

Cultural Daily

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Remembering Robin Williams

Elisa Leonelli · Sunday, January 9th, 2022

[Robin Williams](#) took his own life in 2014, in despair over a disease that was affecting his motor skills and mental state, and was misdiagnosed as Parkinson's, but an autopsy after his death identified as LBD, [Lewy Body Dementia](#).



Robin Williams, photo by Elisa Leonelli 1987

I recently watched the documentaries *Robin's Wish* (2020), which is quite sad, the more joyous *Robin Williams: Come Inside My Mind* (2018), and I was reminded of the numerous times I

interviewed this incredible actor/comedian/human being over the years, when we talked about his comedic and dramatic roles, such as the radio DJ in *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) by Barry Levinson, Doctor Oliver Sacks in *Awakenings* (1990) by Penny Marshall, a homeless man in *The Fisher King* (1991) by Terry Gilliam, Peter Pan in *Hook* (1991) by Steven Spielberg, the nanny in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) by Chris Columbus, and other movies like *The Birdcage* (1996) by Mike Nichols, *What Dreams May Come* (1998), *Patch Adams* (1998), *One Hour Photo* (2002).



Robin Williams as Park Ranger, photo by Elisa Leonelli 1987

The memory I most cherish is when I was hired by my dear departed friend Bob Stein as the on-set photographer for the TV special *Will Rogers: Look Back in Laughter* (1987) also featuring Dan

Aykroyd, Chevy Chase and Harold Ramis, where Robin donned various disguises. In between takes, he kept cast and crew laughing with his hilarious improvisations.



Robin Williams, photo by Elisa Leonelli 1984

I wrote several articles about his work for Italian magazines like *CIAK*, *Donna Moderna*, *Epoca*,

Gioia, Marie Claire.

Here's some quotes from my 1990 interview published in *Marie Claire*:

"I had led a wild life for a while, but fatherhood was pretty sobering, it made me clean up my act; before Zak was born (April 13, 1983), after John Belushi died (March 2, 1982), I stopped everything, drugs and alcohol. Actually, contrary to most people, cocaine slowed me down, that was my excuse for using it. And all the money which isn't going up my nose now goes to pay for my kids' college."

"Performing is my world. I can barely talk to one person, but standing in front of thousands of people is total freedom, I can slay the dragon there."

"Political satire is back in comedy because people are obviously angry and worried about what's going on, so they enjoy laughing about it, it's a way to deal with the fear. It's a dangerous edge, especially if you want to talk about homelessness or AIDS, which are scary issues."

"I organized a second benefit for the homeless, *Comic Relief* (with Billy Crystal and Whoopi Goldberg), we raised \$4 million, and we're doing a third one, because obviously the problem hasn't gone away. If you go to Port Authority bus station in New York, it looks like Bombay, with all the people stacked up on the sidewalks."

"Oliver Sacks is quite amazing, he's a cross between Albert Schweitzer and Arnold Schwarzenegger; he's a former weightlifter, so he's huge, but he looks like Santa Claus. He's probably one of the most well-read, erudite, humanistic people I've ever met."



Elisa Leonelli, Robin Williams (c) HFPA 1987

Click on links to read some of my interviews published in *Gioia* [1995](#), [1996](#), [2002](#).

“I ride bikes, for me that’s a release, psychologically and physically, My weight will come and go, my body type is a [mesomorph](#), so by cycling I can exercise and also get the kind of solitude I need as a person. In San Francisco, I will ride up to 50 miles a day. I went to France and it was great to cycle in the mountains, on the Pyrenees, then go down to Provence. And Italy makes great bikes.”



Elisa Leonelli, Robin Williams © HFPA 2013

The last time I interviewed Robin was in October 2013, for the TV series *The Crazy Ones* by David Kelley, and he seemed as sharp and funny as always.

“When they cancelled *Mork and Mindy* (1978-1982) it was weird, because they don’t call you, I read about it in *Variety*, so it’s like reading your own obituary, ‘He was found dead.’ But no, I’m still here.”

Thank you Robin for all the inspiration and laughs that you gave us. Your compassionate heart was the most amazing quality about you, and that will stay with us. May you rest in peace.

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