Culture



(Thomasin Harcourt McKenzie, left, as Tom and Ben Foster as Will star in Debra Granin's "Leave No Trace" (Bleeker Street/Scott Green)



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The Academy for Motion Picture Arts and Science awards, the Oscars, will take place Feb. 24. I have seen all but two of the nominated films in major categories. However, I think some of the best films were overlooked and my annual top 10 list (or 12 or 15 sometimes), is my chance to draw attention to these films, too.

I don't have to make a list of the worst films (the Razzie Awards for lack of achievement in film will be announced Feb. 23) so I get to savor the opportunity to highlight my favorites that meet my criteria of being compelling stories about humanity told in compelling ways. Honest representations of human dignity, the common good and non-violent ways of resolving conflict also fold into why I think certain films excel.

Leave No Trace — This very gentle film was co-written with Anne Rosellini and directed by Debra Granik who gave us "Winter's Bone." "Leave No Trace" is almost perfect. It draws tight the ties that bind father and daughter while showing the brittle fragility of those ties that connect broken spirits with vulnerable sanity. Benevolent people populate the film. The horror of war that a government inflicts on its own citizens generation after generation in the name of patriotism overshadows everything. If awards were being given today, this would get my vote for best film, actors, the whole ballot.

The Green Book — Tony "The Lip" Vallelonga (Viggo Mortensen) is the chauffer that musician (and psychologist) Don Shirley (Mahershala Ali) hires to drive him from New York City through the Deep South for a concert tour in the 1960s. Tony is surprised to receive a copy of "The Negro Motorist's Green Book" by Shirley's recording label executive before they leave. The Green Book let African Americans know where they could find accommodations during the Jim Crow era. Based on a true story, the film is not only about the social situation of the era but shows how a white man and a black man get to know each other's worlds, overcome preconceived beliefs and become genuine friends. This is a unique road trip-buddy dramady that moves and inspires, with terrific performances.

Bohemian Rhapsody — Rami Malek plays rock group Queen's front man Freddy Mercury with heart and incredible energy in this musical biopic. In addition to his

protruding teeth (that he says gives him greater vocal range), he has to overcome his India-British Parsi father's disapproval and his personal struggle to realize his sexual orientation. He makes many mistakes in judgment (such as going solo, breaking up the band and wasting time hosting, well, for lack of a better word, orgies) except when it comes to music. The film's finale at the 1985 Live Aid Convert at Wembley stadium is incredible and a tribute to a pop icon that entertained generations. You can compare it to the original on YouTube.

Black Panther — Director Ryan Coogler brings to life Marvel Comic's superhero in "Black Panther" but make no mistake, the power of this film goes to the women, led by, Angela Bassett, Lupita Nyongo, Letitia Wright and Danai Gurira. This is a layered tale about Africa's greatest secrets: Its brilliant people and rich resources that have been exploited but are now being protected by an ensemble cast that compels you to watch. Yes, it's just another superhero movie in most ways, but it is Africa itself that plays the main character and invites us to pay attention.



The primary cast members of "Black Panther." (Photo courtesy of Kwaku Alston/Marvel Studios)

Won't You Be My Neighbor? — I entered the convent before Mr. Rogers' became a household name and a cultural influence on millions of children. Though it won a Golden Globe, that the Academy ignored this documentary about a man who could be called the patron saint of children's TV, mystifies me. It tells his story so simply, with the humility that personified the life and person of Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister who believed he could make great programs for children (and he did).

A Star is Born — In Bradley Cooper's directing debut (he also wrote and stars in the film), he retells the story for the fourth time of a singer, Jack Main (Cooper) who discovers Allie (Lady Gaga), a writer and singer, in a bar where she performs to people who don't judge her looks. He falls for her and invites her on tour. He helps her overcome her lack of confidence and become a star. But as her star rises, his fades into the fog of alcoholism and depression. I think this is a fine movie with great music. The test is, will I see it again? You bet.

Boy Erased — In another head-scratcher, the Academy for Motion Picture Arts and Sciences overlooked this based-on-a-true-story film about a teenaged boy, Jared (Lucas Hedges) whose homosexual orientation is revealed to his deeply religious parents by a young man who attacks Jared. His mother, Nancy (Nicole Kidman) is sympathetic, but his father, Marshall (Russell Crowe) is a Baptist preacher who gives Jared an ultimatum: conversion therapy or losing his place in the home and family business. This is a heart-breaking story that I reviewed at greater length here. I received the most Twitter hits ever with this review: over 50,000.



Theodore Pellerin as Xavier and Lucas Hedges as Jared in "Boy Erased." (Courtesy of Focus Features)

Roma — While the accolades continue to pour down on Alfonso Cuarón's semi-autobiographical film, it was the second viewing that convinced me of its power to see and feel the world of 1970 Mexico City through the eyes of the maid to an upper middle-class family that is slowly falling apart. Her name is Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio) and she cleans up after the family (and their dog) from dawn to dusk. As the city rises up in conflict, so does the family and Cleo's personal life. This is a story about the women who love and hold families together. Beautiful black and white cinematography and performances that bless the quotidian rhythm of humble lives.

A Quiet Place — A dystopian thriller about a family trying to save itself from blind creatures with hyper sensitivity to sound that destroy anyone they find. John Krakowski, who co-wrote and directed, is the father, Lee and his real-life wife Emily Blunt, is Evelyn, his wife in the film. They have three children, one of whom is deaf. Besides this being a thriller, it is a tale about family, love, communication and what a father will do to save his family. It's very scary, moving and inspiring.

First Reformed — This drama written and directed by one of my cinematic heroes, Paul Schrader, tells of a Dutch Reformed minister, Reverend Ernst Toller and his historic church now twinned with a Protestant mega church for financial survival. Toller, who is an ex-military chaplain, struggles with the death of his son and counsels a couple involved in environmental issues and if life is worth living in an environment being destroyed by chemical dumps and industrial waste. The story reminded me of Robert Bresson's 1951 film "Diary of a Country Priest" and deserves two or more viewings to plumb the depths of a man's search for meaning in a world where religion and faith-in-action struggles to find life-giving expression.

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