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CHICAGO – The significant HollywoodChicago.com show business interviews of 2012 – eclectic, independent and varied – flowed throughout the year from the perspectives of Matt Fagerholm, Brian Tallerico and Patrick McDonald. All three contribute to this year-end survey of the 15 Best Interviews of 2012.

With so many promotional tours, conventions and shows coming through Chicago, the opportunity to get a wide range of celebrities, filmmakers and up-and-comers is one of the privileges of covering TV and film here. The following interviews – often enhanced with the photography of Joe Arce – were memorable for the timing or circumstance, and the shared give-and-take between HollywoodChicago.com and the representatives of the entertainment world.





Emily Hagins (center) directs the cast and crew of her third feature, My Sucky Teen Romance. Photo credit: Cheesy Nuggets Productions

Interviewer: Matt Fagerholm



Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Some 18-year-olds only dream of becoming a filmmaker. By that age, Austin wunderkind Emily Hagins had already landed a distribution deal for her third feature, "My Sucky Teen Romance," which screened in Chicago before receiving an A-grade Blu-ray/DVD release. What made "Romance" particularly fascinating was how it skewered the "Twilight" craze from the perspective of an actual teenager. Early in her career, Hagins was the subject of a documentary, "Zombie Girl: The Movie," which accurately captured her infectiously exuberant spirit that has undoubtedly fueled her prolific output (she just wrapped production on her next picture, "Grow up, Tony Phillips").

Memorable Quote: "I didn't actually finish the 'Twilight' books. I got halfway through the last book and was getting distracted by how inconsequential the decisions were. It was like, 'Okay, I'll be a vampire now. I'll just leave my parents and go away forever. No problem.' Of course, it's not that simple. I was like, 'Man, this is such a huge life decision and it's not being taken into account at all.' One of the biggest lessons about growing up is that you have to deal with the consequences of your actions, as well as the actions of other people that you care about. You're all learning how to be adults, and in this case, we just used vampires as a catalyst for that."



Tracy Letts [20]



Photo credit: LD Entertainment

Interviewer: Brian Tallerico

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: We've been lucky enough to interview multiple Oscar, Emmy, and Tony winners at HollywoodChicago.com but Pulitzer Prize winners are a rare breed and a naturally exciting opportunity. Tracy Letts isn't just a fantastic playwright, he's a Chicago theatre icon and the William Friedkin adaptation of his excellent "Killer Joe" caused quite a stir this year with its NC-17 take on film noir. As one would expect, Letts is a thoughtful, interesting man who seems to slowly mull over every question and speaks carefully and intellectually. Exactly what you'd expect from a Pulitzer winner.

Memorable Quote: "They used to release X-rated movies for adults and everybody understood it was for adults. When we first put the play up, I put an X rating on it. I said no one under 18 admitted. I didn't want...I wasn't trying to fool anybody. I didn't want people to come in and get hit over the head with a chair. I wanted people to know, "You're in for a very adult, intense experience. It's not for kids. You can choose to see it or not see it."







Director Wim Wenders in Chicago Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Interviewer: Patrick McDonald

Opening Notes: I find it virtually impossible to winnow down the many 2012 interview opportunities to just five. So before this begins, I have to mention some more memorable Q&As - look for them through the HC search engine. Young film actor Ezra Miller ("Perks of a Wallflower"), veteran character actor James Cromwell ("The Artist"), rock legends Al Jardine (The Beach Boys) and Dee Snider (Twisted Sister), TV's Joel Murray ("Mad Men") and Brenda Strong ("Desperate Housewives"), Ben Lewin and John Hawkes (Director and Lead Actor of "The Sessions") and the "Sexiest Man Alive," Channing Tatum. Back to Mr. Wenders.

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: The imposing and iconic director Wim Wenders was at the 2011 Chicago International Film Festival to promote his 2012 documentary, "Pina." His amazing filmography includes "The American Friend," "Paris, Texas," "Wings of Desire," "Faraway, So Close" and "The Buena Vista Social Club." As testament to his lofty cinema status, the interview was set in an ornate meeting room at a local hotel, where he regaled me with the intricacies of his new film – about famous German choreographer Pina Bausch – and his own storied career. He delighted in bringing back details of his most famous films, including "Wings of Desire," describing in the quote how he considered choosing actor Peter Falk to portray an angel.

