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The Big Picture

PATRICK GOLDSTEIN ON THE COLLISION OF ENTERTAINMENT, MEDIA AND POP CULTURE

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Journalists in movies: Why does Hollywood still love 'em?

April 20, 2009 | 5:26 pm

As you may have heard, these are hard times for the journalism business. Newspapers are biting the dust left and right. My own paper's ownership has filed for bankruptcy. Ditto for the Minneapolis Star Tribune, the Chicago Sun-Times and other media groups. Even the New York Times is battering down the hatches. When I visited the Dodger Stadium press box yesterday, a lofty perch once full to the brim with sportswriters, the joint looked like a bar on the day after St. Patrick's Day. According to the latest predictions, newspaper ad revenue could fall as much as [30% in the first quarter of 2009](#).

So why does Hollywood keep making movies about newspapermen? The short answer is that Hollywood loves a good yarn. For much of its 100-plus-year history, whenever Hollywood has portrayed journalists, it seems to have taken the advice of the frontier newspaper editor in John Ford's "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," who said: "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

The maxim is certainly alive today, as is evidenced by two new films that revolve around journalists. This past weekend saw the arrival of "State of Play," which stars Russell Crowe as a freewheeling investigative reporter ensnared in a nasty web of Washington intrigue and conflict of interest. Due this Friday is "The Soloist," which features Robert Downey Jr. playing The Times' own Steve Lopez, a newspaper columnist who finds himself intertwined in an equally complicated relationship with a homeless musician, a relationship inspired by a series of columns Lopez wrote for our paper in 2005 (that you can read [here](#)).

Neither movie is expected to be a big hit. "State of Play," which cost close to \$65 million, opened to a mediocre \$14.1 million this weekend. "The Soloist" (originally slated for release last fall) cost less, is more realistic and might do slightly better at the box office. But both films feel a bit like curios in an era of sci-fi fantasies and superhero adventure extravaganzas.




I say that with sadness, since it was a movie -- or more accurately, a series of movies -- that made me want to be a journalist. When I was in film school, we were bombarded with all sorts of rakish visions of newspaper life, including "Nothing Sacred," "His Girl Friday," "Sweet Smell of Success" and "All the President's Men." Even in the darker, more cynical renditions of the world, like Billy Wilder's "Ace in the Hole," you knew being a reporter was where the action was.

But we now live in an era of diminished expectations, especially when it comes to newspaper dramas. In "State of Play," Crowe's investigative reporter is a walking compendium of conflicted


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interests, manipulating everyone to get to the bottom of the story which involves some good old government conspiracy. The film makes a halting attempt to introduce a contemporary storyline -- his paper has an annoying young blogger on the same story -- but instead of pursuing the tension in that relationship, the film simply turns the character (played by

Rachel McAdams) into a perky gofer for Crowe's big-shot journalist. At the film's end, the reporter presses the SEND button and the presses miraculously begin to roll -- print the legend, indeed!

"The Soloist" is more nuanced, since it's really a film about a relationship between two dysfunctional guys. One of them is pretty woeful; Jamie Foxx's musician character is a schizophrenic, hearing voices and living out of cardboard boxes on the street. But even Lopez, in Downey's hands, is something of a lost soul himself, stuck with an ex-wife as his editor, out of touch with his son and often unable to commit himself to any relationships, especially with a homeless, emotionally volatile man who often demands more unconditional love than Lopez or anyone else can offer.

So why would Hollywood keep making movies about characters like that when selling a comedy about carefree kids or a superhero saving the world is so much easier? Keep reading:

Newspaper movies get made because good drama usually involves moral dilemmas -- and when it comes to complicated choices, the daily work of a newspaper reporter is a perfect vehicle. If you look back on the history of newspaper movies, virtually all of the great films, comedy or drama, involve wrestling with difficult choices and establishing some sort of moral compass. Whether it's "His Girl Friday" or "Sweet Smell of Success" or "Broadcast News," the issue always raises its head -- how far will you go to get the story?

What newspaper movies offer is a ready-made back story, often laced with a nice dose of gravitas, that can be literally adapted to almost any genre. I actually had lunch with a screenwriter last week who wanted to pick my brain about the world of journalism, since the romantic comedy he was writing hinged on a moral choice -- and hey, who better to have wrestle with a moral choice than a journalist, since whatever beat they were covering offered plenty of opportunities for dramatic dilemmas, whether it was bending the rules in corporate boardrooms, steroids in baseball or corruption in City Hall.

Newspaper movies also offer characters that, for innumerable decades, seemed especially colorful or larger than life. "If there's any one reason why Hollywood has always had a love affair with newspaper movies, it's because the stories feel so exciting in your mind," says Sony Pictures Co-Chairman Amy Pascal. "There's a certain romance to the idea that these people -- the reporters -- choose to tell difficult stories, worry about their integrity and don't need to get paid a lot of money. Just by the nature of the kind of stories they're chasing, you've got a great arena for a morality play."

The trick, as Pascal sees it, is to find a story that captures this competitive zeal and moral uncertainty without it devolving into the saga of a obsessed reporter obsessed chasing a story to the detriment of his mental health (say, for example, the journalist Downey played in David Fincher's "Zodiac," a fascinating film that went largely unseen by audiences). The movies that work best, Pascal believes, are the ones like "His Girl Friday," a barbed romantic comedy that is really a portrait of a marriage gone awry. But again, its complications are rooted in the age-old journalistic question: How far will you go to get the scoop?

Still, Pascal runs a studio that survives on making movies for under-35 moviegoers, exactly the sort of people who don't read newspapers anymore. So why would she greenlight a film set in a world that is fast receding from the red-hot center of today's culture? Aren't journalists too out of fashion, as reflected by the grosses from recent journalism movies? "You never say never," she says. "I wouldn't say I'm not going to make a movie about journalists any more than I'd say I wouldn't make one about rock stars, just because the only rock stars on Guitar Hero are from 20 or 30 years ago. You can still tell a great story in a newspaper setting. That will never change."

What might change is the gestalt of journalism movies. "State of Play" didn't just get its facts about journalism wrong, but its tone was off too. The days of top gun investigative reporters are pretty much over. Today's journalists are less swaggering and self-involved, more nuanced and self-critical, especially in an era where every move a journalist makes is immediately analyzed and chewed over in a hundred blogs.

Hollywood hasn't quite caught up to -- or felt the pulse of -- that new style of journalism. "You can still make a movie about reporters, but you need to update that 'Stop the presses' kind of story to reflect the realities of how it's done today," says producer Michael Shamberg, who's produced such timely dramas as "Erin Brockovich" and "World Trade Center." "Let's face it. People read more news than ever before, it's just that no one has found a way to monetize getting all that information online."

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For Shamberg, who's now filming a medical thriller with Brendan Fraser and Harrison Ford, the breakthrough will come from a script that captures the journalism of 2009, which inhabits a very different world from "The Front Page." "I could see a story about uncovering a huge conspiracy," he says. "But it would unfold all online, where lurid photos pop up all over the Internet, where you have TMZ and citizen journalism and a two-hour news cycle. It would simply have to have a very different storytelling rhythm and pace, but the stakes wouldn't be all that different than they were from newspaper films of 30 or 40 years ago."

In other words, in some quiet moment when the tumult dies away, the reporter would still be wondering how far he'd be willing to go to get the story.

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