



AWARDS

What key moments stand out for each lead acting nominee?



(Netflix / Amazon Studios / Searchlight Pictures / Focus Features / Hulu
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By RANDEE DAWN

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It takes a fully embodied performance to earn an Academy Award nomination. But deep inside those heightened performances lies one critical moment that stays with viewers and voters alike — and elevates the actor into being worthy of the industry’s greatest honor: The Oscar. We pinned down the producers and directors from the films that gave us this year’s lead actor and actress nominees to ask them: What was the most key moment *for you*?

Here’s what they had to say.

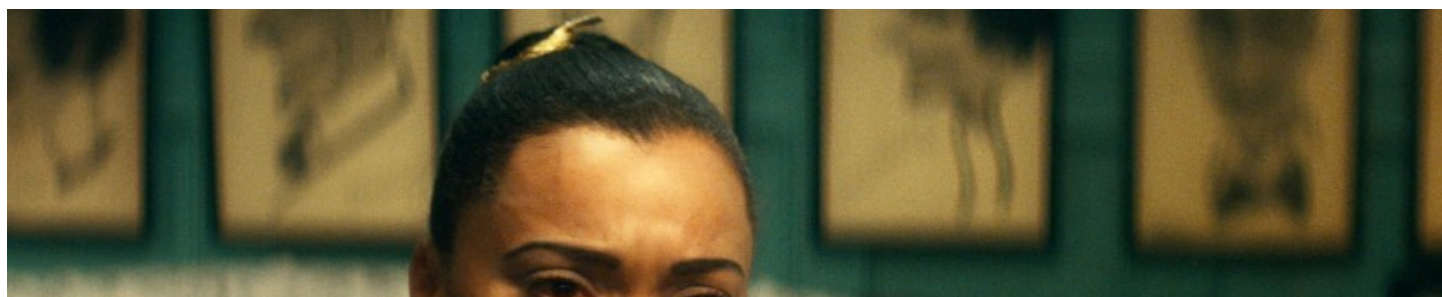
Viola Davis, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom”

Key scene: Ma Rainey (Davis) goes through a rainbow of emotions while declaring that the white people around her treat her like an old whore.

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What’s so special: “She starts out as [a woman used to being in charge](#), then the jealousy erupts and it becomes rage and hurt,” says [director George C. Wolfe](#). “Then it turns into loveliness and wonder and depth of caring. You’re seeing this kaleidoscope of who Ma Rainey is, and it’s startling and deeply moving. You’re inside the anger and fragility.”

Andra Day, “The United States vs. Billie Holiday”





Andra Day in “The United States vs. Billie Holiday” for key scenes story. Key scene: While speaking with a journalist, Billie (Day) realizes she’s fighting a lost cause. What’s so special: The scene was shot nine months after principal photography ended, and Day had to reenter the role seamlessly. “We didn’t want to play her as passive,” says director Lee Daniels. “This is the turning point of Billie’s descent into death, almost giving up. It’s almost like working with an alien to work with Andra — she was really able to keep it in the zone like that.” (Hulu)

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Vanessa Kirby, “Pieces of a Woman”

Shia LeBeouf as Sean and Vanessa Kirby as Martha in "Pieces of a Woman." (Benjamin Loeb / Netflix)

Key scene: Martha (Kirby) delivers her baby at home, but the child dies shortly after being born.

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What's so special: "[It] serves as a reference point throughout the entire story," [director Kornél Mundruczó](#) writes in an email. "It was especially important to me that Martha doesn't only go through the single most tragic moment of her entire life, but she also experiences the purest form of love she has ever known. Though she lost a child, she's always a mother to the lost one, that love still remains inside her."

