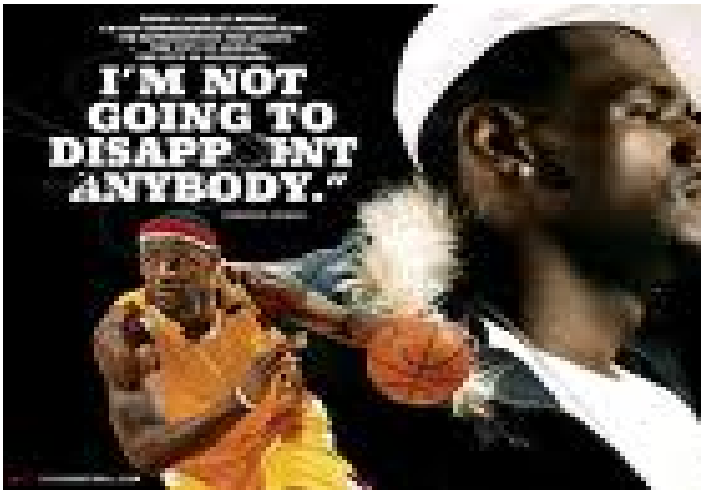
Hollywood could learn something from LeBron James.



Playing his free agency drama as if it were a movie scripted by David Mamet and directed by Oliver Stone, James is keeping the collective basketball fans of several major cities on the edge of their seats with absolutely no idea just yet how this story turns out.

With James' decision now the culmination of the ultimate reality television show on ESPN Thursday night, James has maximized the tension and angst, particularly for fans in Cleveland. Once Chris Bosh decided to sign with the Miami Heat and Dwayne Wade decided to stay right where he's at, the focus once again turned to James, just as he wanted it all along.

The only question now is whether "The Decision" ends up taking its place along side "The Drive," "The Fumble," "The Shot," and "The Move" on the shelf of greatest Cleveland sports letdowns. The latter four events are still major headaches to Cleveland fans but the pain has slowly been receding. James has an opportunity to either freshen the pain and keep it throbbing for another decade or so or give Cleveland fans an appropriate retort every time they're reminded of all their other sports failures.

Yea, we know how this is supposed to turn out. But for once, just once, hope still remains, even as the clock ticks off its final hours.

Listening to both Bosh and Wade explain their rationale for playing in Miami, you get the sense

that all of this isn't as scripted as it certainly could have been. Bosh discussed his decision with ESPN and gave mildly conflicting reasons for playing the prime of his career in South Beach.

First he essentially said that he made his decision irrespective of James because, supposedly, Miami is the best situation for him and his family. That tends to be code for it's the place that allows him to earn the most money. (Before you send the emails, I fully understand that depending on how it all works out, particularly if there is not a trade with Toronto, that Bosh may earn less salary in Miami than, say, Cleveland. But salary is always just one piece of the money pie anyway.)

Later, in discussing why he didn't want to come to Cleveland in a sign-and-trade deal with the Cavs, Bosh said he didn't want to commit without knowing where James would be playing.

Taken together and giving Bosh the benefit of the doubt, it really sounds like the three marquee free agents, Wade, Bosh and James aren't orchestrating this as much as it might seem.

It also suggests that neither Wade nor Bosh wanted to steal James' spotlight or be subservient to it. Certainly Bosh could have waited for James to commit and then made a decision, but that would have made him look like, well, James' bitch, and that's not a position a guy making $100 million wants to be. This way, I suppose Bosh looks like his own man and you can't begrudge him that.

With Wade and Bosh now out of the way, the media frenzy around James only grows more intense. In some sense, his decision (lower case "d") to reveal where he'll play on ESPN is a master stroke. For a guy building a brand you have to applaud, at least a bit, his ability to commandeer an hour of prime-time and then dictate where the sponsors' dollars will be spent.

And yet, it still seems all a bit much, if not a bit unseemly as well, particularly if he uses the platform to give Cleveland the shaft. It would be about the worst way I could imagine for James to leave, publicly humiliating the team and town that has nurtured him and provided him every resource it could possibly muster in order to allow him to develop as he has.

It's hard to overstate the embarrassment the city of Cleveland will feel starting about 1.5 seconds, if that long, after James announces he's playing for anyone other than Cleveland on Thursday night. Art Modell stuck it to the city from a platform in Baltimore with all the media in attendance. But at least he didn't stand front and center on primetime in a show of his own making to do it.

Rest assured, though, that if James does leave in this most public of ways, it will easily become at least as big a story as Modell moving the Browns to Baltimore, which up to now qualifies as the biggest story in Cleveland sports history. There's a good argument it's a bigger story than the Modell's sell out.

The immediate economic impact will be huge, but temporary. What will linger far, far longer is the psychological damage. Essentially it will mean that Cleveland, given every economic advantage in this race still couldn't convince one of its own citizens to stay at home for an extra $30 million.

And while I have great faith in Dan Gilbert and his ability to move forward and put a credible team together without James, it still does make you wonder how the team can ever attract a marquee free agent after having been turned down twice in two days, first by Bosh and then by James.

This is all a negative way of saying that I still think James is staying though my faith is a bit shaky at the moment.

The fallout from James leaving and doing so on national television seems so enormous that I simply have trouble believing he'd do that. Maybe it's just wishful thinking that James is more thoughtful than that, we'll see. But for another day or so I struggle with the notion that anyone could be that cruel to the city.

I also get the sense that James ending up in Miami makes it look like he was the follower in this process and not the leader. It's possible, certainly, that James, Bosh and Wade collectively made the decision and decided on the order in which it would be announced, but it just doesn't seem likely. Again, perhaps that's just wishful thinking.

However this all turns out, the one saving grace is that this story will finally come to a screeching halt. We can dispense with the dozen or so daily rumors from all the “insiders” and other know-nothings and get on to cursing or praising a decision actually made and then moving on to wherever the road takes the Cavs next.

And as Cleveland sports fans, we’ll know how to deal with it, like we always do. With a shot and a beer and the quiet recognition that given the same choice, we’d have the same hard time actually volunteering to winter in Cleveland, irrespective of the money.