

The Soloist: Strife and despair in the City of Angels

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21 May 2009

Directed by Joe Wright, screenplay by Susannah Grant, based on the book by Steve Lopez

The Soloist, directed by Joe Wright, chronicles the real-life encounters of Steve Lopez, columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, and Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, Jr., a former cello-playing prodigy whose musical ambitions were derailed by a severe case of schizophrenia, leaving him homeless on the streets of downtown Los Angeles.

The movie opens with Lopez taking a bike ride through the Hollywood Hills. Lopez (portrayed by Robert Downey, Jr.), hits a rough patch in the road and is thrown over the bicycle's handlebars head first, injuring the right side of his face and breaking a finger.

Lopez returns to work after the accident amid talk of the paper's declining readership and job cuts for reporting staff. His ex-wife, a *Times* editor, laments that "when the stock price tanks, we lose reporters."

There are several scenes portraying the layoffs of *Times* employees, one of which shows a sight all too common in corporate America: a worker carrying away her belongings in a box while being escorted off the premises by armed security guards.

Reflecting on the *Times*' economic difficulties, another staff member bemoans the decline of interest in the paper, particularly among the younger generation. In a later scene, Lopez has his blood drawn by a young nurse who tells him that her father really enjoys his column. When Lopez asks her if she likes it too, she replies that she's never read the paper.

After Lopez cycles through several ideas for articles, aware that his job might depend on finding the right one, he hears Ayers playing a broken, two-stringed violin in a city square underneath a statue of Beethoven. Lopez takes an immediate interest in Ayers, and subsequently writes a series of columns about him.

We learn that Ayers has been obsessed with playing the cello since he was very young, spending long hours practicing the instrument and drawing four lines on his right forearm to practice fingering when it was too late at night to play it. Ayers also attended the Juilliard School in New York City, a performing arts conservatory, where—during his second year—schizophrenia began to take an aggressive hold of him.

In one jarring scene, we see Ayers in his apartment, unable to suppress the cacophony of voices inside his head which make him writhe in pain on the floor. After this experience, Ayers develops an intense fear of being inside an apartment and eventually opts to live on the streets.

Lopez's columns about the musician attract a considerable interest from *Times* readers, with one elderly woman donating a cello to Ayers. The columns also compel Los Angeles mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to pledge \$50 million to revitalize Skid Row, the infamous section of downtown Los Angeles where thousands of homeless reside.

Lopez also attempts to help Ayers personally, with mixed results. He eventually coaxes Ayers into taking an apartment in a transitional living center and also attending sessions at the LAMP center in Skid Row. He then arranges for Ayers to attend rehearsals and concerts by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and take lessons with the orchestra's principal cellist.

The scenes between Lopez and Ayers—played by Jamie Foxx—are genuine and very touching, although the movie's portrayal of Skid Row is undoubtedly the most powerful aspect of the film. We see a homeless woman recently dead from a drug overdose, her elbows and wrists masses of ragged, scarred flesh from incessant needle use. Another scene shows an aerial

view, à la *Gone with the Wind*, of rows of homeless people sleeping on cots. Drug use, disease, prostitution and hopelessness are everywhere. Los Angeles has the largest concentration of poor people of any US city, a few miles from unimaginable wealth and opulence.

We later learn what the mayor's "revitalization" plan for the area really means when the brutal beating of a homeless man by young thugs is used as a pretext by the Los Angeles Police Department to arrest hundreds of skid row residents for possession of "stolen shopping carts and milk crates."

Lopez mistakenly believes that Ayers was the initial victim and frantically searches for him. After this incident he begins to recoil from the too-close bond he has developed and also starts to feel that he might be pushing his new friend too hard and too fast. The viewer also strongly feels that things may not end well for the pair when Ayers tells Lopez that he loves him and considers him his god.

In a later scene, Ayers reacts violently to the suggestion that he suffers from schizophrenia, even going so far as threatening to kill Lopez, telling him that he will "cut him like a fish." Earlier, he reacts violently to the LA Philharmonic cellist who insinuates that the only way he can resolve his personal crisis and become a good musician again is to "find God."

Foxx inhabits Ayers brilliantly. The viewer feels sympathy for the character even while enduring the twists and turns in Ayers' chaotic behavior.

We also learn that Ayers is more drawn to Beethoven than any other composer, having memorized the opus numbers of his various pieces. The composer's Third Symphony is played to great effect throughout the film. The viewer reasonably concludes that the cellist enjoys Beethoven's music for purely aesthetic reasons. The film might have made mention of the composer's titanic struggle with his deafness and his own tumultuous personal life, with which Ayers might have felt some kinship.

Perhaps the movie's weakest element is its implicit contention that the decline of the *Times* and other US newspapers is the fault of the population, which allegedly has no time for or interest in reading. While the reasons for the newspaper industry's decline are complex, the American mass media has played a foul role in recent decades and there is no reason for the population to rally to its side.

Times, for example, recently ran Lopez's series of venomous articles blaming California students' poor academic achievement on "bad teachers," thus offering implicit support to the layoffs of some 30,000 educators and support staff across the state.

That being said, *The Soloist* is a rarity in mainstream American cinema. It provides a candid look at a section of the most desperate members of society, who, in the case of Los Angeles, reside in the movie studios' own backyards, but whose lives and conditions are rarely, if ever, treated. While this effort is commendable and necessary, one gets the feeling that the filmmakers highlighted the problem, saw its complexity and pervasiveness, and then threw their hands in the air for lack of a solution.

While each case, like Ayers's, presents its own complexities and peculiarities, the plight of such an individual is ultimately symptomatic of a social system which discards the newspaper employee as carelessly as it does the mentally ill and destitute.



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