

The journalist is the message

Films like 'The Soloist' tell compelling main narratives - and revealing back stories about the news industry

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"The Soloist," opening April 24, tells the story of Los Angeles Times columnist Steve Lopez's relationship to Nathaniel Ayers, a homeless, schizophrenic classical musician.

It also, in a smaller way, tells the story of a newspaper industry in transition.

"As I watched the movie, the newspaper element of it is bittersweet for me," Lopez said by telephone from Los Angeles. "I find (the film) to be both a celebration and a lament."

As the picture shows newspapers rolling off presses, it instantly spans eras, linking itself to classic films such as "The Front Page" and "All the President's Men." But as the on-screen Lopez, played by Robert Downey Jr., discusses the buyout retirements of colleagues, "The Soloist" places itself squarely in the present, when newspaper companies are adjusting to economic and technology shifts in the industry.

"If you're (making) a film about journalism, you have to incorporate what's happening today," said Joe Wright, director of "The Soloist," during a recent visit to San Francisco.

Wright shot the film partly at the Times building in downtown L.A., an experience that "was exciting," he said, as well as informative. "Spending time and walking around there, there are floors of that building that are being vacated. You can't ignore it, really - it's what life is offering us as filmmakers."

At the same time, the film's focus on Lopez's efforts to help Ayers (played by Jamie Foxx) and call attention to shameful conditions in L.A.'s Skid Row "shows what we can do" as journalists, Lopez said.

"I think it's a celebration of news operations that have the resources to stick with a story," Lopez said. "I have been writing about (Ayers) for four years, the Times has held public forums ... and I have been able to put their feet to the fire at City Hall and elsewhere because I work for a big news operation that thinks this is an important part of our role in a democratic society."

Often assertive and outspoken, print journalists make natural movie protagonists, and they

continue to serve as engines for plots in big Hollywood films, even as newspaper companies are rethinking business models. Hitting theaters Friday is "State of Play," in which Russell Crowe plays a reporter investigating the death of a young woman linked to a politician played by Ben Affleck. Updated from a 2003 British miniseries, "State of Play" reflects the newspaper industry's current multimedia bent in pairing Crowe's old-school reporter with a blogger played by Rachel McAdams.

"The newspaper reporter is the perfect movie character because he/she is always asking questions that the audience might have," Joe Saltzman, a University of Southern California journalism professor and director of its Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture project, wrote in an e-mail interview.

"They offer instant exposition. They are familiar enough to audiences (that) when they see a newspaper reporter, they know immediately that this is a person who is curious, who will ask questions, (and) who will do anything to get the story – the beginning, middle and the end – no matter what."

It helps that real-life journalists, often as irreverent, determined and as ruffled as their on-screen counterparts, meet screenwriters' imaginations halfway.

"I know editors not far off the mark from the Alan Arkin character" in "Marley & Me," said John Grogan, former Philadelphia Inquirer columnist and author of the best-selling memoir on which the hit film, now on DVD, is based. Though the on-screen Grogan (Owen Wilson) was made less ambitious than his real-life counterpart to assist the story arc, Arkin's gruffness and other aspects of the film's at-work scenes seemed ripped from real-life newsrooms, Grogan said by phone from Philadelphia.

But the same qualities that make newspaper men and women attractive as film characters can translate to aggressiveness when movies portray them as traveling in packs with other journalists, invading subjects' personal space with microphones and tape recorders.

"In the 1930s and 1940s, practically every popular actor eventually portrayed a journalist," Saltzman said. "By the 1980s, anonymous reporters were chasing popular actors. The audience, as always, identifies with the popular actor. ... It isn't Clark Gable or Barbara Stanwyck chasing after a story. It is now overzealous media news hounds chasing Bruce Willis or Julia Roberts."

The tide might be turning back in journalists' favor, though, at least in the case of print journalists. Recent films have taken more thoughtful approaches to newspaper-related stories, using well-known actors to play journalist characters of depth and intelligence.

"Marley & Me" offers a well-rounded portrait of a newspaper couple (Jennifer Aniston plays Grogan's reporter wife, Jenny) who have kids, an unruly Labrador retriever and problems relatable to anyone with a family. And the heart of "The Soloist" lies in Lopez's desire to help his extraordinary new friend, even if it means fighting his journalistic impulse to remain at an emotional remove from interview subjects.

"Here's a story where I did something a little different than I did before, and it connected (with readers) in ways that nothing ever has," Lopez said. "And I think there's a lesson in that, that people sometimes don't want us to keep that distance – they want us to share the emotional journey."

As the newspaper business shifts toward digital platforms such as mobile and e-mail news

alerts, film scenes of kids tossing newspapers from bicycles onto lawns will seem especially Norman Rockwell-esque. But whether "journalism (is delivered) in the newspaper or electronically or whatever," Grogan said, the values and characters behind the journalism will continue to resonate with movie audiences.

"You can't have a government without having some sort of independent watchdog monitoring them, and it will always be a role worth celebrating on film," Grogan said. "At its best, it's such a noble role, and at its worst, it's so tacky."

In other words, compelling either way.

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