

Film Feature: The Best Lead Performances of 2013

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 13, 2013 - 2:30pm

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A fictional folk singer who feels real, a real moneymaker who feels fictional, a young woman dealing with her own wounds by helping to heal those of others, and a student discovering her sexuality through the first passionate relationship of her life — 2013 was one of the best years for lead performances in decades. While it wasn't overly difficult to get to a top five in each of the two major acting categories (although I do wish I could have squeezed Robert Redford & Amy Adams in and extended to six), picking a winner was just aggravating. I would really be happy if any of these ten incredible performances earned a trophy at some point during awards season. Which ten? Read on...

The Best Actors of 2013

Five Runner-ups (in alphabetical order): Christian Bale ("American Hustle"), Tom Hanks ("Captain Phillips"), Hugh Jackman ("Prisoners"), Matthew McConaughey ("Dallas Buyers Club"), and Robert Redford ("All is Lost")

Bruce Dern as Woody Grant in "Nebraska"



Photo credit: Paramount

The first few scenes of Bruce Dern shambling down a freeway shoulder in Alexander Payne's "Nebraska" made me nervous. I was concerned that we were headed quickly toward the caricature of the old, Midwestern drunk. And then Dern begins to work his magic. Giving the best performance of his notable career, he perfectly grounds this character through the small decisions and the clear back story he sells us in his eyes. The actor disappears and we see an old man who has avoided emotion and purpose for most of his life realizing that perhaps he needs both as it comes to an end. Considering my #1 pick in this category is looking less and less likely to be in the Oscar race, Dern seems to be the man I'll be rooting for the night of the Academy Awards.

Chiwetel Ejiofor as Solomon Northup in "12 Years a Slave"



Photo credit: Fox Searchlight

The issues I have with Steve McQueen’s adored “12 Years a Slave” are balanced by what I see there in Chiwetel Ejiofor’s breathtakingly subtle work. Some have written about how the supporting cast often steals focus from the saga of Solomon Northup but it always comes back to the center for me through the sheer commitment to character by its lead performer. As it so often is, it’s the little things in Ejiofor’s work — the grief in his eyes, the desperation in his slumped shoulders, the moment of expression in his voice when he allows himself to sing — that add up to harrowing, unforgettable realism.

Oscar Isaac as Llewyn Davis in “Inside Llewyn Davis”



Photo credit: CBS Films

Llewyn Davis could have been such a cliché — the put-upon, integrity-laden folk singer. It’s the kind of part that practically orders an actor to fall back on crutches like costumes and mannerisms. And yet Davis feels completely, totally real from minute one. Before he’s done with his first song. And about those songs. The way that Isaac uses music and lyrics to express things that his character cannot in the real world is incredible. Again, in most years, this would be my favorite performance of the year. It’s that good.

Joaquin Phoenix as Theodore in “Her”



Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Given that the arc of Spike Jonze’s incredible “Her” is that of a man who falls in love with his operating system, much of the film consists of essentially a one-man show for Joaquin Phoenix, as his romantic partner in the film is never seen. And Phoenix is utterly fantastic, perfectly sketching a man who has romantically lost his way and showing us how he finds it again. We’ll be writing about “Her” a lot in the next few weeks as it finally gets released but what you need to know is that none of this high-concept brilliance works AT ALL without the relatable humanity given it by Joaquin Phoenix.

The Best Actor of 2013: Leonardo DiCaprio as Jordan Belfort in “The Wolf of Wall Street”



Photo credit: Paramount

Leonardo DiCaprio, easily one of the best actors of his generation, is a true force of nature in Martin Scorsese’s latest epic, the story of a man who lived in and for the moment. Like a Wall Street version of Alien from “Spring Breakers,” Jordan Belfort is always the richest, smartest, and most in-demand person in the room. And there is no actor who could have sold this role with this degree of screen charisma like Leo. Jordan Belfort is an awful human being — he’s a drug addict who steals from his clients like a con man and thinks little of anyone he deems beneath him. And yet DiCaprio finds a way to keep us engaged. We don’t check out of the movie like we would with a lesser performer. We don’t exactly “root for” Jordan Belfort but we can’t wait to see what he does next. There was no more captivating performance by an actor this year.

