

THE MAN BEHIND AA

Bill W. delivers a personal but hazy history of the 12 steps

BILL W.: Directed by Dan Carracino and Kevin Hanlon. Written by Carracino, Hanlon and Patrick Gambuti Jr. Cinematography, Ryo Murakami. Original music, Gil Talmi. Page 124 Productions, 2012. Not rated. 124 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

If you're hoping for a full, deep understanding of the founding and success of Alcoholics Anonymous, *Bill W.* probably won't be the film you'd like it to be. A personal, occasionally patchy documentary, *Bill W.* sticks close to its subject: Bill Wilson, one of the founders of AA.

Wilson was an ordinary, flawed, complicated fellow — as much as a man can be ordinary and be central in the creation of a now-worldwide organization, which spawned dozens of related groups. Dan Carracino and Kevin Hanlon's documentary is a traditional, largely linear take on Wilson's life, full of re-enactments, shadowy interviews (respecting the anonymous aspect of AA) and voiceovers. Wilson wrestled with tragedy early, when his first love died; he married young, had a variety of jobs and made some money for financial types back in New York.

And he drank. But there's no real sense of Wilson as a drinker in *Bill W.* The co-directors provide a scene in which young Bill takes his first drink, but after that, we hear the man tell us what a drunk he was — his wry, self-deprecating speeches have a definite old-fashioned charm — but there's no context. This is true in different ways later in the film. When Wilson and his wife, Lois, are working at establishing AA, it's unclear — until members begin to offer assistance — how they could afford ordinary living expenses. And when the story reaches Wilson's affair with the much-

younger Helen Wynn, it's vague about how serious their connection was.

Bill W. touches briefly on key moments in Wilson's — and AA's — existence, from his hospital stays to his encounter with the Oxford Group, a Christian organization through which Wilson met Dr. Bob, AA's cofounder. What most interests the directors is the conflict between the man and the myth — the impossibility of being AA's founder and being a member of AA. Wilson could never be anonymous to the people who felt he'd saved their lives. When he wanted to quit, to live a normal life, he was dragged back; people needed him too much to give him what he needed.

The writing of the AA book proves a surprising interesting subject, as edited pages fade in and out on the screen, disagreements evident in the different shades of ink, strikeouts and changes. But I kept wondering what led Wilson to define his 12 steps just the way he did. The film tells a story about Wilson writing them down, but it can't quite express what they meant to him or clearly describe how



he wove different ideas about alcoholism into this often (but not always) effective program. The importance of AA is clear in the testimonies of men and women who became sober through its guidance, but the parallel tales of Wilson's life and the organization's growth seem like they're missing pieces — or as if, in trying to get to everything, Carracino and Hanlon were limited to giving parts of the story only cursory attention. The full picture is there, but you have to squint just a little, making connections and filling in the gray patches as best you can. ■

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			12:45 2:45	12:45 2:45	CHASING ICE			
	5:15 7:30 9:30	5:10 7:15 9:15	5:10 7:15 9:15	5:10 7:15 9:15	5:10 7:15 9:15	5:10 7:15 9:15	5:10 7:15 9:15	5:10 7:30 9:30
	ANNA KARENINA 6:00 ENDS TONIGHT!	6:00	3:30 6:00	3:30 6:00	BILL W. 6:00 8:20			6:00 8:20
	HOLY MOTORS 8:45 ENDS TONIGHT!	BIG EASY EXPRESS 1:30 8:30			NEXT: RUST AND BONE THE LONELIEST PLANET HYDE PARK ON HUDSON			THE COMEDY 8:30 ONE NIGHT ONLY!
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