Memorable Quote: "We thought of politicians, sports figures, but then thought the only people that everyone around the world knew were actors. We had to find an actor that was well known. But who was that actor, and would he come and join us? And I said, 'Columbo.' There is a man who everybody knows, and everybody likes. I'd never met anybody who didn't like Columbo. We both laughed, and thought it was impossible. I didn't know Peter Falk."



Benh Zeitlin [22]



Director Benh Zeitlin and actress Quvenzhané Wallis on the set of Beasts of the Southern Wild. Photo credit: Jess Pinkham

Interviewer: Matt Fagerholm

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: This year's winner of the Chicago Film Critics Association's coveted accolade for Most Promising Filmmaker, Benh Zeitlin has been garnering an overwhelming amount of praise for his directorial debut feature, "Beasts of the Southern Wild." He coaxed a spellbinding performance from pint-sized newcomer Quvenzhané Wallis, who played the lead role of Hushpuppy, a six-year-old girl in a tight-knit southern village bracing itself for the apocalypse. Dubbed "The Bathtub," this fictional town is a triumph of production design on an independent budget. Zeitlin even co-wrote the film's score, which includes the year's most memorable main theme.

Memorable Quote:"It was never about scoring what was going on in the scene—if the scene was tense or sad. It was always about [Hushpuppy's] sense of what was happening right now, which was different from what was happening objectively. In the film's opening moments, it's just a kid running around with sparklers, but for her, it's a moment of cultural iconography that defines the spirit of her town and the place. We knew that we needed a song that resonated back to that moment. This was an utopian place that was going to die very quickly in the film, and we needed something that constantly brought you back to her sense of what the Bathtub means. So we tried to create a folk song, an iconic song like 'Auld Lang Syne' or 'America the Beautiful.' It needed the sort of simple melody capable of having lyrics that every person in the Bathtub would have [memorized]. We think of it as the national anthem.."







Robert Zemeckis

Photo credit: Joe Arce/Starstruck Foto

Interviewer: Brian Tallerico

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: "Back to the Future," "Forrest Gump," "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" — Robert Zemeckis isn't just a living directorial legend, he's a personal icon. I grew up with a "Roger Rabbit" poster on my wall. (Feel free to make fun of how dorky that is the next time you see me.) And so meeting the Oscar winner created a few more butterflies than most interviews in the past. The butterflies were quick to dissipate as the man is as fascinating and insightful as one would expect.

Memorable Quote: "I remember very distinctly seeing 'Bonnie and Clyde' for the first time. I was a Freshman in high school. All of my friends were talking about the machine-gunning scene at the end and I went and I remember being emotionally moved when these characters started dying. I remember feeling horrible when Gene Hackman got shot in the head. And I remember thinking, 'Wow. There's this thing that I'm feeling and I want to find out what that is.' I fell in love with the art form and started to learn that movies were more than action and effects. There was a director who did this."





Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



Ed Asner as Artie in 'Let Go' Photo credit: Entertainment One

Interviewer: Patrick McDonald

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: In my childhood in the 1970s, Ed Asner was a major television player, mostly for his role – both in a comedic sitcom and drama series – as Lou Grant. This was a phone interview, which are always odd because his familiar voice is emanating into the home office. I've always been a great admirer of Asner, as much for his progressive views as his distinct style of performance. We spoke of the independent film he had just completed, "Let Go," and his long and distinguished career. "Oh, Mr. Grant!"

Memorable Quote: "I am a progressive, and it's harder and harder to be a progressive these days, as the world keeps being marched towards conservatism, and in some cases fascism. The truth about CBS, the flurry about my political choices were carried to an extreme, and they thought it would reflect back to advertisers. They wanted to get away from the trouble spot, which was me. I think there is fairly good evidence that Bill Paley [Chairman at CBS] did not want the series ["Lou Grant"] around."







Sophia Takal stars in Lawrence Michael Levine's 'Gabi on the Roof in July' Photo credit: Lawrence Michael Levine

