



A serious man

Robin Williams on drink, death and playing the fool

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'I was shameful, did stuff that caused disgust - that's hard to recover from'

Robin Williams talks to Decca Aitkenhead



In the normal order of things, an interview with a Hollywood actor observes the form of a transaction. The actor wants to promote their film, and ideally talk about little else - least of all anything of a personal nature. The newspaper is mildly interested in the new film, but hopes they can be tempted to talk about other matters - best of all their private life. Sometimes the agreement is explicit, but most of the time it is mutually understood, and so the interview tends to proceed rather like a polite dance, with each

party manoeuvring in its own interests. On this occasion, however, the convention appears to have been turned on its head.

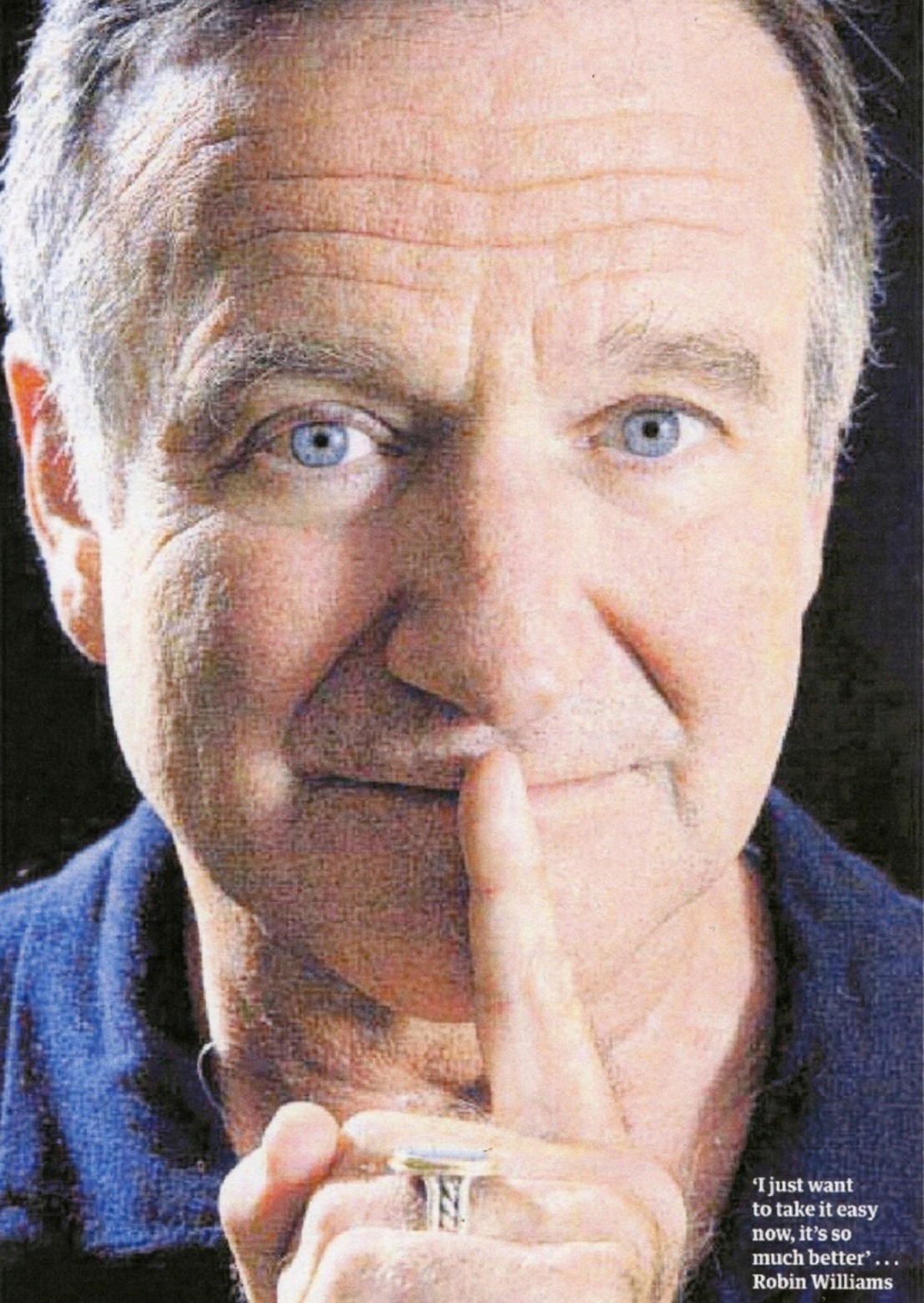
Robin Williams's new film, *World's Greatest Dad*, is brilliant. Having starred in a lot of unspeakably sentimental dross in recent years, here he is at last in something clever and thoughtful; a dark, slightly weird comedy that touches on all sorts of interesting themes that I'm hoping he'll talk about. Williams, however, has other plans. It is almost impossible to get anything coherent out of him

about the film, or any of the issues it raises. He is vague, tangential and at times more or less incomprehensible - until the conversation turns to more personal matters, at which point he becomes lucid and forthcoming. What Williams really wants to talk about, it turns out, is his relapse into alcoholism, his rehab and his open-heart surgery.

Unfortunately, it takes me some time to cotton on to this, so I keep asking questions about World's Greatest Dad. Williams plays Lance, a failed writer, failed teacher and single father of perhaps the most irredeemably dislikable teenager ever to appear on screen. His son Kyle is addicted to hardcore internet pornography and is almost universally loathed - until he accidentally dies. His father fakes a suicide note, and when it is leaked, the school magazine reprints the letter, its poignancy prompting a posthumous revision of everyone's former low opinion of the boy. Soon a juggernaut of confected grief is roaring out of control.

Unable to resist the allure of his new popularity, Lance proceeds to fake a whole journal, passing it off as his son's and fuelling the insatiable hunger for loss. A bidding war breaks out between publishing houses, the journal becomes a bestselling book, and Lance winds up on a daytime TV show, like a pseudo celebrity, peddling his mythical son's tragedy to the nation.

The film is a devastatingly funny indictment of the modern grief industry, but when I ask Williams if he thinks it's getting worse, he says mildly, "Well, I think people want it. In a weird way, it's trying to keep hope alive." So does he not share the film's judgment on mawkish sentimentality? "Well, you just try and keep it in perspective; you have to remember the best and the worst." It seems as if he's about to engage with the question - "In >>



'I just want to take it easy now, it's so much better'...
Robin Williams