

Movie Review

The Soloist ♦ a movie about a book about hope

Reviewed by Chris Lewis

On January 12, 2007 an internationally acclaimed violinist spent 43 minutes playing his Stradivarius, standing in a busy Metro stop in Washington DC. Joshua Bell, 39 years old at the time, was taking part in some Washington Post research to observe the reactions of commuters hurrying to work past some of the finest music ever written being played, unrecognized, by one of the best musicians in the world.

The outcome of this 43-minute experiment, which can be viewed on the Internet, was widely publicized and discussed, because out of thousands who hurried past him, six stopped to listen to this man whose playing usually commands triple-digit ticket prices, and about \$32 was dropped into his open violin case.

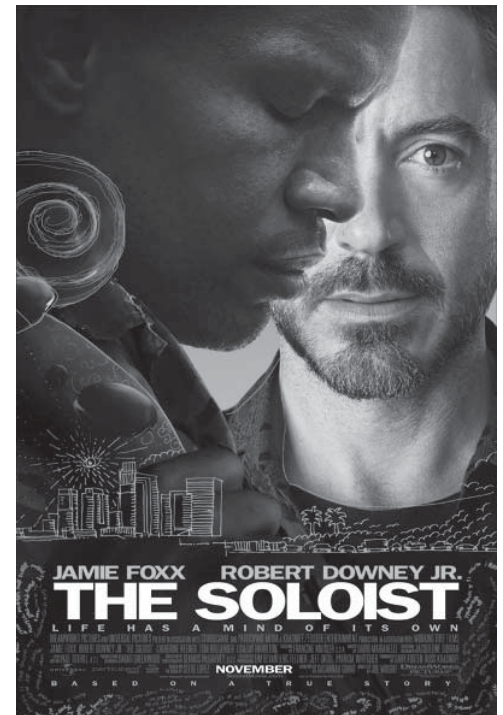
To be fair, the observation would have been better on a weekend when the threat of tardiness wouldn't have loomed for those commuters. But, it leaves no doubt that context matters. A person playing music for coins in a subway station must be homeless, or desperate, or something else that makes him not like me. Not only am I blind to his worth, but also something in me needs to put distance, quickly, between myself and him. He is different.

During the same time as the above story was being publicized, *Los Angeles Times* columnist Steve Lopez was finishing his non-fiction book, *The Soloist*, about another musical child prodigy who grew up to be immensely passionate about playing the strings, Nathaniel Ayers. Mr. Ayers' life took a very different turn from that of Joshua Bell, who began recording classical violin music at age 18 and whose star has risen higher each year.

Nathaniel Ayers has the mental illness of schizophrenia. He becomes overwhelmed by stress to the point of becoming psychotic. He had to leave Julliard, unable to function in the demanding music school, and lived with his mother, even submitting to electroconvulsive therapy which did not help. After she died in 2000, he made his way to Los Angeles in search of his father and lived on the streets, alone, coaxing music out of broken instruments for tossed change and mental relief. It is at this point that the movie (aptly named, not about a musical role so much as about the need for self-determination) begins.

Steve Lopez' book from which the movie was made has a subtitle: *The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music*. That is a good description of the context within which each man changes the other, after the reporter Lopez bothers to notice the music. The viewer soon gets drawn into Lopez' urges to "help" Ayers by rescuing him from the grind of homelessness. Indeed, the backdrop of homeless mentally ill living on LA's streets is portrayed as an alien world of strange people whose bizarre appearance and behaviors seem exaggerated by the filmmakers for effect. But it is Ayers' world, where nobody intrudes to try to change him until the reporter happens along with the possibility of something better, which each of them defines differently. That difference is what you will mull over for weeks after watching this film. As Lopez states on p. 268 in his book, "this man I hoped to save has done as much for me as I have for him."

Our esteemed MCDES colleague, Ted Bowman, wrote a booklet titled



Loss of Dreams: A Special Kind of Grief, which has been read by thousands of people looking for a label for what they are experiencing. He recognized the significance of losing a dream, which is exactly what both men in *The Soloist* story struggle with.

Watching this grief work evolve, as portrayed so achingly by the two fine actors, Jamie Foxx and Robert Downey, Jr., is not easy but you will be at peace when the curtain falls.

Editor's Note: For readers wanting a succinct resource for learning more about people who are homeless and mentally ill, this is a great website: www.takepart.com/thesoloist/

"Today I search for a new home and a bed not made of cold cement. I'm waiting for a new day, a warm smile, and a new dream."

- Greg Horam, former member of the Board of Directors for the Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless