

## **The Soloist**

**Directed by Joe Wright**

**Screenplay by Susannah Grant  
(based on columns by Steve Lopez)**

**Principal Actors: Robert Downey, Jr. and Jamie Foxx**



*Always on the prowl for human interest stories, reporter "Steve Lopez" (played by Robert Downey, Jr.) meets a homeless man named "Nathaniel Ayers" (played by Jamie Foxx). Although the relationship begins on a professional level, Steve finds himself inexorably drawn into the grim details of Nathaniel's troubled life.*

*Jamie Foxx conveys a wide range of emotions as Nathaniel, but good as he is, the point-of-view in *The Soloist* is always Steve's, and this may well be the deepest, most sincere performance Robert Downey, Jr. has ever given. "Uplift" is elusive in this painful film (loosely based on columns written by a real reporter), but Susannah Grant's screenplay demonstrates that the only thing worse than struggling and suffering is giving up and giving in.*

## **Pen's Points: \* \* \* \* \***

In February 1899, decades before she became the first American woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize, Jane Addams wrote a heartfelt essay for *The Atlantic* magazine called "The Subtle Problems with Charity."

"Many of the difficulties in philanthropy come from an unconscious division of the world into the philanthropists and those to be helped," Addams begins. "Of the various struggles which a decade of residence in [the Hull-House] settlement implies, none have made a more definite impression on my mind than the incredibly painful difficulties which involve both giver and recipient when one person asks charitable aid of another."

There is no “peace of mind,” she concludes, after many examples of fractious misunderstandings, only “pangs and misgivings.” So why even try? Because the only thing worse than doing the wrong thing is doing nothing.

Audience members, be warned: If you’re looking for “uplift” from the new film *The Soloist*, then stay away. After struggling and suffering, characters filled with “pangs and misgivings” find themselves facing more struggling and more suffering. So why keep trying when there is no redemption? The only thing worse than struggling and suffering is giving up and giving in.

*The Soloist* begins when a reporter named “Steve Lopez” (Robert Downey, Jr.) meets a homeless man named “Nathaniel Ayers” (Jamie Foxx). Steve writes a column, so he’s always on the prowl for human interest stories, and something about Nathaniel piques his curiosity. He does some research and submits his copy, and soon one “Nathaniel column” leads to another, drawing Steve inexorably into the grim details of Nathaniel’s troubled life.

Steve’s “Nathaniel columns” bring him awards and accolades, and but at some point he inadvertently crosses a professional boundary between reporter and source. He’s transformed Nathaniel into a local media personality, so what next? Is he now Nathaniel’s “keeper,” his friend, what?

Jamie Foxx conveys a wide range of emotions as Nathaniel. He never condescends, but he also never lets us forget that this man is deeply disturbed. Nathaniel will never be capable of conventional relationships, but his ability to love others begins to manifest itself when he starts allowing others to love him, first Steve and then his sister Jennifer (played by Lisagay Hamilton). Nevertheless, their love for him will always be mixed with fear, fear of his emotional storms and physical explosions, fear of his vulnerability and fragile hold on activities of daily living that most of us take for granted.

Good as Foxx is, the point-of-view in *The Soloist* is always Steve’s, and Robert Downey, Jr. is terrific. Downey brings all of his own anguish to Steve, wearing his life experiences as the glasses through which he looks out at Nathaniel’s world. We all know Downey’s back story, his years of addiction and imprisonment, and when he spends the night with Nathaniel on Skid Row, his empathy is palpable. This may well be the deepest, most sincere performance he’s ever given.

In numerous interviews, screenwriter Susannah Grant says she started interviewing both Steve and Nathaniel while Steve was writing his book (*The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music*). In other words, the book and the screenplay developed in parallel, so the screenplay is not “based on” the book in any direct sense. As an accomplished screenwriter (best known for her Oscar-nominated *Erin Brockovich* screenplay), Grant always focuses on telling her story even when the characters she creates to fit it diverge from the facts at hand.



Jamie Foxx (left) with Robert Downey, Jr.



Screenwriter Susannah Grant.

The Steve Lopez character that results is the polar opposite of the cinematic Erin Brockovich (also a real person transformed into a Hollywood heroine). The Brockovich character was a crusader, convinced of her mission and willing to do whatever was required to achieve it. The Lopez character is anguished and filled with foreboding; even knowing he has the best of intentions, Steve is never sure of how to use the power he has acquired over Nathaniel's life.

The relationships Grant develops for this Lopez "character" amplify his uncertainty. This is not a documentary, so the actual facts of Lopez's life are irrelevant. Is "the real Steve Lopez" happily married? Is he a great father who has solid relationships with all his kids? Don't know. Don't care. This film is about the emotional changes that occur when a man of status and privilege bonds with a man with neither, and Grant has found powerful ways to convey his transformation.

Despite huge hype and multiple Oscar nominations, I was personally underwhelmed by both of director Joe Wright's prior films, *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) and *Atonement* (2007), so I did not have high hopes when I walked into the theater to see *The Soloist*. But Wright stays in the background this time and serves the story. Perhaps he was humbled, like the real Steve Lopez evidently was, by the responsibility entailed in trying to tell it. Based on all the manipulative previews I saw in advance, I did not expect to be so moved by this film, but I was, and it has stayed with me for days.

© Jan Lisa Huttner (May 7, 2009) Special for the Fund for Women Artists ([www.WomenArts.org](http://www.WomenArts.org))

### Excerpts from Debra Eckerling's online chat with Susannah Grant

"Were there any similarities between writing *Erin Brockovich* and *The Soloist*? Only in that you are doing the incredibly presumptuous thing of putting words in the mouth of somebody you know and creating a character that's supposed to be someone you know. The only way I've ever found my way around that is to divorce them from each other.

*The Soloist* Review – Special for The Fund for Women Artists

Say, there is this Steve Lopez whom I know, for whom I have tremendous respect. And then there's this other guy that I am writing. He will be informed by that respect and empathy and compassion and fondness that I have for Steve. I am not in charge of Steve Lopez the man, but I am in charge of Steve Lopez the character. And if I separate them that way, I find they come a lot closer to each other than if I try to replicate the guy I know.

If I thought I was creating the real Steve Lopez, I wouldn't be able to write a line. Because what right do I have to say what Steve would say or think or feel?"

<http://www.storylink.com/article/302>

\*\*\*\*\*

To read the Jane Addams article, visit:



<http://www.theatlantic.com/ideastour/philanthropy/addams-full.mhtml>

To learn more about the Lamp Community (which plays a prominent role in the film), visit:

<http://lampcommunity.org>

To learn more about services for the homeless In YOUR Community, visit:

<http://www.participantmedia.com>

	<p>Lifelong movie buff Jan Lisa Huttner is the managing editor of <i>FILMS FOR TWO: The Online Guide for Busy Couples</i> (a website devoted to promoting films of interest to both male &amp; female audience members). She writes monthly columns for Chicago's <i>JUF News</i>, as well as freelance articles for numerous print publications &amp; websites. Her article on the 2004 Oscars for <i>Women's eNews</i> received the award for "Best News Writing – Web" from the National Federation of Press Women in September, 2005.</p>	
---	---	---

To surf Jan's database (with dozens of films written &/or directed by women), visit:

[www.TheHotPinkPen.com](http://www.TheHotPinkPen.com)

*The Soloist* Photo Credits: Francois Duhamel.  
Courtesy of DreamWorks/MCT. All Rights Reserved.

Susannah Grant at LA Premiere of *The Soloist* (April 20, 2009).  
Photo credit: Michael Germana (Globe Photos/NewsCom).