

Film Feature: The Best Supporting Performances of 2010

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CHICAGO – It started with [the best lead performances of 2010](#) [16] yesterday and now we naturally move on to many of the stars who made those lead turns possible. For what is a great lead performance without the supporting ones that got it there? These were the MVPs of 2010 who may have allowed others to take the spotlight but also made it shine so much brighter.

The Best Supporting Actor Performances of 2010

Many of the great supporting performances of 2010 came from the same films as strong ensembles ruled the year. Whether it was the men of “The Social Network” (including runner-ups Armie Hammer and Justin Timberlake along with a man you’ll find in the “big five” further down the list), the supporting team of “Inception” (with underrated work from Joseph-Gordon Levitt and Tom Hardy), the spectacular ensemble of “True Grit” (Matt Damon, Barry Pepper, and Josh Brolin, who was also scene-stealing in “Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps”), the true stars of “The Town” (Jeremy Renner & Jon Hamm), the only reasons to see “Eat Pray Love” (Javier Bardem & Richard Jenkins), the men of “The Kids Are All Right” (Mark Ruffalo & Josh Hutcherson), or the often one-scene stealers of “Shutter Island” (Jackie Earle Haley, Ben Kingsley, Max Von Sydow), many of 2010’s best films featured not one but two great supporting actor performances.

Of course, not all of the most notable supporting actor performances came in pairs or trios. Alexander Siddig (“Cairo Time”) could arguably be mentioned in lead but the film feels more completely like the story of Patricia Clarkson’s character and so we consider him supporting. Either way, he deserves recognition.

As do Geoffrey Rush (“The King’s Speech”), Jonah Hill (“Cyrus”), Michael Fassbender (“Fish Tank”), Niels Arestrup (“A Prophet”), Paul Reubens (“Life During Wartime”), and Richard Jenkins (“Let Me In”). All good. None quite as good as these five (four “other nominees” alphabetically followed by the winner):

Vincent Cassel as Thomas Leroy in “Black Swan”



Vincent Cassel

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

Vincent Cassel has been a well-respected actor for years, stealing scenes in movies like “Elizabeth” and “Eastern Promises” while also delivering riveting performances in his own native French language in a wide variety of films. One pair of films known as “Mesrine” came out

in arthouses earlier this year and proved the actor's devastating screen presence but it's the way he balances "Black Swan" that truly stood out this year. Thomas Leroy serves so many thematic purposes in this highly-symbolic dream-like film that his character easily could have served only its cliched purposes — the representation of power, control, and sexuality in Nina's world. Cassel fulfills all the thematic roles of Thomas without losing the realism of the character. It's easy to play an over-the-top dream role but it's very difficult to straddle that line between symbol and character. Cassel does it perfectly, proving to be the perfect instigator for the talented female cast of the film. This movie may belong to its female cast but they aren't nearly as effective without the supporting work of Vincent Cassel.

Andrew Garfield as Eduardo Serra in "The Social Network"

Andrew Garfield

Photo credit: Sony

Did any actor rise to the top more like he was strapped to a rocket this year than Andrew Garfield? He will likely become a household name after he portrays Peter Parker in the reboot of "Spider-Man" but he laid the critical foundation this year that will bring dozens of A-list directors and producers to his door in the next decade. Andrew Garfield is going to be a star and not just a box office one but a critical darling as well. For proof, look at the range shown in "The Red Riding Trilogy," "Never Let Me Go," and his best work of the year, "The Social Network." If Jesse Eisenberg's performance is the fascinating brains of the film, Andrew Garfield's is the devastating heart.

John Hawkes as Teardrop Dolly in "Winter's Bone"

John Hawkes

Photo credit: Lionsgate

If we were ranking the four runner-ups, Hawkes would be a solid number two, just barely behind the top spot. His performance in “Winter’s Bone” is one of those rare turns that’s instantly riveting — like the first time you saw The Joker or Anton Chigurh. Sitting in a rundown kitchen and telling his niece that there’s no way she’ll ever find her father, Hawkes instantly imbues Teardrop with a devastating combination of danger, melancholy, and the kind of world-weariness that makes a man truly scary. When Teardrop says “*I told you no once already with my mouth,*” the statement doesn’t feel like a false threat crafted by a Hollywood writer but the creed of a dangerous man who only gives one warning. The genius of Hawkes’ performance is in how broad it could have been and how specifically Hawkes plays it. So many other actors would have played Teardrop like a villain looking for redemption. That’s easy. Hawkes realizes that this is a man not looking for anything but a way through another painful day. That’s tough.