On to page two for the actresses of 2013, an equally amazing group...

The Best Actresses of 2013

Five Runner-ups (in alphabetical order): Amy Adams (“American Hustle”), Berenice Bejo (“The Past”), Cate Blanchett (“Blue Jasmine”), Julia Louis-Dreyfus (“Enough Said”), and Olivia Wilde (“Drinking Buddies”)

Sandra Bullock as Ryan Stone in “Gravity”



Photo credit: Warner Bros.

Too many people have written off this performance under the misguided belief that “Gravity” is purely a technical exercise. Yes, it’s an amazing film in terms of eye-popping visuals and breathtaking special effects...none of which would matter without Bullock’s work at its center. We get CGI-heavy, sci-fi extravaganzas every other month but none of them have the grounded character work that Bullock is doing in this film. If she hadn’t just won an Oscar for her lesser performance in “The Blind Side,” she’d be a lock to take one home here. And she still might. She takes a character who could have just been another visual effect and makes her real, thereby bringing us into this rollercoaster of a film. We’re not watching, we’re riding, and that’s because of Bullock.

Julie Delpy as Celine in “Before Midnight”



Photo credit: Sony Picture Classics

One of the most underrated performances of the year is one that I saw almost 12 months ago at Sundance. I’m SURE that Julie Delpy gets called “Celine” in public as she has become this character for so many people that perhaps they forget how much acting she’s doing when she plays her. That’s the only explanation for why this incredible work hasn’t been cited as much as some of the scenery-chewing Oscar bait this time of year. It’s TOO real. Delpy perfectly captures a woman who has been down this road with her daydreaming husband before. Through her co-writing and performance she finds what is so often missing from our romantic cinema — the consequences of love, good and bad.

Brie Larson as Grace in “Short Term 12”



Photo credit: Cinedigm

Grace is one of the most fascinating characters of 2013 and she instantly puts Brie Larson on any worthwhile list of interesting young actresses. Again, it's about what this talent doesn't do as much as what she does. She doesn't turn this character into a series of melodramatic tics as so many others would have done. She doesn't overplay the emotion, letting it simmer just under the surface. It's the way she scratches too hard on her wrist, the way she reaches out to a young man in trouble, and the way she seems to respond too openly to a young woman who reminds her of herself. "Short Term 12" doesn't work if we don't believe Grace is real and that doesn't happen without the attention to detail of Ms. Larson.

Amy Seimetz as Kris in "Upstream Color"



Photo credit: Shane Carruth

Fearless. That's the word to describe Amy Seimetz's captivating work in Shane Carruth's divisive Sundance hit. Think about where Carruth asks his star to go. Not only does Seimetz have to portray the character that keeps us engaged in the very unusual story but she has to do so with almost none of the tools given a typical performer. There's no dialogue in the last half-hour of this movie and yet we never take our eyes of Seimetz. She conveys emotion and narrative in original ways, serving as the human connection to a film that defies description. It's the most underrated performance of 2013.

The Best Actress of 2013: Adele Exarchopoulos as Adele in "Blue is the Warmest Color"



Photo credit: IFC

Has there been a more emotionally and physically exposed debut performance than this one? In nearly every scene of a three-hour movie, this young future star holds absolutely nothing back, not only in the explicit sex scenes that earned the movie an NC-17 rating but, more importantly, in the emotional beats of the arc of an entire relationship. The “favorite moments” are too many to list but I think of the way Adele portrays that first glance of love, the nerves she shows with her friends when she realizes the girl she likes has to come to see her, their first conversation, the awkwardness of hosting a party with people with whom she has seemingly little in common, and, of course, the now-legendary fight. I have some small issues with the mid-section but “Blue is the Warmest Color” captures the beginning and end of a relationship in ways more truthful than we’ve seen in a VERY long time and that truth comes from the performances. In an incredible year, there was none better than Adele’s.



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