

Film Feature: The 10 Most Overlooked Films of 2012

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 26, 2012 - 5:36pm

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CHICAGO – The wider range of films critics see during a single year, the less susceptible they are to the inevitable onslaught of expensive awards campaigns. Just because a studio can bark the loudest doesn't mean its product has any bite. The majority of Oscar bait I've witnessed during the final months of 2012 have been wildly overrated behemoths weighed down in self-importance and executed with all the calculated precision of a undergrad aiming to score an A on the final. What's lacking from many of these pictures is the spontaneity and imagination of true artistry, and that is precisely what the films on this list have in spades. From the most criminally overlooked blockbusters to the most invaluable indie gems available online, here are the Top Ten Most Overlooked Films of 2012.

10. "Cloud Atlas"



Cloud Atlas

I'll be the first to admit that Tom Tykwer and the Wachowski siblings' staggeringly ambitious adaptation of David Mitchell's masterful novel is—shall we say, flawed. Some members of its ensemble are grossly miscast, others are covered in wince-inducing make-up and there's one entire section of the picture rendered utterly intelligible by incoherent dialogue (no other film this year has been in such desperate need of subtitles). And yet, regardless of its shortcomings, this is still one of the most exuberantly entertaining pictures in recent memory. By juxtaposing Mitchell's smorgasbord of interconnected parallel timelines, Tykwer and the Wachowskis have crafted an immensely provocative meditation on the malleability of identity, the necessity of change and the impact that a single human life can have on the course of human history. After primarily sleepwalking through the first decade of the 21st century, Tom Hanks delivers a decade's work of fabulous

performances, while Jim Broadbent cements his status as one of the funniest men in the business (he's like a live-action Wallace minus Gromit).

9. "Green"



