

Boulevard

Robin Williams was a singular American comedian and a long-time movie presence. Among his many films, a clear minority was serious, and a few of them (“One Hour Photo,” “The Night Listener”) featured him as a forlorn, thwarted figure. In “Boulevard,” the last on-screen role of his 35-year career, Williams appears again in that lonely mode.

Nolan Mack (Williams) is 60, a small man in a small life. A long-time loan officer stuck in a Nashville mini-mall bank, his marriage to Joy (Kathy Baker) is a convenient if loveless affair symbolized by their separate bedrooms and separate lifestyles, though they at least share literate tastes in books and movies. His ailing father vegetates in a home and then suffers a stroke. One night out cruising a boulevard, he almost hits a young street hustler named Leo (Roberto Aguirre) and is so mortified that he tries to comfort him by taking him to a motel. For Nolan, the aim is not sex but simple connection, an attitude promiscuous Leo finds hard to credit. Still, Nolan pays him, and thus begins a liaison where the older man’s hidden gay character quietly reveals itself, though never physically.

Hiding such erratic behavior sends troubling signals to Joy, to his best friend, Winston (Bob Odenkirk), a college professor, and to his skeptical boss. It also gets Nolan entangled with Leo’s pimp, the tough Eddie (Giles Matheny). Nolan’s life becomes unhinged with more and more lies, a beating, some embarrassing encounters, and work failures because he cannot extricate himself from delicate but clueless Leo. He finally comes out to his almost comatose father before he finally becomes resolved to change his life. As his friend Winston notes: “Maybe it’s never too late to finally start living the life you really want.”

The film was directed by Dito Montiel and is a real departure for him. A native New Yorker, he is best known for gritty crime-and-cop films with the likes of Channing Tatum and Dwayne Johnson. Here he gets out of the city for the first time and takes on a modest, low-key world where psychology outweighs action. His new effort is worthy, helped by a sound script from Douglas Soesbe.

Among the featured roles, Kathy Baker stands out as Joy, both tender and distant, and utterly natural and believable in the part. When the lies become too much for her near the end of the picture, her placidity explodes dramatically as she spews a litany of collected outrages about her marriage. It is a vivid turn. Young Aguirre is cast just right as the angelic Leo with a mind that is blank but with a face Caravaggio would love. He gives off the right vibe of decent yet dumb, thoughtful then clueless. It will be nice to see him spread his acting wings further.

Nolan’s whole life is a symphony of repression, and Robin Williams plays all the instruments. A man afraid of physical violence, of argument, of contention—of life itself, he is constantly setting his sights down, his expectations low. His becoming intrigued with young Leo is puzzling at first, then troubling, then promising, then threatening, as he becomes wrapped up with an object of desire which cannot reciprocate. Williams is

most touching as a forsaken soul who cannot fathom his inchoate yearning but also cannot turn away from it. Robin Williams may have left the movies in a low profile role but also with a fine feat of acting.

(The film is rated "R" and runs 88 mins.)

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