

While I was playing around online the other day, I stumbled onto a list that Maxim has compiled of “The Worst Casting Decisions Ever Made.”

I have to admit, it’s a pretty cool list to make. We don’t think about it that much, but casting is maybe the most important part of film production. Every movie has actors who come fully equipped with their own star persona, talent, look, and chemistry. And sometimes the chemistry and personas are all wrong, and can destroy any chance a movie may have had to be decent. (I am, by the way, sad that Maxim completely overlooked what has to be the worst casting decision of all time: putting Keanu Reeves in the 1993 version of Dracula. “Vampires! Whoa!”)

On the other hand, the right actor can bring the perfect amount of his or her specific qualities and make a movie great, all on their own. (Just think – what would “Alien” have been without Sigourney Weaver?) So, in honor of the people who can make a movie great, just by showing up, here is my list of the Ten Best Casting Decisions Ever:

10. John Travolta in Pulp Fiction

I’ve always seen Vincent Vega as a henchman struggling *not* to wake up to what’s happening all around him – religious epiphanies, near-death experiences, a romantic attraction. Vincent just wants to keep his head down and not make waves. John Travolta, who was on the losing side of a downhill career slide at the time, turned out to be the perfect pairing to his lost and confused character. And Vincent Vega turned out to be the perfect part to catapult Travolta back to stardom.

9. Robin Williams in Aladdin

Do you remember who played the voice of Belle in Beauty and the Beast? No? Me neither. But everyone remembers the Genie in Aladdin, voiced by Robin Williams. Williams, the man with a thousand voices, lent the Genie his exuberance and gaiety, creating a character that has us hanging on his every word. He’s the spark that gives the movie its life and movement – and its timelessness.

8. Kevin Spacey in The Usual Suspects

At the beginning of “The Usual Suspects,” we all assume Spacey’s ‘Verbal’ Kint is the sniveling, weak third banana he seems to be. But Spacey’s appearances can certainly be deceiving, and he manages to pull off a great hat trick (which I won’t reveal here) without batting an eye. It’s a powerhouse performance, and one of the biggest reasons for the film’s enduring popularity.

7. Bill Murray in Lost in Translation

Joss Whedon, the creator of “Buffy” and “Firefly,” once said that he always tried to cast funny actors in serious roles. The idea is that comedy is much harder than drama, so if you can be funny, you can certainly act. Bill Murray’s performance in “Lost in Translation” is a perfect example of a comedian who was the greatest possible choice for a very dramatic role. His Bob Harris spends the film adrift in self-examination and self-doubt. No one else could have lent Murray’s depth and solemnity – with just the slightest hint of a wink – to such a subtle character.

6. Arnold Schwarzenegger in the Terminator movies

There was always something very foreign about Ahnold. It wasn’t just the body, and it wasn’t necessarily the accent or the halted manner – it was the combination of all three. Looking back at these films after everything Arnold’s done, even with all the bad hairstyles and familiar sequences, you can still actually believe the guy is a machine. No matter what terrible movies he’s done, or interesting life choices he makes, Arnold will

always be the sole dynamic force of the Terminator movies. At least until some idiot decides to write a part IV.

5. Julia Roberts in Notting Hill

It had to be Julia, or it wouldn't have worked at all. "Notting Hill," the sweet romance about an ordinary guy (Hugh Grant, then the go-to ordinary guy) who falls for the world's biggest movie star (Roberts) only works because she's actually played by...the world's biggest movie star. That gimmick alone would have been enough, but Roberts also gives Anna Scott a fragility, a sense of longing and distrust that could only have come from living life just as Roberts must. Talk about Method acting.

4. Daniel Radcliffe, Rupert Grint, and Emma Watson as the Harry Potter kids

Many characters are based on the actor who plays them, but not everyone can really grow into their parts. By hiring young, unknown actors – and keeping them, despite growth spurts and salary negotiations – Warner Brothers gave these three children a chance to literally mature into their roles. It's a lot to ask of a kid, to sacrifice much of your childhood to embody someone else's. But it gives the "Harry Potter" films a steadiness that have helped them survive so many changes in cast and crew. And that's a pretty big achievement for anyone – especially if they can't yet drive.

3. Harrison Ford in the Indiana Jones movies

Tom Selleck has probably been kicking himself for 25 years. The swarthy "Magnum, P.I." actor turned down "Raiders of the Lost Ark," leaving the door open for Ford to swing through. Bad for Selleck, but great for us – it's hard to imagine anyone but the wisecracking, road-weary Ford donning the fedora and whip. Ford's put-upon stubbornness and crooked grin make Jones larger-than-life, to the point where he's actually reviving the franchise next year with a brand new movie. Beat that, Selleck.

2. Johnny Depp in Pirates of the Caribbean

Here's the thing: it was not supposed to be Johnny Depp's movie. When the original "Pirates of the Caribbean" film came out, it was supposed to be all about rising star Orlando Bloom, fresh off the first two "Lord of the Rings" movies. Johnny Depp, on the other hand, hadn't been in a movie for two years (and that was the underwhelming "From Hell"). But with Depp painting hilarious, befuddled layers onto what was supposed to be a sidekick, Captain Jack Sparrow became the stumbling, incoherent star of every single "Pirates" movie. And stole the whole ship right out from under that poor Orlando Bloom.

1. Danny DeVito in Batman Returns

I took lots of informal polls for this particular column, and every single person fought me on my top choice. The truth is, since the very first time I saw Batman Returns, I thought Danny DeVito was literally made for the part of the Penguin. He's built for it, of course, but DeVito also infuses an all-in-good-fun mania to the Penguin, putting his own creepy/funny stamp on a character that's been around for decades in various formats. And there's just the right amount of winking so that we know DeVito is having an absolutely wonderful time, too. Seriously, what more could you possibly ask of casting? Danny DeVito, I salute you.