by ex-psychiatric nurse and namesake of the film's hero, Paul Sayer, is the same. It inspired



Dr Malcolm Sayer (Robin Williams) accompanies Leonard Lowe (Robert DeNiro) on his first foray out of the hospital since being revived from his decades-long “living death”. Copyright Columbia Pictures.

Pinter's play *A Kind of Alaska*, it runs through Freud and Laing. The film lacks the play's power; a kind of half-baked Alaska. It is the fantasy of liberating a person where others acquiesce to their imprisonment; the idea that through understanding and humanity we may see beyond the distortion of disease and disability and reveal the person beneath. ‘Awakenings’ recreates this fantasy in a profoundly moving way. Although sentimental at times, the message is powerful enough to get through.

I am sure that this fantasy in part pulled me towards psychiatry. Unfortunately I am almost as sure that the fantasy will never come true. It is the psychiatric patients in the film who are the incurables and grotesques who serve as a balance against the sensibilities of the other neurological patients. Their unreachability is maintained; they need more than

miracles. Ultimately 'Awakenings' succeeds because it puts forward the role of the physician not as a god or a saint but as the person who is endlessly curious, inquisitive, patient, and always fallible. It is these qualities that our patients will have to put up with for the foreseeable future.

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The media and psychiatry

Expert input: confusional state, acute onset

ANNE CHARLISH, writer and broadcaster*

Yes, I remember the piece on self-trepanation. What intrigued me most was the question of how the journalist had managed to persuade anyone to talk about it . . . and now I know (*Psychiatric Bulletin*, February 1991, 15, 107–108).

Psychiatrists are notoriously unwilling to divulge their secrets to busy hacks, often with good reason. This is a shame, because, as one professor has said, health education is an integral part of health care. Of course, you do have to choose your journalists with care, but I'll get to that in a minute.

A journalist's lot is not always a happy one.

Failure to engage

- Dial the hospital – no answer.
- Redial – answered but left hanging on to no effect.
- Redial – put through to the wrong Dr Russell or the wrong Dr Cook.
- Redial – get the secretary of the correct consultant.
- “He's not in”/“I don't know where he is”/“he's gone home”/“he's working at home”/“he can't be disturbed”/“he's at a committee meeting”/“his wife's left him”.

Only the writer's obsessive-compulsive tendencies sustain her in a relentless pursuit of the consultant she believes to be the best.

In the middle of all this, a proof lands on your desk. You spot a sub-editor's change which is going to wreck your reputation: she's altered puerperal

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psychosis to “baby blues” – “because it's easier” . . .! The telephone rings and it's Dr X, wanting to make a couple of amendments to an earlier piece. You still haven't got through to the consultant you want today. Formal thought disorder seems perilously close.

So, we're busy, too, in our way. And we don't have secretaries and appointment clerks, but we do have alarming deadlines. All this occasionally leads to mania, but more often not.

Depression

At last you get through: magic moment.

- “I don't know anything about that” (that's not what your colleagues say – well, some do).
- “Who's it for?”
- “I'm terribly busy” (this point is usually elaborated upon for anything up to five minutes – never mind the time, think of the telephone bill).
- “I don't want to be quoted” (why not?)
- “It would be better if you spoke to Dr X . . .” (no, it wouldn't!)
- “I've got a frightful headache”.

Euphoria

But, sometimes, you strike gold:

- “Oh, yes, how interesting.”
- “When's your deadline?”
- “Would you prefer to do it on the telephone or would you like to come and see me?”
- “There are a couple of papers you ought to read first, hang on, I'll just get you the references” (good).
- “I had a most interesting case, once.” (excellent!)