Green

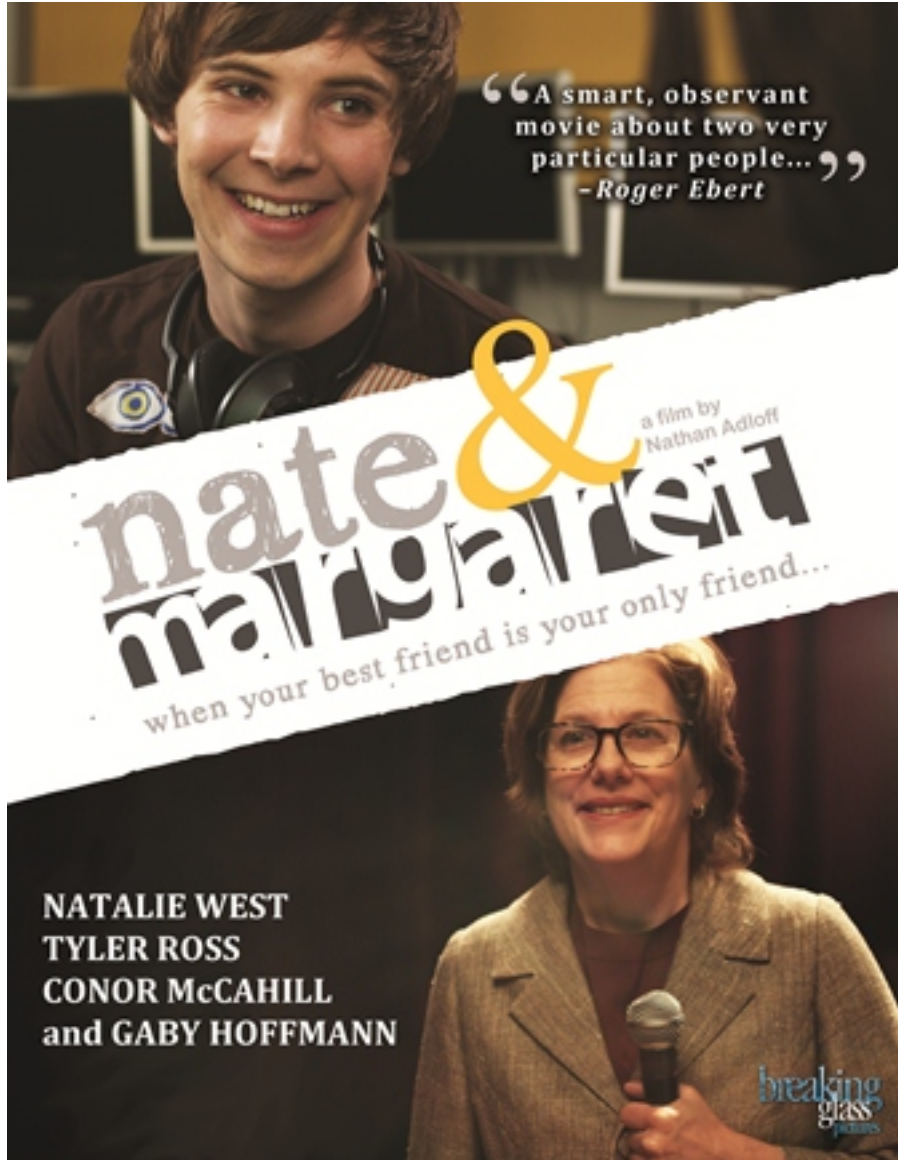
Sophia Takal's hypnotic drama played for a week at Facets, and it has haunted me ever since. Evoking memories of Lars von Trier's "Antichrist," albeit without the excessive bloodletting, Takal's film creates an immensely moody atmosphere through its subtly unhinged score by Ernesto Carcamo and gorgeously brooding cinematography by Nandan Rao. The tremendously prolific Sundance star Kate Lyn Sheil plays Genevieve, a young city dweller who moves to the country with her boyfriend, Sebastian (Takal's real-life husband, Lawrence Michael Levine, a fine filmmaker in his own right), and quickly befriends a cheerfully genial local woman, Robin (wonderfully played by Takal). As the trio's friendship deepens, Genevieve starts to fear that Sebastian and Robin's relationship goes far beyond the boundaries of friendship. Jealousy emerges as the monster lurking within the shadows of Takal's forbidding forest, and Sheil (who has starred in no less than 17 feature films over the last two years) delivers one of the year's most shattering performances. She reminds me of a young Meryl Streep, and could very well have an equally enduring career. She's certainly off to a spectacular start.

8. "Tiger Tail in Blue"



Tiger Tail in Blue

On the heels of its well-deserved nomination for "Best Film Not Playing at a Theater Near You" at the Gotham Awards, Frank V. Ross' sublimely melancholy romance will be premiering at the Gene Siskel Film Center in January. Make sure to add it to your "must-see" list for 2013. Though Ross stole scenes in Joe Swanberg's web series "Young American Bodies" and displayed his gift for eliciting equally naturalistic work from actors in his excellent directorial efforts, "Present Company" and "Audrey the Trainwreck," "Tiger Tail in Blue" represents his most accomplished work to date, both in front of and behind the camera. It reminded me of Derek Cianfrance's riveting 2010 romance, "Blue Valentine," which flipped between the endearing origins of a romance and its wrenching demise. Yet whereas the past and present are clearly delineated by nostalgic grains and piercing HD in "Valentine," Ross' film is elegantly subtle in the way it intersects various passages in the lives of married couple Christopher (Ross) and Melody (Rebecca Spence), whose once electric connection is flagging due to conflicting work schedules. Cinematographer Mike Gibisser brings a distinct tone and flavor to each scene, leading up to a final act that knocked me for a loop.

