



Finding Your Way: The Films of Peter Weir

Dead Poets Society

Dead Poets Society

Director: Peter Weir

Production Companies: Touchstone Pictures, Silver Screen Partners IV, Witt-Thomas Productions
Producers: Steven Haft, Paul Junger Witt, Tony Thomas

Associate Producer/Unit Production Manager: Duncan Henderson

Location Manager: Michael J. Meehan

Production Assistants: Leigh Feitelberg, Jay Gibson, Daniel S. Kudart

Assistant Directors: Alan B. Curtiss, B. Thomas Seidman, Brian Fong, John Rusk
Casting: Howard Feuer

Screenplay: Tom Schulman

Director of Photography: John Seale

Camera Operator: Stephen Shank

Special Effects Co-ordinator: Allen Hall

Special Effects Foreman: Gary L. Karas

Cave Constructor: Alexander Scutti Jr

Editors: William Anderson, Lee Smith, Priscilla Nedd

Associate Editor: Deborah Zeitman

Associate Editor (Australia): Louise Innes

Production Designer: Wendy Stites

Art Director: Sandy Veneziano

Set Designer: Carleton Reynolds

Set Decorator: John Anderson

Costume Supervisor: Eddie Marks

Set Costumer: Marilyn Matthews

Set Costumer: Tony Scarano

Makeup Artist: Susan Cabral

Title Design/Photography: Neal Thompson

Titles: Cinema Research Corporation

Music: Maurice Jarre

Sound Recording: Charles Wilborn

Sound Re-recording: Michael J. Kohut,

Aaron Rochin, Carlos F. Delarios

Sound Re-recording (Australia): Phil Judd

Music Mixer: Joel Moss

Music Mixing: Record Plant

Supervising Sound Editor: Alan R. Splet

Sound Editor (Australia): Peter Townend

Supervising Dialogue Editor: Karen Spangenberg

Dialogue Editors: Gloria D'Alessandro,

Michael Silvers, Barbara McBane

Sound Effects: Robert Shoup

Sound Effects Editors: Ann Kroeber, John Verbeck

ADR Supervising Editor: C.J. Appel

ADR Group Co-ordinator: Leigh French

ADR Editor: Marilyn McCoppen

Foley Supervising Editor: Jeff Watts

Foley Editors: Robert Shoup, Mary Helen Leasman

Technical Adviser: Lisa Birnbach

Cast:

Robin Williams (*John Keating*)

Robert Sean Leonard (*Neil Perry*)

Ethan Hawke (*Todd Anderson*)

Josh Charles (*Knox Overstreet*)

Gale Hansen (*Charlie Halton*)

Dylan Kussman (*Richard Cameron*)

Allelon Ruggiero (*Steven Meeks*)

James Waterston (*Gerard Pitts*)

Norman Lloyd (*Mr Nolan*)

Kurtwood Smith (*Mr Perry*)

Carla Belver (*Mrs Perry*)

Leon Pownall (*McAllister*)

George Martin (*Dr Hager*)

Joe Auiery (*chemistry teacher*)

Matt Carey (*Hopkins*)

Kevin Cooney (*Joe Danburry*)

Jane Moore (*Mrs Danburry*)

Lara Flynn Boyle (*Ginny Danburry*)

Dead Poets Society is a compelling story about courage and self-awakening set against a rare and unusual backdrop: poetry and romanticism. Of paramount importance to the filmmakers was choosing a director who could balance the film's intellectual concerns with the story's extraordinary characters. Equally critical was their desire to give the film a stunning visual look. The producers immediately focused on acclaimed Australian filmmaker Peter Weir, who, like Robin Williams, also attended a private school during the 1950's.

'I was getting ready to board a plane back to Australia when I was handed the script,' recalls Weir. 'I seldom read on planes but I noticed the words "Dead Poets Society" and thought what an intriguing title! It caused me to turn the page and before I knew it I was at the end of the screenplay. As a story, it was intriguing and completely enveloping. I thought it had unusual density – rather like a good Charles Dickens novel that's full of characters and situations.'

The teaming up of director Peter Weir and actor Robin Williams was a welcome turn of fate. The two first met socially in 1985 and then briefly again in 1987 on the beach in Sydney, Australia.

'We had coffee and chatted and Robin said he was off to do a film in Thailand called *Good Morning, Vietnam*. We just talked and laughed and went our separate ways. It was an interesting twist that my next film was to be with this very funny man,' muses Weir.

Similar to Williams' role as Adrian Cronauer in *Good Morning, Vietnam*, for which he earned an Oscar nomination, the role of John Keating once again engages his comic genius while allowing him to explore more dramatic territory.

