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10 Oscar-nominated actors and the key moments that may have gotten them there



Which actors will go home with one of these? (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

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There's that one point in every film where an actor's performance turns on a very thin moment — the moment when they truly embody the character and convince the audience of the importance of the story being told. These are those moments from the 10 actors and actresses nominated for lead-acting Academy Awards this year.

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Saoirse Ronan as Jo March in “Little Women” expresses a freedom and intimacy with Laurie (Timothée Chalamet) unusual for the era. (Wilson Webb/Columbia Pictures)

Saoirse Ronan, ‘Little Women’

Key scene: Laurie (Timothée Chalamet) brings Jo (Ronan) home, and she starts relaxing by taking off her top skirt, then shouts across the room, “Can I call you Teddy?”

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Why it works: “Saoirse came up with that idea,” says director Greta Gerwig. “She said, ‘When I come home, I just take off my pants.’ It’s a totally intimate moment — but in the 19th century... Details like that build character. It’s so resonant because it comes from a human being she’s built with such care.”





Renée Zellweger shows Judy Garland could still give a powerful performance in her later years in “Judy.” (LD Entertainment/Roadside Attractions)

Renée Zellweger, ‘Judy’

Key scene: [Judy \(Zellweger\) performs “By Myself,”](#) and in the process reveals she still can give a powerful performance, even though she is physically fragile.

Why it works: “This is the release of the genie out of the bottle of her gift,” says director Rupert Goold. “It was about Renée performing as a singer, and us believing her — a microcosm of all of [Judy’s performances](#). We had to convince the audience with this number. This fusion of psychology, tension, massive interior crisis with deep exterior performance was incredible.”

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Cynthia Erivo as Harriet Tubman returns from freedom to rescue her husband, played by Zackary Momoh, only to find he has left her for someone else. (Glen Wilson/ Focus Features)

Cynthia Erivo, ‘Harriet’

Key scene: Having escaped to her freedom, Harriet (Erivo) returns so she can rescue her husband, only to find he’s moved on.

Why it works: “She’s gone through a lot to get down there and come back for him; literally, she risked her life,” says director Kasi Lemmons. “There’s an essence of womanhood in her; every woman who’s ever had her heart broken [knows it]. It’s deeply affecting and hard to watch and perfectly realized and very deep. To be transcendent in heartbreak is a deeply female, human moment.”



In “Marriage Story,” Scarlett Johansson’s character meets with a divorce attorney (Laura Dern, left) who makes her finally feel heard. (Wilson Webb/Netflix)

Scarlett Johansson, ‘Marriage Story’

Key scene: Nicole (Johansson) meets with a divorce attorney (Laura Dern) and shares her side of the story.

Why it works: “Nicole has already decided to divorce Charlie [Adam Driver],” says producer David Heyman. “This is the first time she feels properly heard, where she has someone who listens to and understands her. A lot of it is done in one shot, and Scarlett’s honesty and her ability to convey both the pain of what she’s experienced but also the ‘excitement’ of actually being heard is so affecting.”



Charlize Theron plays Fox News anchor Megyn Kelly, who decides to take on Roger Ailes during a car ride with her family and husband, played by Mark Duplass in "Bombshell." (Lionsgate)

Charlize Theron, 'Bombshell'

Key scene: Megyn Kelly (Theron) decides that she'll take the side against her boss, Roger Ailes (John Lithgow) during a car ride with her family.

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Why it works: "She has such conflicted feelings about Roger," says director Jay Roach. "Because of who Charlize is, you can feel the identity search that's going on as much in her as in the character. That's what a great actress can do: tap into their own predicaments. That's where the magic happens, when the depth of persona that is in your actor overlaps with the depth of the character."



Leonardo DiCaprio as Rick Dalton has a tantrum spurred by insecurity in "Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood." (Columbia Pictures)

Leonardo DiCaprio, 'Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood'

Key scene: After forgetting his lines while filming a TV show, Rick Dalton (DiCaprio) goes back to his trailer and has a tantrum.

Why it works: "That was a pivotal scene for Leo and Quentin [Tarantino, director] in the journey of discovering Rick Dalton's character," says producer Shannon McIntosh. "You discover his lack of security in his life and career. He's a tortured soul who tortures himself more than anybody else does."



Joaquin Phoenix used a calming dance movement to signify the transition of Arthur Fleck to Joker. (Niko Tavernise/Warner Bros.)

Joaquin Phoenix, 'Joker'

Key scene: A bloodied and panting Arthur (Phoenix) hides out in a bathroom and begins a slow dance, which calms him down.

Why it works: “This is where we really keyed into Arthur, and more importantly the metamorphosis that’s happening in him as Joker starts to rear his head,” says director Todd Phillips. “This is the first taste of Joker that we got. Originally, something else was supposed to happen in that bathroom, but we stumbled on this idea of it happening through movement and not action. That was a breakthrough for the film and for him.”



You feel Charlie's (Adam Driver) devastation in his breakdown during an angry argument with wife Nicole (Scarlett Johansson) in "Marriage Story." (Netflix)

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Adam Driver, 'Marriage Story'

Key scene: Charlie (Driver) and Nicole (Scarlett Johansson) have an angry discussion about their impending divorce.

Why it works: "In the scene, Adam is losing it, and you feel his breakdown and utter devastation," says producer David Heyman. "He collapses on the floor before her. His openness, the ability to show so many colors from anger to extreme devastation is gorgeous and affecting and leaves the viewer in a similar state."



Antonio Banderas as filmmaker Salvador Mallo addresses old wounds with his mother, played by Julieta Serrano in "Pain and Glory." (El Deseo/Sony Pictures Classics)

Antonio Banderas, 'Pain and Glory'

Key scene: Salvador (Banderas) speaks with his elderly sick mother, who reproaches him by saying he hasn't been a good son.

Why it works: "Salvador is very moved for what it seems a settling of scores from his mother," writes director Pedro Almodóvar in an email. "This scene shows the many years of silence between them. On the verge of crying, Salvador says: 'I have failed you just for being who I am, and I am truly sorry for that.' These words are the moving proof of the otherness Salvador felt when he was a kid, only because he was different."



Jonathan Pryce as newly anointed Pope Francis prepares to greet the faithful in St. Peter's Square for the first time, knowing his life will now never be the same. (Netflix/Netflix)

Jonathan Pryce, 'The Two Popes'

Key scene: Newly anointed, Pope Francis ([Pryce](#)) prepares to greet the faithful in St. Peter's Square for the first time.

Why it works: "Being elected pope was something Cardinal Bergoglio [Pryce] never wanted," writes director Fernando Meirelles in an email. "When he takes the responsibility, he understands that the life he had until then is over. These feelings are mixed with the notion of duty to put the changes that he advocates into effect. Before he steps on the balcony, I can read these thoughts on Jonathan's face."

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