7. “Nate & Margaret”

Nate and Margaret

Another “Young American Bodies” alumnus had a superlative year in 2012. After directing a series of darkly hilarious shorts, including the prize-winners “Untied Strangers” and “Irregular Fruit,” Nathan Adloff made his feature filmmaking debut with an immensely charming look at an unlikely friendship. Tyler Ross gave one of the year’s best performances as Nate, a young film student whose best friend is Margaret (Natalie West of “Roseanne”), a 52-year-old aspiring stand-up comedian. As Nate starts opening himself up to a relationship with his first boyfriend (Conor McCahill), Margaret begins to lose her inhibitions onstage. Not only does the film capture the endearing chemistry between its two protagonists (Adloff has referred to the picture as “‘Harold and Maude’ without the sex”), it also portrays with startling insight how an overly dependent friendship can stunt one’s growth as an individual. Most importantly, the exceptionally observant script co-authored by Adloff and Justin D.M. Palmer refuses to define its characters on the basis of their gender, age or orientation. This is lovely crowd-pleaser as uncompromisingly quirky as it is universally relatable.

6. “Take This Waltz”



Take This Waltz

I love it when a film puts its own indelible stamp on a familiar tune. In the case of Sarah Polley's beguiling dramedy, it's The Buggles' "Video Killed The Radio Star," which plays over scintillating footage of Margot (Michelle Williams) thrusting her head back while riding aboard the Scrambler, a carnival amusement that reduces the world to a swirl of color. This delirious setting, which crops up more than once in the film, serves as a metaphor for the euphoric "honeymoon phase" of a relationship that Margot desperately desires to recapture. She's reasonably happy in her marriage to an adoring chef, Lou (Seth Rogen in his best performance since "Knocked Up"), yet she's unwilling to settle into the rhythms of a longterm romance. When a handsome neighbor (Luke Kirby) makes no secret of the fact that he's hopelessly smitten with her, Margot's once secure future threatens to collapse. Polley's heroine could've emerged as wholly unsympathetic had she not been played by an actress as engaging as Williams, who draws the audience into Margot's mounting obsession despite its multiple signals of doom. And as far as supporting performances go, you can't do much better than Sarah Silverman's sardonic alcoholic who delivers an unexpected dosage of sage advice.

5. "Patang"



Patang

The criticism that a movie relies too heavily on its visuals never fails to mystify me. What is cinema, if not the ultimate form of visual storytelling? Sure, some pictures favor style over substance, but there isn't a single frame of director Prashant Bhargava's mesmerizing opus that isn't intrinsically connected to its overarching theme of familial bonds and the hands that grasp onto them, even as they slice through the skin. Set during the spellbinding Uttarayan kite festival in Ahmedabad, Bhargava's intricately composed visual poetry work on the senses much like the recent films of Terrence Malick. Not much dialogue is uttered during the film's first half, but a great deal is conveyed through the actors' expressions and body language (only three members of the film's uniformly stellar cast were professional actors). For a few years,

Bhargava traveled to Ahmedabad conducting research and filming documentary footage, providing him with a wealth of material that eventually helped him form the story of “Patang.” Bhargava’s achievement is a filmmaking tour de force as impressive in scope and texture as Benh Zeitlin’s “Beasts of the Southern Wild.”

4. “Ruby Sparks”



Ruby Sparks

No Fox Searchlight release was more sorely deserving of connecting with an audience than Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris’ long-awaited follow-up to their sensationally funny 2006 road comedy, “Little Miss Sunshine.” Both pictures brilliantly skewer America’s wrongheaded perception of “perfection,” arguing that it is in fact the messiness and unpredictability of life that makes it worth living at all. “Ruby Sparks” centers on a lovesick writer, Calvin (Paul Dano), who falls hopelessly in love with his own elusive dream of an idealized female companion (gamely played by Dano’s real-life girlfriend, Zoe Kazan). When Calvin awakens to find his dream girl suddenly living in his apartment, the film could’ve quickly devolved into a cutesy wish-fulfillment comedy. But the brilliant debut script penned by Kazan has a delicious assortment of twists up its sleeve. As the girl starts to develop a mind of her own, Calvin tries to mold her back to his original vision. What follows is both a scathing satire of Hollywood’s infuriating “Manic Pixie Dream Girl” archetype and a deeply moving fable about the importance of loving someone for who they are. Though this year’s Best Score category will undoubtedly be crammed with the usual Oscar baiters, no composer in 2012 created music as captivating and poignant as Nick Urata. He is the magic behind Ruby’s luminous sparks.

