



ROBERT DE NIRO

ROBIN WILLIAMS

AWAKENINGS



Awakenings

(1990, d. Penny Marshall)

Based on the life of Dr Oliver Sachs and his book on the experience, this is the recounting of a medical experiment in New York City in the summer of 1969. After years spent in observing experiments, Dr Sayer (Robin Williams) gets a job in a hospital where some of the patients seem to be in suspended animation except for their abilities in response to stimulation by reflexes.

Supported by a nurse (Julie Kavner), he studies the records of the patients and finds they all suffered from encephalitis in the 1920s. Hearing of a drug, L-Dopa, he experiments with Leonard Lowe (Robert de Niro) with the permission of his devoted mother (Ruth Nelson). Leonard awakens and comes to life. Donations enable the drug to be given to all the others who also awaken. Eventually, the drug is unable to sustain the awakening and the patients return to their catatonic state. The experiment, however, has had a life-giving effect on the shy Dr Sayer and on the hospital staff.

Nominated for many Oscars, *Awakenings* proved a very moving experience for many audiences. Gently paced (as if moving according to the pace of the shy but ingenious Dr Sayer), the film shows how a concerned scientist and a devoted doctor can intuit and



discover ways of bringing people to life. The central character, Leonard, was a bright child when he went into his trance-like existence. On re-awakening, he discovers the exuberance of life as a grown-up, breaking a little free of his mother, attracted to a visitor who reads to her father, eager, despite his regression, that his case be studied to assist others.

Robin Williams lived with Oliver Sachs for some time and gives his most restrained performance to date. Robert de Niro obviously relishes the demands of the role of Leonard. Directed by Penny Marshall (*Big*, *A League of Their Own*), *Awakenings* is a fine drama of the human spirit.