

WHAT ABOUT BOB?

Directed by Frank Oz
Produced by Laura Ziskin
Distributed by Touchstone's Buena Vista Pictures
Released in 1991

When Bob Wiley finds hope in a new psychiatrist, Dr. Leo Marvin, he refuses to accept the possibility of a month sans his new-found source of wise counsel. Tracking down Dr. Marvin at his vacation retreat in Lake Winnepesaukee, Bob is gradually welcomed into the family as Leo finds himself on the outside looking in. Soon, Bob is on television with Leo, the doctor being interviewed about his new book. Leo cracks under pressure, and Bob shines. Leo arranges for Bob to be admitted to an asylum, but Bob is released and Leo's composure unravels when Bob becomes friendly with Leo's visiting sister, Lilly.

Now Bob is in control of things and Leo is the patient. Desperate to end the farce, Leo kidnaps, and straps explosives to, an eager Bob, who interprets the situation as just another intense therapy session. Bob is able to free himself and inadvertently burns down Leo's immaculate vacation home in the process. In the epilogue, Leo recovers from his psychiatric meltdown just in time to 'welcome' Bob to the family...as Lilly's new husband.

The strength of this film, probably Frank Oz's best, lay in the antagonism between Bob and Leo, its humor finding expression in Bob's wide-eyed inability to recognize Leo's displeasure. It's like *The Odd Couple* with Oscar thinking he's just the same as Felix.

Leo seems like he is a very good psychiatrist. He gets to the root of a problem quickly, and can make quick assessments. But he is arrogant, as evidenced by voicing his praise for his new book in the third person and unnecessarily reminding the grocery clerk that he would soon be on TV. It is this arrogance that sets him up for the kill. The critical decision in all his trouble with Bob was taking him on as a patient to begin with. A distressed colleague is able to unload his most troublesome client, Bob Wiley, by playing on Leo's pride, making reference to his new book and deferentially labeling him "brilliant."

Dismissing Bob as just another patient after their first session, Bob is desperate for further assistance, faking suicide and posing as an investigator to procure Dr. Marvin's location.

Later, perturbed by Bob's tenacity and finally realizing that getting rid of him was easier said than done, Leo could have maintained his composure, but arrogance prevented him from embracing the idea of Bob appearing on "Good Morning America," an episode to stand as the impetus for Leo's descent into imbecility. What is not clear is whether Dr. Marvin would have been successful on camera even if Bob wasn't with him. Leo could have made the best of the situation and preserved his professional reputation while, unseen, his private life was soured by the interloper Bob. At this point of the story his frustration with Bob is easily understood, but the weight of blame shifts as Leo commits Bob to an asylum.

The kids, Anna and Sigmund, keep their father at arm's length for good reason, but he did have every right to buy the house. The Guttman's channel their resentment over losing the

sale right back at Dr. Marvin; they know Bob irritates him, so they twice encourage Bob—first, conveying him to the house, and then, offering a place to stay so he can continue to hound the panicking psychiatrist.

Naturally, Bob would be well-received by the family, the first arbiters in this awkward doctor-patient relationship. Bob is funny, he saves Leo from choking, he gives Anna someone with whom to share her anxieties, and brings moribund Ziggy out of his all-too-youthful flirtation with depression. He complements Faye's beauty and her cooking. But we're never sure if Bob is really ignorant of the impact he is having. As he remarks in passing as we approach the film's climax, he is becoming the daddy, superseding Leo, who is desperate to reclaim his rightful place. But he can't convince Faye, despite passionate entreaties. When he "brushes" his teeth with his finger (his new toothbrush ceded to Bob), he begs her to reassess the situation they find themselves in, but to no avail; when he returns home without Bob later in the film, Faye hauntingly cries, "What about Bob?!"

The most important confrontation between the couple comes after the ingratiating Bob has been impulsively pushed in the lake by Leo. As Bob scrubs away in the outdoor shower, Leo asks Faye not to invite Bob to dinner. He is passionate, but previously he'd been very cool about the family's new friend. When Bob entered his house, uninvited, to retrieve Gill, Leo, reaching for the fish, unseen by the others, bristled at this latest violation of privacy and psychiatric protocol, this coming on the heels of Leo's insightful take on Bob's persistent anxieties. When Bob showed up at his house, Leo calmly took Bob on a stroll, advising him to "take a vacation from [his] problems." He veiled his anger, having decided that by staying calm he could better dispense the advice that would get Bob out of his hair.

Leo says that he doesn't get angry. Until Bob invaded his life, he was able to bury the anger so no one could see. Thus, the analyst inadvertently receives treatment from the client.

So, here he is, devastated that his family will not heed him and shun Bob. Faye refuses to listen, saying, self-righteously, "Right is right." We see Bob, then, reacting to this exchange with restrained delight. We don't know if he is excited that Leo's moodiness was overcome or he recognizes Leo's intransigence for the serious reluctance and disapproval it is...and he's more than happy to stick it to him. As Bob relates to Anna at an earlier juncture in the film, if he does not receive a positive response from a person, he views that person as a telephone, temporarily disconnected. Thus, in his mind, with time, all people can be won over. It is not choice, but circumstance that prevents him from interrelating.

Bob looks at all of Leo's increasing hostility as unorthodox treatment that will prove as successful as Leo's previous efforts. He really is, as Bob predicts at the film's beginning, the first person who can help him. And since Leo gave his 'prescription' to "take a vacation" while he, himself, was on vacation, Bob may figure that Leo is willing to go on treating him there in New Hampshire, and that such radical methodology may be necessary to restore Bob to full mental health. And when he's not being treated, he will hang around just for fellowship.

He is so convinced of Leo's brilliance that only death could convince him otherwise for only then would therapy be of no consequence. Leo may be right, that Bob will never leave him alone, but this is no justification for murder. A less immoral recourse would be to frame Bob for an elaborate crime, appropriating the prison walls as a suitable buffer. Again, Leo's anger, finally unleashed, is appreciable, if not understandable. Bob promised to get his bus ticket to go

back to New York and to wait in the coffee shop. Though the Guttmanns had other plans, Bob could have said, "No, I made a vow and I intend to keep it—I respect him a lot more than your fruitless grudge." Then, on the TV show, Bob, unthinking, assuming, appropriated Leo's family as his own and took Leo's seat next to the interviewer.

But this is heart warming: Book-ending the explosion, Leo is embraced by his family, for, despite his numerous failings, he is their father and husband. He came before Bob, and he will outlast him, too.

At least, that's all Leo can hope for anymore.