3. “Marriage Material” and “Be Good”



Marriage Material

Here are two relatively short indie features that would make a killer double bill. The first is Joe Swanberg's "Marriage Material," starring Caroline White and Kentucker Audley as an unmarried couple whose seemingly content relationship is tested by their experience of babysitting a toddler (played by Swanberg's own prolific toddler, Jude). White feels an unmistakable "tug on her uterus," while Audley worries that fatherhood will disrupt his work. The extraordinary 15-minute take in which the couple open up about their feelings contains some of the funniest and most heartbreaking acting and dialogue I've seen all year. It's Swanberg's most riveting achievement since his 2004 debut effort, "Kissing on the Mouth," and bodes well for his future evolution as a filmmaker. Since "Material" played exclusively on Vimeo (and is still available there), I suggest that a venue like the Siskel Center pair it with Todd Looby's equally rewarding study of young parenthood, "Be Good," starring Thomas J. Madden and Amy Seimetz as a married couple balancing their day jobs with child-rearing. Like Audley, Madden is a workaholic glued to his computer screen who starts to question whether in fact he is "marriage material." Yet these films take their similar premises in entirely different directions, both stylistically and thematically, while illustrating how great filmmaking can pack a sizable emotional punch, regardless of how microscopic the budget.

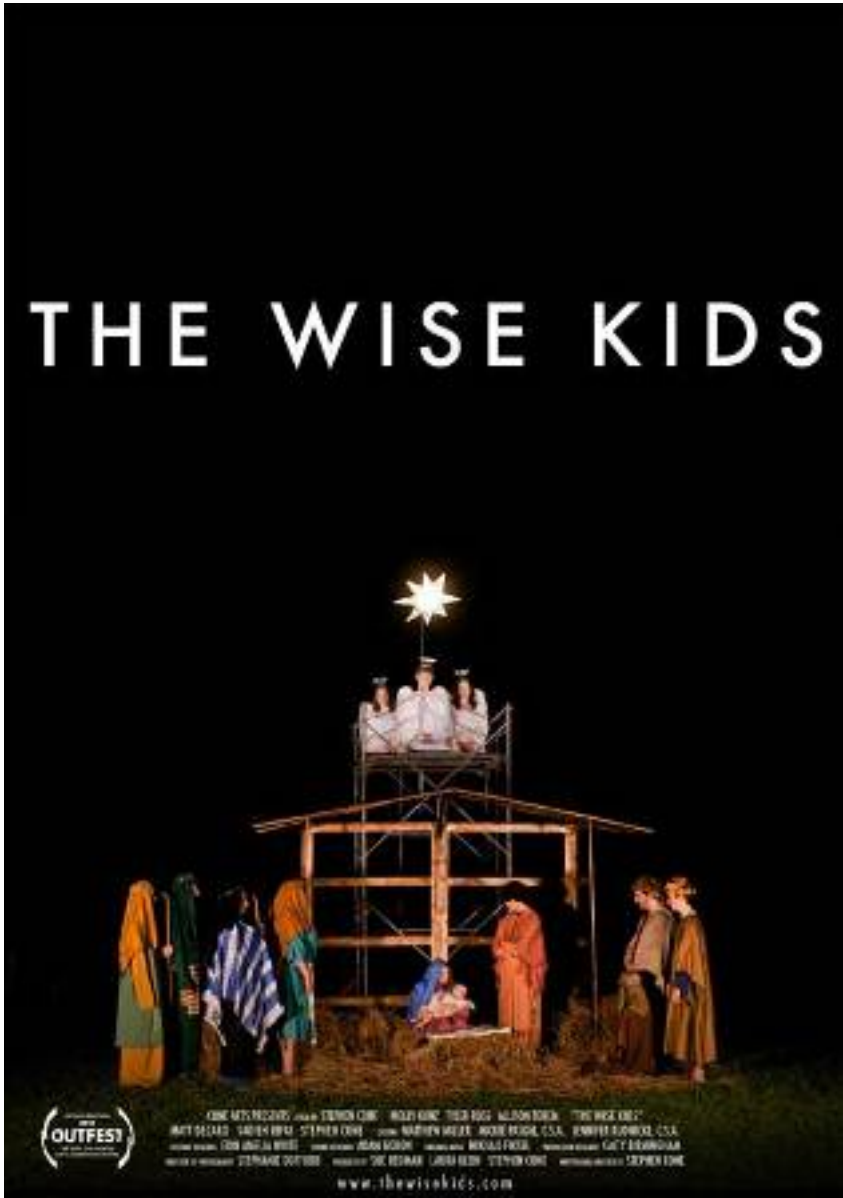
2. "Monsieur Lazhar"