Sam Rockwell as Kenny Waters in “Conviction”



Sam Rockwell

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

There are few actors working today that are more consistent than Sam Rockwell. After turning in the best performance of his career in “Moon” last year (and collecting a nice paycheck for “Iron Man 2”), he returned this year with one of 2010’s most memorable supporting turns. “Conviction” has some issues with melodrama overall but Rockwell grounds the piece in the realism necessary to make the emotion powerful. The movie is a total mess without him. If there was an MVP in acting, he would win. Why? Because every time the cliches of “Conviction” come to the surface, Rockwell pushes them away and makes the story real. Some critics lamented the relatively TV-movie direction of Tony Goldwyn (for mostly good reason) but that diminishes the amazing work done by Rockwell, who somehow pushes through to deliver another fully-rounded performance. He’s only getting better. It probably won’t happen this year but Oscar will eventually find Rockwell. Probably more than once.

The Best Supporting Actor Performance of 2010: Christian Bale as Dicky Eklund in “The Fighter”



Christian Bale

Photo credit: Paramount

The trendy thing to do is to point how great Christian Bale is in “American Psycho” and “The Machinist,” as if the fact that he’s finally going to not only get his first Oscar nomination but actually win the prize (count on it) makes this performance lesser than the ones that were snubbed. It’s the same bullshit argument that leads people to proclaim the greatness of musicians before “they sold out,” which usually just means other people finally realized their greatness too. Guess what? Just because you’ve known that Christian Bale is one of our best living actors for decades doesn’t mean that this isn’t one of his best performances. It is. And in the most-crowded category of the year, one in which any of the runner-ups would be deserving, he takes the prize. Once again, he literally transforms himself into Dicky Eklund, but it’s not until his character goes through a redemptive arc of his own that the brilliance of Bale’s performance really shows. It’s not just “playing junkie” but playing brother, son, and former rising star and how fully Bale commits to all of it. He’s as much of a fighter as Mickey Ward and Christian Bale makes his fight feel real.

Move on to the second page for the best supporting actress performances of 2010.

The Best Supporting Actress Performances of 2010

Would Natalie Portman’s performance in “Black Swan” be as powerful without the perfectly-tuned sinister work of Barbara Hershey? Would we talking about likely Oscar nominations for Annette Bening and Mark Ruffalo (and possibly Julianne Moore) if Mia Wasikowska wasn’t completely believable in every one of her scenes in “The Kids Are All Right”? Would Leonardo DiCaprio have made the list for the best lead turns in “Shutter Island” without Emily Mortimer, Patricia Clarkson, and Michelle Williams? And is there any way to measure Robert Duvall’s work in “Get Low” without doing so against what Sissy Spacek brings to their scenes together?

The category of Supporting Actress is often a star-maker, the one that takes young ingenues and makes them household names. As for new talent, Ari Graynor (“Holy Rollers”), Ashley Bell (“The Last Exorcism”), Chloe Moretz (“Kick-Ass”), Imogen Poots (“Solitary Man”), and Sarah Steele (“Please Give”) delivered turns that will make their next career choices that much more intriguing.

As for the rest, there were a surprising number of what could be called comeback supporting actress performances this year. After a few bad career choices, it might have been tempting to write off Bryce Dallas Howard (“Hereafter”), Juliette Lewis (“Conviction”), Milla Jovovich (“Stone”), and Olivia Williams (“The Ghost Writer”), but they all delivered performances among the best of the career in 2010.

Finally, Anika Noni Rose (“For Colored Girls”), Keira Knightley (“Never Let Me Go”), Kimberly Elise (“For Colored Girls”), Rebecca Hall (“Please Give” & “Red Riding 1974”), Rosamund Pike (“Made in Dagenham”), and Vanessa Redgrave (“Letters to Juliet”) all deserve mention but couldn’t break into the top five.

Special Runner-Up: Having done features like this for years now, there’s almost always a clear-cut top five but this year produced a special #6 nominee, a runner-up better than the other runner-ups: Marion Cotillard in “Inception.” An actress who seems to give at least one stunning performance a year added another gem to her resume as the beating, terrifying heart of the most intellectual blockbuster of the year. Those who claimed that Nolan’s masterpiece was too cold weren’t paying attention to the heat coming off Cotillard.

Melissa Leo as Alice in “The Fighter”



Melissa Leo

Photo credit: Paramount

Melissa Leo’s 2010 may be the most notable overall for one actress simply due to the diversity of her performances. She popped up in “Don McKay,” “Welcome to the Rileys,” “Conviction,” and “The Fighter” and was almost unrecognizable from film to film. She’s one of those rare actresses who disappears into her roles. We no longer see Melissa Leo. We see a mother caught in a web of denial about her junkie son and doing whatever she can to keep her family unit intact while making sure BOTH her children find success. Alice’s behavior in “The Fighter” may be so frustrating that it could cause people to yell at the screen (a critic at my screening actually muttered a “STFU” — without the abbreviation — during one scene) but Leo never loses the realism. She refuses to give up on either son and realized long ago that they’re both fighting to stay on their feet. She may drive Mickey crazy by pushing the false story of Dicky’s fame around Lowell, but it’s something a lot of mothers do — she knows Dicky needs her in his corner just as much. The number of “right” decisions in Leo’s performance in “The Fighter” is somewhat breathtaking. She’s perfect.

