

Basking in the Glow of 'The Soloist'

Skid Row Community Had a Supporting Role in
Film

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May 26, 2009

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - Downtown is no stranger to Hollywood film shoots: Dozens take place on any given day, in all corners of the community.

While most of those films, television shows or commercials are about something else or pretend to be somewhere else, that is not the case in *The Soloist*, the recently opened film inspired by Los Angeles Times columnist Steve Lopez's book about his relationship with Nathaniel Anthony Ayers, a homeless, mentally ill man and talented musician.

The film, in which Robert Downey Jr. plays Lopez and Jamie Foxx portrays Ayers, is ostensibly about how a newspaperman's quest for a promising story — at one point sleeping on the street with Ayers in Skid Row — evolves into a crucial friendship for both men.

But for the Skid Row community, the movie marks the culmination of hundreds of other friendships that were made between the crew and a cadre of area residents who helped shape director Joe Wright's understanding of the world Ayers inhabits.

Wright and his crew relied on many service agencies in Skid Row to learn the area's history and politics, but no group had a more visible role in the film than Lamp Community, the permanent supportive housing provider where Ayers ultimately moved into an apartment. A group of the organization's members comprised what Wright called the "Lamp Chorus," which is seen when Lopez and Ayers visit a Lamp facility that was recreated for the film.

Casey Horan, Lamp's executive director, said the production left a deep imprint in the community, but she admits to having been skeptical at first.

"No one was more skeptical than Lamp Community, because we recognized from the get-go that if they used our name and we partnered with them really in a relatively small capacity, that it's their film and we'd have no control," Horan said.

More concerning was the possibility that the film would mischaracterize mental health and homeless issues, and jeopardize Lamp's credibility, she said.



(l to r) Casey Horan of Lamp Community, Teri "Detroit" Hughes and Nathaniel Ayers. Hughes was one of the Skid Row residents who appeared in *The Soloist*, about Ayers' relationship with L.A. Times columnist Steve Lopez. *Photo by Gary Leonard.*

“The men and women who live on the streets are still really depicted in a way that is demeaning and punitive, as if it’s a lifestyle, and they’re seen as crack-addicted, treatment-resistant people, which is completely erroneous,” Horan said. “But it was the relationships they made months before they started shooting that allowed them to come in here, and allowed them to get it.”

The Chorus

The members of the Lamp Chorus were not quite actors in the film, but they were more than extras. The directing crew and acting coaches led the group through two days of improvisation classes.

“The stories and the performances that came out of that were so extraordinary,” said Thomas Napper, second unit director on the film. “At the end of the second day, everyone sat in a circle and told their life story.... I think really it was just such an eye opener and we felt as filmmakers, we had to respond for that.”

They did respond: While Skid Row residents, and Skid Row itself, plays a side role in the film, Napper is wrapping up a documentary about the community called The Chorus.

Individuals with minor roles in The Soloist take center stage in Napper’s film, which doesn’t yet have a release date, though he plans to premiere it Downtown.

Both films represented a sense of opportunity for participants, who were paid, but Horan said the larger value was in the interaction between the crew and the community.

“These individuals have been so isolated and dismissed,” Horan said. “In this case they were really included and valued.”

One of those involved was Teri “Detroit” Hughes, a recovering drug addict who is still homeless. She appeared multiple times in the film, and credits the experience with catapulting her out of depression and into a new life direction.

“This has been the best thing in life that could have ever happened to me, not just the movie, but all the people in it,” said Hughes, who remains in contact with Wright, Napper and other production staff.

Horan is hesitant to speculate about whether the national exposure of Skid Row and issues surrounding homelessness and mental illness will lead to change in the neighborhood. But that would be optimal, she said.

Some housing and homeless service agencies have approached film studios Dreamworks and Paramount to ask if they could screen the film in conjunction with fundraisers, but the producers were hesitant to green light such requests before talking to Lamp, Horan said.

She is enthusiastic about the possibilities.

“That’s what the best case scenario is,” she said, “that people will see this film, talk about it and it will impact individuals who work in the field as well as the general public and create dialogue, and people maybe will focus on those strategies that are proven to end chronic homelessness.”