Monsieur Lazhar

The Academy Awards do a major disservice to their Best Foreign Film contenders by nominating them before they've even had a chance to play in the states. Once they open in a handful of art houses, they've already been forgotten by the mainstream public. Such was the case for Philippe Falardeau's "Monsieur Lazhar," an astonishingly powerful drama that had the misfortune of being dwarfed by the hype surrounding Asghar Farhadi's "A Separation," which was virtually assured a win at last year's Oscar ceremony. Yet since "Lazhar" didn't open in America until April of this year, it easily earns a place near the very top of my list ranking the year's greatest cinematic marvels. On paper, the plot sounds like the sort of inspirational formula tailor-made for Robin Williams-esque treacle. Thankfully, Falardeau's script, magnificently adapted from Évelyne de la Chenelière's one-man stage show, avoids any semblance of manipulative sentiment. In two of the finest child performances ever captured on film, Sophie Nélisse and Émilien Néron play a pair of Montreal students who suffer deep emotional wounds after discovering the body of their teacher hanging lifelessly from the ceiling of their classroom. Enter Monsieur Lazhar (Mohamed Fellag), a compassionate Algerian immigrant who offers to help the students through their grieving process, while harboring his own repressed pain. This is the rare tearjerker that actually left me in tears, and there sure is nothing quite as cathartic as a good cry at the movies.

1. "The Wise Kids"



The Wise Kids

“I’m not feeling it,” says Austin (Stephen Cone), interrupting the romantic song that his wife, Elizabeth (Sadieh Rifai), had requested for him to play. She yearns to recapture the warmth that she once felt with him, but Austin is having an increasingly difficult time denying the fact that his sexuality may be in question. He’s the music director at a Southern Baptist church where the pastor’s daughter, Brea (Molly Kunz), is experiencing her own internal struggle. The first pangs of doubt have begun to cloud her once effortless faith, making Brea unable to bring herself to sing the lyrics of a standard church hymn. She just isn’t feeling it, and Stephen Cone’s “The Wise Kids” is one of the most breathtakingly honest films I’ve ever seen about that pivotal period separating high school from college and childhood from adulthood. Few straight actors have played gay characters with as much unmannered realism as Tyler Ross (star of Nathan Adloff’s “Nate & Margaret”), who delivers another stunning performance as Tim, one of Brea’s closest friends. After confessing that he might be gay, Tim’s devoutly religious friend, Laura (Allison Torem), is beside herself. She can’t understand why a God-fearing man would engage in sinful behavior. A lesser film would’ve done one of two things: have Laura “see the light” in a contrived third-act transformation or reduce her to a condescending two-dimensional caricature. Cone does neither. In fact, he gives her a monologue delivered in close-up where she professes her unaltered beliefs with such sincerity and passion that it could move the most cynical of hearts. Torem has already garnered great acclaim as a veteran of the Chicago stage, and she knocks her first major film role straight out of the park. “The Wise Kids” is not only the most overlooked film on this list. It is the best film of 2012.



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