

VANITY FAIR

Emotional Rescue: Inspirational Notes from a Homeless Musical Prodigy

Graham Fuller

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Robert Downey Jr. is hardly known for exercising his protective instincts on-screen, so it will be fascinating to watch him portray a grounded guardian angel to an especially spiky and unpredictable Jamie Foxx in *The Soloist*.

Downey plays the Los Angeles Times columnist Steve Lopez, who in 2005 chanced upon Nathaniel Ayers (Foxx), a homeless man in his early 50s performing on a scarred two-string violin near the Beethoven statue in Los Angeles' Pershing Square.

Pursuing an acquaintance, Lopez learned that Ayers had enrolled at Julliard on a full scholarship in 1970, but dropped out because of a breakdown; he is a paranoid schizophrenic.

Lopez's columns and recent book about his "unlikely friendship" with Ayers tracks his attempts to rehabilitate him and to draw City Hall's attention to the plight of people at the mercy of an "inept" mental health system.

The film will make much of Ayers's discovery—as cinematic as that of pianist David Helfgott in *Shine*—and the transformative power of what British director Joe Wright describes as the men's "plutonic love story."

But it doesn't gloss over, apparently, the grimness of Ayers's day-to-day reality on skid row. It's as if Wright, whose last two films were *Pride & Prejudice* and *Atonement*, had surfeited on Keira Knightley and country houses.

For the *Soloist*, he worked with Lamp Community, which helps skid row's homeless and mentally ill, "to build a chorus of characters from people who really live that life in that world, and to create an environment they'd be able to express themselves in. Making the film with them was the point. It was a really, really beautiful experience—and I'm not being American and sentimental when I say that."