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Thursday, Apr. 23, 2009

The Soloist: Elegy for Cello and Newspaper

By Mary Pols

Director Joe Wright's *The Soloist* is a deeply empathetic exploration of mental illness and a winning showcase for the talents of its two stars, Robert Downey Jr. and Jamie Foxx. Its third great component is its relationship to daily newspapers — it's either the ultimate advertising campaign for a dying industry or the perfect funeral wreath.

It's based on the real story of Los Angeles *Times* columnist Steve Lopez's (Downey) relationship with a homeless schizophrenic named Nathaniel Anthony Ayers (Foxx), whom he met in a downtown LA park in 2005. Ayers was playing a violin during that first encounter, apparently quite well, despite it having only two strings. He had been a Juilliard student in the 1970s, until mental illness cost him just about everything but his love for music. That year, Lopez wrote nearly a dozen columns detailing his attempts to understand and assist Ayers and, in 2008, published a book about their friendship. ([See pictures of a band of hobos.](#))

If this sounds like *Marley and Me*-style pleasantly heartwarming pabulum to you, think twice. There's real sentiment here, but the sentimental is blessedly missing. The script by Susannah Grant (*Erin Brockovich*) is smart, witty and lean. Wright's principal indulgences are visual, as in [his 2007 film *Atonement*](#). He turns a neighborhood bar where a depressed Lopez pounds shots into something that glows like the inside of a vein, and makes Skid Row into a Hieronymus Bosch painting with grocery carts (using some of LA's estimated 60,000 homeless as extras).

Without direct experience in the awful second language of mental illness, one cannot say whether the translation is in fact, accurate, but Wright's visual representations of schizophrenia are searing. Teenage Ayers watches a burning car drive by and we assume it is the symptom of a rough neighborhood, but as it glides past with eerie smoothness, it is revealed to be hallucination.

There is beauty in these visions as well. Ayers favors playing in a tunnel under a freeway, where he can hear "the pigeons clapping." As delivered by Foxx in mumbled tones, this is garbled poetry, halfway to making sense. Later, when you've almost forgotten that, Wright pulls the camera up to helicopter level, over the loops and cement curlicues of the freeway. Up from its core rise two pigeons, which indeed, seem to be clapping.

There are extraneous scenes — namely Lopez's wrestling with a backyard raccoon problem — and an obviously fabricated character, Mary, who is simultaneously Lopez's editor, his ex-wife *and* his romantic

interest. Thankfully, she's played by Catherine Keener, so the implausibility almost doesn't matter. Downey approaches Lopez as a sort of journalistic *Michael Clayton*, swapping George Clooney's suits for sweatshirts, and he's in perfect control of this bruised, cynical but good-hearted character. Though there are moments when Foxx's Ayers veers toward the puppyish, overall, it's a touching performance, and the best thing he's done since *Ray*. ([Read a profile of Jamie Foxx.](#))

The Soloist makes a compelling case for two things in increasingly short supply in the newspaper world today: veterans like Lopez, who are awarded the gift of time to find his stories, and readers who respond to them. Just after Lopez writes a column explaining that the cello is Ayers's true love, but he doesn't have one, Wright cuts to a little old lady reading the paper with her arthritic hands, a cello in the background. The next morning, we get a driver's seat view of that cello, winding its way through the newsroom in a mail cart to be deposited in front of Lopez with a note that would do Paddington Bear justice, bequeathing it to Ayers. Downey's eyebrows arch in pleased surprise. He's earned his paycheck and a psychic reward. There are very few other professions that can claim to give you that.

But what elevates *The Soloist* into the ranks of the best newspaper movies is its honesty. The columnist wants that column, and maybe a follow up, and yes, making a sorry life less sad is good, but he never wanted to become a defacto one-man Social Services Agency. He can't cure Ayers and no one is trying to gloss over that reality here (except for one scene at the end that contradicts what we've come to know about Ayers' ability to cope with crowds). All Lopez can do is try to help, and the movie gives testimony to the way newspapers can comfort the afflicted. ([See the top 10 newspaper movies.](#))

Like this month's *other* newspaper movie, *State of Play*, *The Soloist* has been updated from a few years past to what feels like this morning. An editor looks out a window, despondent, dulled with pain, as off-camera, another one of her employees is advised to take a buyout. As Lopez reports from his desk, a freshly laid-off journalist trails a security guard out of the building. Yet *The Soloist* still makes you want to run out and be a newspaper columnist. Crazy? Maybe a little. Certainly most industry observers would gently suggest you choose a more obtainable, sensible goal and, given the economy, it's unlikely *The Soloist* will cause a run on journalism schools the way *All the President's Men* did in 1976. But perhaps at the least, appreciative audiences will be encouraged to respond to those irritating subscription solicitations before there's nothing left to subscribe to. *The Soloist's* homage to the fading news business might be maudlin, but in the spirit of the movie's honesty, I confess I'd be about as likely to declare my own mother's funeral too sentimental.

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