



## *The Soloist*

**Robert Downey Jr., Jamie Foxx, and Catherine Keener star in a film written by Susannah Grant and directed by Joe Wright.**

By Josef Woodard

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For journalists and newspaper columnists, schmaltz does occur, but so does serendipity. *Los Angeles Times* writer Steve Lopez dealt with plenty of both in his fascinating, continuing saga of columns about the inspirational, schizophrenic homeless man and passionate classical musician, Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, resulting in a series of columns, the book *The Soloist*, and now a full-length feature film. In his book, Lopez handily juggles multiple themes, including the glaring disparity between the haves and the have-nots in downtown Los Angeles, the impending twilight of the newspaper industry, and the stirring power of music, even amid great adversity. As well,

Lopez addresses his own moral questions about exploiting the growing friendship at the core of this unusual journalist/subject relationship.

In director Joe (Atonement) Wright's brave but flawed film, the juggling act is less of an art. Hollywood slickness and the necessary pruning process in Susannah Grant's script get in the way of what could have been a grander and deeper film. But even so, *The Soloist* hits the screen with some unique messages, not only about its two protagonists, but concerning the strained topography of downtown L.A., with its gleaming Grand Street promenade contrasting skid row just blocks away, the *L.A. Times* building in the middle.

It all starts in the serendipity zone, with a chance encounter between Lopez and Ayers at Pershing Park. Lopez unravels the complex but foggy story of this once-promising, impoverished musician who made it to Juilliard in 1970 but was quickly unraveled by the onset of a debilitating mental illness.

While compelling in his own ruffled way, Robert Downey Jr. is strangely cynical in his portrayal of Lopez, perhaps channeling remnants of his character in *Zodiac*. Jaime Foxx is a wonder to behold, in his aptly mumbling, mercurial performance, with bursts of clarity amid the confusion and free associational ramblings.

From the all-important musical angle, *The Soloist* qualifies as a rare, multiplex-ready film celebrating the grandeur and power of classical music, especially Beethoven. Scenes in the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Ayers's temple, feature the actual Los Angeles Philharmonic, not some phony facsimile, and ironically, semi-immortalizes outgoing conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen's role as maestro, in a movie released only one week after Salonen's final concerts at the helm. Mr. Ayers would appreciate that coincidence.