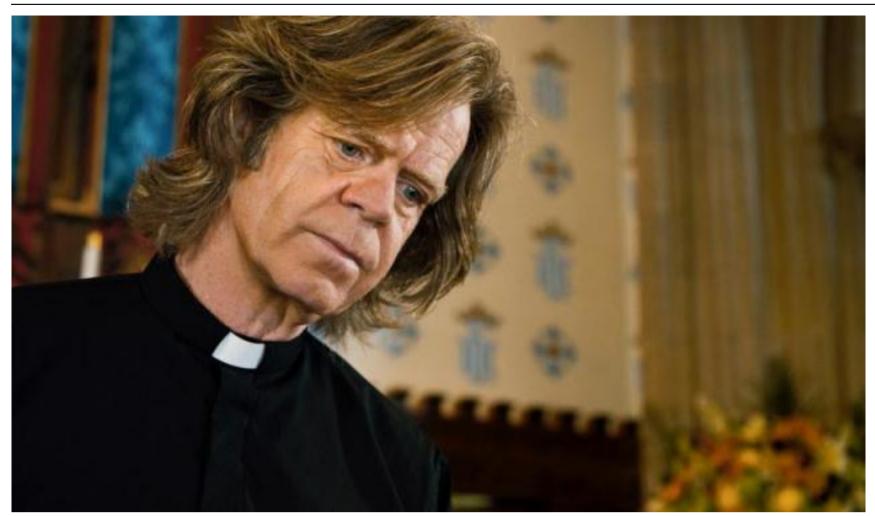
Interviewer: Matt Fagerholm

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Since creating my own independent film blog, Indie Outlook, last May, I've been exposed to an even greater assortment of filmmakers—both in the country and around the world. I first saw Sophia Takal in Joe Swanberg's galvanizing picture, "The Zone," in which she co-starred with Lawrence Michael Levine. Both Levine and Takal are accomplished New York filmmakers and very close collaborators (they got married last year). Levine directed her in his excellent 2010 drama, "Gabi on the Roof in July," while Takal directed him in last year's mesmerizingly eerie gem, "Green" which screened at Facets. Though I interviewed Levine for Indie Outlook, I decided to interview Takal for HollywoodChicago.com prior to "Green"'s theatrical release, without making our conversation any less in-depth.

Memorable Quote: "['Green'] was a reaction against 'Gabi' in so many ways. I was super-jealous on the set of 'Gabi' and was kind of impossible to deal with. Time had passed and I was able to look at it and see where that jealousy came from. I decided that I wanted to make a movie that dealt with the issues that I had gone through. I also wanted to make a movie with my friends with no plans of who was going to see it or how we were going to market it or anything like that. It was a no pressure situation where we were all working together to just create art. I wanted to get away and remind myself why I love making movies."



Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



William H. Macy
Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

Interviewer: Brian Tallerico

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: It was a sudden and quick interview offer as Mr. Macy had time off from "Shameless" and chose to promote his underrated turn in "The Sessions." It was a sudden and quick interview offer that I JUMPED at and while someone with a resume as long and impressive as Macy is obviously an interview subject for whom anyone could talk about movies at length, it was fascinating to me how serious the subject matter turned and how clearly and passionately Mr. Macy expressed himself. Not only is he a great actor and as nice a guy as you'd expect but he's even more well-spoken and interesting than I thought he would be. I've been lucky enough to meet a lot of actors and directors that I truly loved and few surpassed already-high expectations as much as William H. Macy.

Memorable Quote: "I've always felt that the way you keep score in a civilized society is how we take care of those who, through no fault of their own, need the most amount of help. And I think we fall down in this country. This is not poverty or welfare. I'm talking about people with disabilities. And it puts me in a rage a little bit, especially in light of the abortion issue. I find some people's point of view absolutely untenable that they, at once, would insist that every baby be born but, at the same time, want to shrink government and not take care of them. I find their positions to be reprehensible and immoral and hypocritical."





Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



Mike Birbiglia Toasts Chicago in 2012

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Interviewer: Patrick McDonald

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Birbiglia is a hot comic commodity with the hard-to-pronounce name, getting acclaim for his quirky stand-up shows and his new film, "Sleepwalk with Me" (click for HC reviews here [28] and here [29]). Our meeting was at the 2012 "Just for Laughs Chicago" Comedy Festival, and as is appropriate for a comedian, Birbiglia was relegated to a hotel meeting place that looked like a police interrogation room. The low-keyed but very funny comic is transitioning into a new medium with his first film, which is filtered through his style of truth and passion. Soon everyone will be pronouncing his name correctly.

Memorable Quote: "Oddly, it's the audience [that discover comics] these days, because that relationship has become more direct. That wasn't a possibility, obviously, before. Dane Cook was the pioneer of that. He just wanted to harness an audience through any means, and not go through the traditional route. Whoever liked him, he invited them to come with him. There was a sense in comedy before this era, that if you didn't get the right connection or network, you couldn't succeed. That just isn't the case anymore."







