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AWAKENINGS

Based on neurologist Oliver Sacks' account of how he temporarily "awoke" victims of the 1920s sleeping-sickness epidemic from trance-like states with the drug L-dopa, Penny Marshall's likable disease movie ultimately trips over its own zeal to warm our hearts. The difference between Robin Williams as Dr. Sayer and Robert De Niro as Leonard Lowe, the guinea pig for early experiments with L-dopa, is the difference between mimicry and acting. Williams overdoes it, transforming a complex intellectual into a bright, lovable loon with a heart of gold. De Niro subordinates his twitching symptoms to the inner struggle of an intelligent, self-aware man, who comes to accept his condition and even the failed experiment as part of his life. De Niro comes as close as *Awakenings* gets to approximating Sacks' tough-minded, European humanism, whose faith in people is predicated on the knowledge that the world we live in is as dark and bestial as it is light and airy. The film struggles bravely with this more complex view, but Marshall can't resist simplifying Sayer into a hero fighting a hostile medical establishment, and playing down Leonard's out-of-control sexuality by giving him a love interest. Without De Niro, *Awakenings* would just be a proficient weepie with a sense of humor. With him, it may indeed be an Oscar candidate — for best actor.

(Selected theaters) (ET) Ella Taylor