

# Rebellion, fast living ruin films' creative characters

By Judith Trojan  
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — The peril of non-conformity is a key theme for Australian director Peter Weir ("Witness," "The Mosquito Coast"), whose latest American film, "Dead Poets Society" (Touchstone), explores the impact of one unorthodox English teacher on his impressionable high school students.

A former graduate of posh Welton Academy, a New England prep school for boys, John Keating (Robin Williams) has returned to teach poetry. A romantic who idolizes Emerson and Thoreau, Keating is determined to turn his boys on to poetry and into freethinkers who "seize the day."

Weir and screenwriter Tom Schulman raise more questions than they answer in this thought-provoking period drama. It's 1959, and Keating is out of step with the times yet totally appropriate to the alternative educational climate set to bloom in the 1960s. It's obvious early on that he will be held accountable for his quiet rebellion.

While Keating manages in touching and funny ways to uncork each boy's creativity, his philosophy also incites them to follow their whims. They reinstitute the Dead Poets Society, a secret club Keating and his classmates created in their prep school days to honor the work of their beloved writers. The boys sneak out to a cave by night, smoke cigarettes, read poetry and tell ghost stories — harmless stuff by today's standards, but acts of dire consequence on that stuffy campus at the close of the Eisenhower era.

Personal rebellion takes different forms. One boy (Josh Charles) pursues a perfectly innocent crush on a lovely girl who's dating the son of a family friend. Another boy (Gale Hansen) nuttily provokes the school administration by urging admission of girls. Shy Todd (Ethan Hawke), who lives in the shadow of his older brother's top scholastic average, is inspired to find his own poetic voice. And Neil (Robert Sean Leonard) is compelled to challenge his father's dictatorial career directives. For Neil, whose creative heart and soul blossoms under Keating's inspiration and shrivels under his father's thumb, there will be tragic consequences.

True to its romantic theme, the film is ripe with lush natural and musical interludes, two Weir signatures. Although it's strapped with an emotionally manipulative ending, "Dead Poets Society" raises issues that are important to adolescents and their parents, among them non-conformity, peer pressure, child rights, values clarification and teen suicide.

Due to mild locker-room language and an unsettling, unresolved teen suicide sequence, the U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-III — adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

## 'Let's Get Lost'

The tendency to deify jazz musicians may be questionable given their dissipated personal lives. But the heady mix of extraordinary talent and non-conformity make them fascinating film subjects — especially if portrayed responsibly. Such stirring dramatic films as "Bird" and the current documentary "Let's Get Lost" (Zeitgeist) do justice to their brilliant musical protagonists, yet never glamorize their self-destructive lifestyles.

Like Charlie Parker, Chet Baker battled to the end of his roller-coaster life to make music in a haze of drugs, women and anti-social antics.

Born in 1929, this white jazz trumpeter had the looks and troubled personality of James Dean. A self-taught musician blessed with a dreamy singing voice, Chet hit it big in his early '20s and hit the skids soon after. But no matter how many addictions and afflictions racked his handsome body, his talent lingered on.

In jazzlike fashion, director Bruce Weber unravels a disturbing portrait of the



Robin Williams as John Keating talks with some of his students in "Dead Poets Society." The U.S. Catholic Conference says the film "raises issues which are important to adolescents and their parents."

genius during his youth and tragic middle age. Fascinating film clips and photos chart the mottled career of this bad boy at gigs, jazz festivals and trendy European venues,

during several recording sessions, and in appearances on Steve Allen's early TV show and in Italian B-movies. He's interviewed at the end of his life (he

died at age 58 in Amsterdam after falling out of a window) and is also captured re-recording some final songs. While his face and body are shockingly ravaged and he talks as if he's spaced out on drugs, he still manages to sing and play in virtuoso fashion.

Weber juxtaposes interviews with various wives and lovers who, in retrospect, jealously bad-mouth each other and often denigrate Chet. Also heard from are his mother and three of his adult children, as well as musicians and jazz aficionados who knew and worked with him.

The result is a film that is as maddening as it is mesmerizing. Weber flits back and forth in time and never clarifies the degree and cause of the drug and spouse abuse nor the fascinating contradictions found in this talented, tormented man.

Due to some explicit reminiscences about Baker's sexual promiscuity, drug abuse and violence-prone, anti-social behavior, and its unflinching look at his drug-dazed last days, the USCC classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. Not rated by the MPAA.



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