Movie Review: 'Soloist' goes it alone, hits a lot of wrong notes

by Lee Grant

Steve Lopez is a gifted writer, a journalist with a rare eye for the human condition, its struggles and its bliss.

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) As a high-profile columnist, he captured life as he saw it in California's Silicon Valley for the San Jose Mercury News, then at The Philadelphia Inquirer, and currently at the Los Angeles Times.

"The Soloist," his fine book subtitled "A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music," has been turned into a not-so-fine motion picture with iron man Robert Downey Jr. playing Lopez and Jamie Foxx as the street denizen and fallen classical musician Nathaniel Ayers, on whom Lopez fashioned a series of columns.

The movie suffers from a stunted screenplay by Susannah Grant ("Erin Brockovich") that leaves out some of the book's best vignettes -- an Easter day celebration, for instance, at Lopez's home, his wife and young daughter in attendance, wary of the strange, homeless guest brought to the party.

Then there's the visit with Ayers' long-lost dad in Las Vegas, ignored cinematically in favor of a violent, physical confrontation in the apartment the reporter finagles for his subject at Lamp Community, a housing and treatment center for homeless men and women suffering from mental illness.

And what about that? How ethical is it for a journalist to break that wall of separation and get so involved in the life of someone about whom he's writing?

Grant could've used Lopez's touch -- his realistic approach to characters, less a treatise on mental illness and how society ignores this medical condition, more on an unusual friendship.

The most vibrant aspect of the film concerns Lopez's struggles at his newspaper, the downsizing all around him that's plaguing the newspaper business nationally.

As he writes columns -- pesky deadlines imminent -- there are wistful exchanges with his editor and ex-wife (captivating Catherine Keener). She's what you want in an editor -- a listener, supportive, someone who makes the pieces better.

The day he meets Foxx's Nathaniel Ayers, Lopez is on the prowl for his next column, and a good story, the panic of the blank computer screen looming. It's a better representation of a journalist than "State of Play," with its melodrama and stereotypical grubbiness of reporter Russell Crowe.

In "The Soloist," the credit for genuineness goes to Downey Jr., who played excellently a reporter at the San Francisco Chronicle in the '60s-set "Zodiac."

Downey is a terrific actor, and his Lopez is a regular guy whose work is all-consuming, living a lonely existence in a Los Angeles residence (though in the book, he's married with a young daughter).

In Ayers, Lopez at first found fodder for another column, a homeless guy strumming a two-stringed violin near the Beethoven statue in downtown L.A.'s Pershing Square. When he approaches and identifies himself, Ayers says, "I apologize for my appearance. I've had a few setbacks."

Responds the reporter, "Me, too."

Turns out, Nathaniel Ayers, a middle-aged man from Cleveland, years ago studied at New York City's prestigious The Juilliard School with such sterling alumni as cellist Yo-Yo Ma.

How did he get from there to here, living on the streets, pushing a shopping cart, playing his two-string violin in the dank Second Street tunnel that leads into a teeming and dangerous downtown?

The problem here is Foxx, the Oscar winner for impersonating Ray Charles, who finds nothing deeper in his Ayers character than occasional incoherent speech and bouts of schizophrenia.

The actor is the victim of Hollywood makeup and wardrobe, his get-up of multicolored rags identifying him as a street person. In the credits: "Dental Special Effects for Mr. Foxx."

There are scenes of the young actor Justin Martin at home (as a teenage Nathaniel) in Cleveland discovering his talent. The lone black face at Juilliard, he begins to hear voices, mental demons taking over. These depictions are tight, fascinating, how a musical brilliance was lost in the blur of mental illness.

British director Joe Wright ("Atonement") films L.A.'s Skid Row as slices of hell, which no doubt is so, but the view from Lopez's car window and his guarded neighborhood strolls are designed simply for shock. We're shocked, but not moved.

The movie steers away from Ayers' racial, sometimes anti-white demeanor, more pronounced in the book. And what about the swastikas scratched on the wall in his Lamp apartment?

There's a scene where Lopez sleeps outside in a storefront next to his column subject, fending off rats, observing the parade of junkies and hookers. Says Ayers, "Do you think about writers, Mr. Lopez, the way I think of musicians?" They should be thinking about movies that matter.

"The Soloist." Rated: PG-13. Running time: 1 hour, 52 minutes. 2.5 stars.

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