Lesley Manville as Mary in “Another Year”



Lesley Manville

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

She's already won awards in the lead actress category (although recent shut-outs by BFCA and the Golden Globes might indicate that we're not the only one with category confusion) for her work in “Another Year,” but just because Lesley Manville gives the most memorable performance in the film doesn't make her the lead. Mary may be unforgettable but Mike Leigh's drama is not her story; it is the story of a couple (played by Jim Broadbent and Ruth Sheen) and the stability they provide the unstable people in their lives. The most memorable of those people is Mary, a borderline tragic figure brought to three-dimensional life by Manville. If you're over thirty, you probably know someone like Mary, a woman who externally exudes happiness but barely hides the melancholy within. As he has done before with Imelda Staunton, Sally Hawkins, and many more, Mike Leigh worked with Lesley Manville to the point that her dialogue instantly sounds genuine. She IS Mary. It never looks like a performance. Think about that for a minute. Even some of our best actors and actresses telegraph their performances with larger-than-life behavior but Manville knows that, for Mary, life is too big already.

Jacki Weaver as Janine Cody in “Animal Kingdom”



Jacki Weaver

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Very few women have ever owned the final act of a film as completely as Jacki Weaver owns “Animal Kingdom.” Especially a crime film. For the majority of its running time, “Animal Kingdom” is a testosterone-heavy tale of bad men doing bad things and the other men trying to stop them but then Weaver gets her turn in the spotlight and we realize that the queen of the lion's den is arguably the most dangerous creature on the plain. As the house of cards she's helped create in her family of criminals starts to collapse, Weaver moves into the spotlight and the movie goes from good to near-great. She perfectly embodies a woman who doesn't fit the typical description of a criminal mastermind and has probably never gotten her hands dirty herself but certainly knows how to make the tough decisions, beautifully delivering lines like “*Just because we don't wanna do something doesn't mean it can't be done.*” Reminiscent of one of the best TV characters of all time, Livia Soprano, Janine Cody is a woman comfortable in domesticity or going head-to-head with the policeman trying to take her down. You don't mess with a lioness.

Dianne Wiest as Nat in “Rabbit Hole”



Dianne Wiest

Photo credit: Lionsgate

What is there to say about Dianne Wiest other than it would a better film world if she acted more often? She was spectacular on “In Treatment” but it’s been too long since she delivered a performance as resonant as Nat in “Rabbit Hole.” The mother of Nicole Kidman’s Becca, Nat is similarly without a road map in the world of tragedy and yet she could also be the only one who knows how her daughter feels. Nat lost a child too when Becca’s brother died of an overdose. The fact that losing a young child is different than losing an older child is unimportant to Nat — her son died. And it’s a situation that has clearly shaded her entire relationship with her daughter. She wants to relate but clearly does so too much for the sanity of her daughter and, consequently, doesn’t know how to help. Wiest delivers a brief-but-amazing performance, taking her few scenes and using them to ultimate effect. In fact, “Rabbit Hole” isn’t nearly as complete a film without her as Wiest adds a much-needed view into the tragedy of Becca & Howie in that she both knows their tragedy and yet doesn’t quite. She grounds the piece as she has done in so many other films and as we’d love to see her do in so many more.

The Best Supporting Actress of 2010: Amy Adams as Charlene in “The Fighter”



Amy Adams

Photo credit: Paramount

There was reason to worry about Amy Adams. Her performance in “Julie & Julia” was overshadowed by her co-star, the less said about that awful “Night at the Museum” sequel the better, and most who paid to see it have repressed “Leap Year” out of their memories. It started to look like one of the most promising actresses of her generation would go the way of so many talented young ladies and disappear into crappy studio product. Then Adams proved why she’s already been nominated for Oscar twice and surely will be a third time — when she finds the right material, she’s truly remarkable. What she brings to “The Fighter” is an intangible chemistry that’s essential to the film’s success. From the minute she falls for Mark Wahlberg’s Mickey Ward, we believe it and her devotion to her love is key to the arc of the film. There’s a scene late in “The Fighter” between Bale and Adams on a porch that is a master class in character-driven drama. The brother and the lover of a man realize that they may hate each other but they must unite over a common goal. Adams is stunning in this scene, going through roughly seven emotions in just a few lines. Amy Adams is back and while it would be nice for her excellent co-star to win the Oscar in this category, it would be great for Adams to take what she deserves and never have to consider a “Leap Year” again.

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