'Keating is not subversive; he's not radical or somebody from the 60's,' explains Weir. 'He's somebody who belongs to all time and no time, who believes in thinking for yourself and finding ways to express the more sensitive aspects of your being.'

'Everyone has at least one teacher like Keating they remember,' adds Williams, 'the ones that give you something beyond what they teach. I can remember two or three. One was a history professor; another was a cross-country coach. What they give you is something you take with you the rest of your life.'

Weir sought to preserve the humour that Williams brought naturally to the role, while at the same time capture the actor's sensitivity and intelligence.

'Keating can get a laugh out of a gesture or an odd word or phrase that doesn't detract from him being a teacher,' Weir explains. 'That range of humour on a smaller scale which puts a smile on your face for a lot of this film is something that I don't think Robin has used in this particular combination before. It's Robin as you've come to know and love him but with new depth.'

Dead Poets Society reveals the winds of change that John Keating and his seven students set in motion at Welton Academy in 1959. The film explores the clash between two very different worlds: the resolute and privileged Welton Academy and the mystical cave deep in the forest where the Dead Poets Society secretly convenes.

Colin Irving (*Chet Danburry*)
Alexandra Powers (*Chris Noel*)
Melora Walters (*Gloria*)
Welker White (*Tina*)
Steve Mathios (*Steve*)
Alan Pottinger (*Bubba*)
Pamela Burrell (*directing teacher*)
Allison Hedges (*actor/fairy*)
Christine D'ercole (*Titania*)
John Cunningham (*Mr Anderson*)
Debra Mooney (*Mrs Anderson*)
John Martin Bradley (*bagpiper*)
Charles N. Lord (*Mr Dalton*)
Kurt Leitner (*Lester*)
Richard Stites (*Stick*)
James J. Christy (*Spaz*)
Catherine Soles (*stage manager*)
Hoover Sutton (*Welton professor*)
James Donnell Quinn (*procession alumnus*)
Simon Mein (*Welton vicar*)
Ashton W. Richards (*physical education teacher*)
Robert Gleason (*father of Spaz*)
Bill Rowe (*dormitory porter*)
Robert J. Zigler III (*Beans*)
Keith Snyder (*Russell*)
Nicholas K. Gilhool (*Shroom*)
Jonas Stiklorius (*Jonas*)
Craig Johnson (*Dewey*)
Chris Hull (*Ace*)
Jason Woody (*Woodsie*)
Sam Stegeman (*Sam*)
Andrew Hill (*senior student*)
USA 1989
129 mins
Digital

With thanks to

Peter and Ingrid Weir

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'Welton is certainly the world of order... the classical world of proportion, harmony and shape,' describes Weir. 'The cave is symbolic of the more primitive origins of man. Fleeing the environs of the school in the night to this cave seems to unlock a kind of muse.'

In addition to the film's story, Williams was also excited by the ensemble nature of the project. 'In a condensed way, this has been some of the hardest work I've ever done, but in another way it's been the most relaxing and the most fun. I'm not carrying this film and I don't feel pressured that the whole movie rests on me,' notes Williams. 'The real story of this film is the boys. I come in and I'm a catalyst, but how they react and their tribute back is the power – that's when it comes full circle.'

Weir and New York casting director Howard Feuer looked at more than 500 boys across the country before casting the official Dead Poets Society.

'In some instances, this film reminds me of *Gallipoli*,' Weir says. 'Here again you have the spirit of youth with all its hopes, wildness and energy. The story also has a sense of fun and adventure.'

Filmed entirely on location, *Dead Poets Society* is the first feature to be shot in Delaware. After scouting more than 70 universities and private schools throughout the country, the filmmakers decided to use St. Andrew's School in Middletown as the film's primary location. Doubling for Welton Academy, production designer Wendy Stites calls St. Andrews 'a set dresser's dream'. Founded by Felix A. Dupont in 1930, the school is situated on 2,000 acres of beautiful farmland above two-mile-long Noxtown Pond. The school's Etonian halls, stone-walled wings and tranquil setting were an immediate source of inspiration for director Weir.

'I got out of the car and I knew I wanted it. We met the headmaster and I had to suppress the desire to say "This is it! Can we have it?" There was always a surprising nook or cranny... a new place to put your actors against. Despite the fact that it's on the East Coast – just 90 minutes from New York – you could really be in Northern Scotland.'

The real clincher for Weir was a mural in the St. Andrews dining hall painted by N.C. Wyeth in 1936 depicting a divided image (one side of the mural is a figure of liberty surrounded by a cluster of boys, the other is a group of industrialists crouched over a drafting table). The moment Weir laid eyes on it he knew he would have to use the tableau in the film's opening credits. This 'found image' encapsulated the 'Dead Poets' theme – the choice that must be made between the pursuit of personal freedom or a life of unyielding conformity.

Production notes