

Williams Only Scratches the Surface in "One Hour Photo": Also, "Barbershop"

Written by Mike Schulz

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ONE HOUR PHOTO

One Hour Photo has a simple, juicy premise that's just right for an art-film creepshow. The meek, late-middle-aged nebbish Sy Parrish (Robin Williams) has, for 11 years, run the photo lab at the California discount store Sav-Mart and has become inordinately fond of his regular customers, the Wilsons.

Or rather, he's fond of their *photos*. Developing shot after shot of perfect husband Will (Michael Vartan), perfect wife Nina (Connie Nielsen), and perfect son Jakob (Dylan Smith), Sy becomes obsessed with the family, to the point of decorating his apartment walls with (unauthorized) copies of nine years worth of Wilson pictures. But when Sy begins noticing cracks in the façade of this "perfect family," he begins to unspool, and soon enough, this sad and frightened man becomes downright dangerous.

Williams has a few moments that astonish. When Sy is informed by his officious boss (Gary Cole) that he's being let go from his position at the Sav-Mart, Williams lets out a quick yelp of pain and grief, like a dog being kicked, before thoroughly unraveling. Later, and with a renewed purpose in his life – exacting vengeance on Will for his imperfection – Sy traverses a motel hallway with a knife and a giddy spring to his step; he's so excited about his forthcoming, horrific encounter with this man that Sy is practically skipping. In these and other scenes, Williams gets

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the external details of Sy down with eerie perfection, yet for the most part, they remain external. Technically, Williams' performance can hardly be faulted. But, truth be told, Williams is miscast (which *One Hour Photo's* more vociferous advocates will invariably describe as "cast against type"). He certainly scratches the surface of this grubby loser and comes through with some inspired bits of business, but Williams, by nature, is one of the least recessive performers in the history of film, and therefore, all wrong for Sy; how many actors receive critical hosannahs, as Williams did in the recent *Insomnia*, for doing next to nothing? (The press, myself included, just appeared grateful that he was toning it down for a change.) In Williams' hands, you never get remotely close to Sy's soul. An actor such as William H. Macy, Philip Seymour Hoffman, or Dylan Baker might be able to suggest Sy's pathetic, enervating awkwardness, but Williams is all show – even his tight-lipped focus announces, "Look how restrained I am." His performance, dexterous though it often is, is inherently phony, and if it seems that I'm going on about Williams for an unwieldy length, it's because he's the entire movie; writer-director Mark Romanek doesn't give anyone else in the film a thing to do.

Romanek's work is all about the vacuity behind surface "perfection" – Sy appears to have become fascinated by the Wilsons based on their all-American blandness – but did that concept have to extend to the film's other performers, too? Even in those rare moments when Nielsen and Vartan are given an exchange in which they're allowed some actual emotion, they're wooden; Nielsen and Vartan display nothing to make us think they're anything *but* pretty-looking waxworks. Even fine actors such as Cole, Eriq La Salle, and Clark Gregg are dulled down beyond belief, but it's not clear how any supporting performer could make an impression given Romanek's staging. Romanek originally made his name in music videos, and although his TV work is unseen by me, that's probably a good medium for his talents; all throughout *One Hour Photo*

, his images are pristine, exquisitely framed, and self-conscious as all get-out. His themes are spelled out in huge block letters – LONELINESS, ISOLATION, MADNESS – and that pushiness extends to Romanek's script, which features Sy, in voice-over narration, talking in all manner of pseudo-profundity about how a photo is a moment-in-time captured forever, blah blah blah. Like Williams, it's quite possible that Romanek is a technical virtuoso; his color schemes are gorgeous, and he's more than proficient at filling silence with dread. The film is wonderful to look at, and it has some pull, but it's an empty, unfulfilling piece of work, even on its own genre terms; Romanek appears to have the skill – make that the

surface

skill – to one day pull off a first-rate thriller, but

One Hour Photo

remains disappointingly undeveloped.

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