Frances McDormand, "Nomadland"

FOR KEY SCENES: Frances McDormand in “Nomadland.” Key scene: Fern’s (McDormand) van, which she lives in, has broken down. The mechanics tell her it’s better to sell it and buy a new one than fix it, but she won’t hear of it. What’s so special: “She sighs, and there’s this silence before she says, ‘It’s my home,’ and in that silence is resignation and quiet desperation and also hope for a better tomorrow,” says producer Peter Spears. “The whole movie is in that sigh. She’s completely bare in that moment. But she’s not going to be defeated.” (Searchlight Pictures)

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Carey Mulligan, “Promising Young Woman”

FOR KEY SCENES: Adam Brody and Carey Mulligan in "Promising Young Woman". Key scene: A drunk Cassie (Mulligan) goes home with an at-first helpful man (Adam Brody) who turns out to be predatory. What's so special: "This scene is the most deceptive one in the movie," says writer-director Emerald Fennell. "Carey is playing two people: Cassie, who is meticulous and a planner — and an incredibly drunk girl at the wrong place and the wrong time. What she does so brilliantly is you see the little decisions Cassie is making. She's completely sober, but is this a trap? She cleverly exists in the corner. The men trap themselves." (Merie Weismiller Wallace/Focus Features)

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Riz Ahmed, "Sound of Metal"

Riz Ahmed in a scene from "Sound of Metal." (Amazon Studios)

Key scene: Recently deaf Ruben (Ahmed) gets a cochlear implant, which causes his mentor and the leader of the [deaf community, Joe \(Paul Raci\)](#), to kick him out.

What's so special: "The whole film pivots on that scene," [says director Darius Marder](#). "The energy was so intense coming into this scene; [Ruben] was looking for a fix for his fears. He walked away from that language and that culture and knew he'd never have it again. It was a real goodbye."

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Chadwick Boseman, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"

Chadwick Boseman as Levee in MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM(2020). DP Tobias Schliessler's favorite scene in when Chadwick Boseman," playing the talented yet distracted trumpeter Levee,"recounts the rape of his mother and murder of his father to his bandmates." Cr. David Lee/NETFLIX (David Lee/NETFLIX/David Lee/NETFLIX)

Key scene: Levee (Boseman) explodes with rage and hurt that stems from the brutal loss of his mother.

What's so special: This is one of two "blues arias" director George C. Wolfe says Boseman has in the film. "His anger flows against [bandmate] Cutler and over God and the power of God, and Levee's rage because of what he witnessed when he was a

little boy. [Chadwick exposed \[Levee's\] vulnerability](#). It becomes this performance that shifts between unbridled rage and deep hurt. It's a quicksilver transformation."

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Anthony Hopkins, "The Father"

Anthony Hopkins as Anthony in "The Father," for key scenes. (Ben Smithard/Sony Pictures Classics)

Key scene: In a nursing home, Anthony (Hopkins) asks a nurse his name. When she tells him, he cries for his mother to save him.

What's so special: "I wanted the film to lead to this place," says [director Florian Zeller](#). "Anthony [the actor] thought of a lullaby his mother used to sing to him, and I saw that memory destroying him in front of us. He traveled through time and became not a child, but the child he was. He was really crying for his mother."

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Gary Oldman, "Mank"

Key scene: Mank (Oldman) stumbles drunkenly into bed, and as his wife (Tuppence Middleton) undresses him, he bemoans that he hasn't made a mark on the world, by

saying, “I should have done something by now.”

What’s so special: “It always comes down to the simplest thing,” says producer Eric Roth. “He’s of an age where he should have accomplished something, but he hasn’t found the right vehicle. [Gary’s performance is understated](#) — he’s such a smart actor, recognizing his character’s flaws. And there’s a sadness to it.”

Steven Yeun, “Minari”

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Steven Yeun in "Minari." (A24)

Key scene: Jacob (Yeun) and his wife, Monica (Yeri Han), argue in their small trailer home after a tornado threat passes, their hopes and fears exposed in front of their children.

What's so special: "This was an incredibly nuanced scene," says producer Christina Oh. "Steven was conscious of not characterizing a performance of our [collective Korean] parents but [putting himself in his own parents' shoes](#), so to speak. He absolutely crushes it. In that scene, we are all reminded how while our upbringings are different, what we went through emotionally in families is similar."

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