

A close-to-maniac Robin Williams gets tied up to keep him out of trouble in "The Survivors."

the movies
Louise Snider

Comic co-stars turn into losers in 'Survivors'

One look at Walter Matthau's jowls, whatever the expression, one listen to Robin Williams' blitzkrieg speech, whatever the words, and you're going to laugh, whatever the situation. These two qualities are the primary assets of "The Survivors" (R). In fact, they are the only assets, and they aren't enough to sustain a movie for one hour and 40 minutes. But that's what they must do because of Michael Ritchie's loose direction and Michael Leeson's woefully weak script.

The movie begins with a brisk sequence of scenes suggesting a biting but comic approach to contemporary social problems. Within the first 15 minutes, Williams, as Donald, a dental supplies salesman, is fired from his job by a parrot (the boss doesn't like the trauma of firing employees), threatened by a gun-wielding secretary, rudely treated at the unemployment center and threatened again, this time by a robber at a lunch counter.

MATTHAU, AS SONNY, a gas-station owner forced out of business, has similar unenvying and frustrating experiences. His interview with a sari-clad social worker as he applies for unemployment benefits is a comic highlight of the film. Afterwards, he and Donald meet at the lunch counter where they are thrown together by their resistance to the attempted robbery.

From this point on, the movie loses much of its pungency and focus as it spins off in several directions, none of which develops the original theme of the two men coping with unemployment. "The Survivors" then digresses into confrontations between the gunman (country singer Jerry Reed) and Sonny, and the gunman in pursuit of Donald, for no reason which makes any sense.

Meanwhile, Donald has become overwhelmingly paranoid. He has armed himself to the teeth and abandoned his urban life for a military-style survival-training program and condo in Vermont.

Occasional flashes of bright dialogue make this unstructured film bearable, as when Donald, trying to convince his fiancée of the need for weapons, asks her, "What are you going to do when they break down the door? Stun 'em with your good taste?"

But more often than not, Ritchie allows the manic to overrun the comic. The result is disastrous because Donald really seems mentally ill, and that's not funny.



Williams and Walter Matthau both lose their jobs and band together to survive, but the plot's more furious than funny.



Jerry Reed is an unemployed hitman looking for work who tries armed robbery.

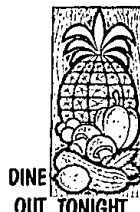
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