

# Dead Poets lively

★ ★ ★ Dead Poets Society  
Plaza

Hollywood has always been enamored with literature and poetry and the respectability they bring. *Educating Rita* with Michael Caine is one of the best recent examples of this. It perpetuates the romantic idea that simply reading a book will bring about momentous changes in people's lives.

Continuing in this tradition is *Dead Poets Society*, a slick and entertaining drama that quotes snippets of poetry to great effect. It is set at a stuffy prep school for boys during the late '50s. John Keating (Robin Williams), the new English professor, is determined to wake up his docile class of students and turn them into free thinkers.

Keating's "unorthodox teaching practices" include having his pupils rip out a boring introduction to a book of poetry, getting them to stand on top of their desks to gain a new perspective and even encouraging the boys to march to a different drummer — literally.

With this creative atmosphere and a dash of Walt Whitman, the students are soon living out their pent-up dreams and fantasies. One begins to write poetry, another tries out for a part in a play and a third finds the courage to

chase after the girl of his dreams.

They even go so far as to reconvene the Dead Poets Society, a secret organization founded by Keating when he was a student. It is a group "dedicated to sucking the marrow out of life," though generally their actions are limited to sneaking off campus to read poems in a dark cave.

The movie is an ensemble piece that has less to do with a rebellious teacher than the students he teaches. Director Peter Weir allows Williams to toss off a few one-liners, but basically holds the frequently wild actor in check.

In fact, most of the focus is on the boys, especially Neil and Todd. Neil (Robert Sean Leonard) feels constrained by a dictatorial father who has Neil's entire life mapped out for him. But with Keating's encouragement he finally does what he's always wanted: act. Todd (Ethan Hawke) is Neil's roommate, a quiet stut-terer ignored by his parents.

While *Dead Poets Society* indulges in melodramatic events, it is much better at small triumphs. The best scene occurs when Todd is too embarrassed to read aloud the poem he's been working on. Keating forces the shy student to stand up in front of the class and say something, anything. Pointing



FRANCOIS DUHAMEL

Robin Williams as English professor John Keating tries to inspire his students with a love for poetry.

at a picture of Walt Whitman, Keating tells Todd to say whatever pops into his head.

At first, the other students giggle as Todd mumbles and stutters. But Keating persists and the camera whirls around the two feverishly as Todd becomes more and more exasperated at his own timidity. Disoriented and confused, Todd struggles on when suddenly words — beautiful words — begin pouring out of him in a torrent of emotion.

Todd comes to a halt flushed with triumph and everyone —

Keating, the class, even us — is taken aback by the force of what he said. Later scenes involving defiance of authority and expulsion aren't nearly as convincing as

that brief moment in illustrating the movie's central message: that finding the confidence to express yourself can change your life.

by michael giltz



- ★★★★ . . . . . one of the year's best
- ★★★ . . . . . good with minor flaws
- ★★ . . . . . basically poor but not worthless
- ★ . . . . . a waste of celluloid
- 0 . . . . . if it's really late and this movie comes on TV, change the channel