David Newell at the April 15th C2E2 convention in Chicago. Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

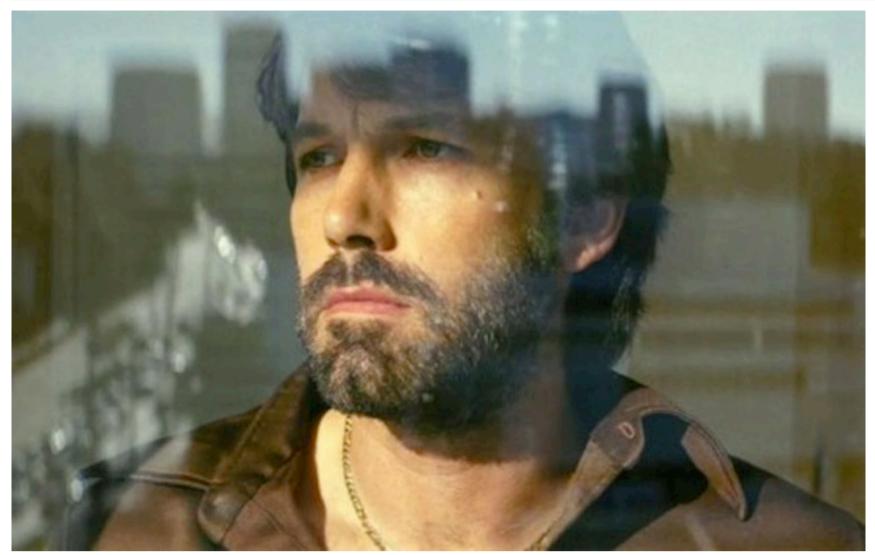
Interviewer: Matt Fagerholm

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: I fully credit photographer Joe Arce for helping me land this once-in-a-lifetime encounter with one of my childhood heroes. Like most people my age, I grew up with "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood," and knew all of the show's songs by heart. One of the most amusing characters on the program was Mr. McFeely, Mr. Rogers' ever-reliable, tirelessly chipper speedy delivery man, wonderfully played by David Newell. When I discovered that Newel would be attending last April's C2E2 convention, I couldn't resist snagging an interview with the man and he was more than happy to oblige. We ended up chatting for over an hour. Our wide-ranging discussion covers everything from favorite "Neighborhood" episodes to Mr. Rogers' stunning speech at the 1969 senate hearing where he convinced the judge not to slash PBS's budget (needless to say, his argument is more relevant than ever).

Memorable Quote: "It was the Nixon era. Senator [John] Pastore was put in charge of getting stories about public television, and we had just been on the air for a year. The senator was feisty and so tired of hearing written statements. He told Fred to plead his case without notes, and Fred turned his decision. After Fred spoke, Pastore said, 'It looks like you've just got your \$20 million.' \$20 million was like \$80 million now. It was a lot of money, and the ruling affected all of PBS. ... Fred was like Jimmy Stewart in 'Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.' He put his written remarks away and spoke from the heart."



Feature: HollywoodChicago.com's 15 Best Interviews of 2012 Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



Ben Affleck

Photo credit: Warner Bros. Pictures

Interviewer: Brian Tallerico

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: "Gone Baby Gone" and "The Town" were interesting movies but Ben Affleck reached a new career height with "Argo" and he came to Chicago at that time of year that is often the most-fun in which to do interview — post-Toronto. Films that really work send their directors and stars out of the Toronto Film Festival on a high and one can sense that as an interviewer. Affleck knew by the time he got here that he had a likely Oscar contender and a massive crowd-pleasing hit and so his confidence and excitement to talk about were amplified. He's so passionate about what he does that I left the room with the impression that while "Argo" was his best work that that probably won't last long. He seems like a creative voice always trying to top his best work.

Memorable Quote: "I've taken a lot from a lot of directors. Gus Van Sant was very chill and creates a mellow atmosphere and allows actors to make their own discoveries. Roger Michell cast every part, like every extra, like he casts the lead in the movie, and so he would create this really cool thing where you can talk to anybody in the scene and go anywhere. Terrence Malick allows the unexpected to happen, and there are no rules. Martin Brest, from him I really learned about doing a lot of takes and letting actors get comfortable and choosing little tiny select bits from each take. Kevin Smith taught me that it doesn't have to be fraught; it can be about working with your friends and can be a relaxed atmosphere and that can be conducive to getting better work."





Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



The Interviewer Plays 'Laser Cats' with Andy Samberg Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Interviewer: Patrick McDonald

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: Andy Samberg, one of the great players on "Saturday Night Live" of the last ten years, rolled through town promoting his co-starring role – with Adam Sandler – in "That's My Boy." He was placed in an airless hotel cube that I remarked to him "looked like the room they used in the movie 'Fail-Safe." This was a nerve racking 15 minutes, because I'm a great admirer of Samberg's style of fun in his comedy. The free-wheeling interview put me at ease, and Samberg is as laconic and funny as his many comic personas. His quote refers to the fight he had in "That's My Boy" with actor James Caan.

Memorable Quote: "I was doing my best to not to think of everything else he had been in, because if I thought about other movies James Caan had done before working with me, I would have got it in my head about how much of a letdown this was going to be for him. It would be like, 'The Godfather,' and now the 'Dick in a Box' guy."



Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris [33]



Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



Directors Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton on the set of Ruby Sparks. Photo credit: Merrick Morton

Interviewer: Matt Fagerholm

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: One of the year's most criminally overlooked films was "Ruby Sparks," the beguiling second feature effort from the directing duo (and real-life couple) Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris. Their 2006 ensemble comedy, "Little Miss Sunshine," provided me with one of the greatest moviegoing experiences of my life. The film's unforgettable climactic set-piece received a standing ovation and inspired a few audience members to start dancing in the aisles. Though "Sparks" is more bittersweet than rousing, it is an even more provocative exploration of mankind's pursuit for perfection and its inherent fallacy. Like "Sunshine," "Sparks" was a debut script (brilliantly written by actress Zoe Kazan) that is worthy of an Oscar nomination.

Memorable Quote: [Dayton:] "In a first script, writers are bringing a lot of their lives to the table. There's more time for the ideas to gestate. Once a writer becomes successful, it's like the first album of a band. You have your whole life to write your first album, and for the second album..." [Faris:] "You have three months. I also think there's an authenticity to it. Nobody told them to [write] it, nobody asked them to do it. It came from something very intuitive and deep. All that they bring to it feels very authentic, and their voice comes through in a way that makes us respond to it. Both scripts are very funny and also have the potential to be emotionally stirring."





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Looper

Photo credit: Sony Pictures

Interviewer: Brian Tallerico

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: I love coming back to people that I spoke to years ago and seeing how work, experience, and life has changed them and I remembered fondly speaking to Rian Johnson about "The Brothers Bloom." I ran into him in the lobby of the Peninsula as mine was the first interview post-lunch and we started talking before the scheduled time. It created such an easy-going dynamic that it made the conversation so comfortable and fun. Johnson's "Looper" is the kind of film that is easy to talk about and one that will almost certainly grow in esteem as the years go by. Speaking to its incredibly ambitious and risk-taking writer/director about the chances he took, the way he works with his stars, and what inspires him was my interview highlight of 2012.

Memorable Quote: "I got no expectations. You have no control over that aspect of it. At the end of the day, it's important for a lot of people and a lot of reasons but you can't let it be important as a filmmaker. I'm also just an optimist in that neither "Brick" and "Bloom" made any noise in theaters but found their audience after the fact. The opening weekend and all that jazz doesn't really matter for what I care about, which is the right audience and people who love the movie finding it. On a long enough time scale, that will happen. And that's all you can care about."





Published on HollywoodChicago.com (http://www.hollywoodchicago.com)



Ken Burns Represents 'The Central Park Five' Photo credit: Sundance Selects

Interviewer: Patrick McDonald

Background and Behind-the-Scenes: One of the most influential filmmakers in the last 25 years, Ken Burns continues to be a provocateur with his latest documentary, "The Central Park Five." Examining a case of railroaded justice in late 1980s New York City, again he points out that the more things change, the more they remain the same. The opportunity to talk with Burns – via phone – was a career highlight for me, and his gracious, intellectual approach to his observations made the interview resonate with me for weeks. Ken Burns is truly a national treasure.

Memorable Quote: "When you see that tangible, non-sanitized evidence of our nation's complicated past – you really don't diminish what Abraham Lincoln called, 'the last, best hope of earth' – you just wish that the idea of American Exceptionalism wouldn't always be shouted out by people who are unwilling to tolerate those complexities. I believe we're an exceptional country, I believe what Lincoln said, but that also requires me to be that much more critical of my country. Not just love it or leave it or accept everything that it does. Lincoln was saying if we are this bright beacon, this so-called shining city on a hill, that we should start acting like one."

Click on the name of the interviewee in the headline to read each of the full interviews.



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