



Oscar, are you listening?

Robert Burton, M.D., author of "On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You're Not," and Salon columnist

Truly great movies jolt us into a new way of seeing. "Into Great Silence," a documentary about the meditative life in the Carthusian monastery in the French Alps has accomplished the near impossible -- to make silence the main character in a plotless yet riveting narrative. You get the sense of how silence "looks" and how the dialogue between loneliness and aloneness are the central textures of this silence. Without a single word of moralizing commentary, the movie forces a degree of self-examination rarely directly experienced during a movie. But be warned: After you see the movie, your iPod and cellphone will be stripped of their best-friend status. **Andrew O'Hehir, Salon senior writer**

A lot of the wonderful performances found in 2007 films have been amply covered elsewhere, like Mathieu Amalric's mesmerizing work as the ambiguous protagonist of "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly," both before and after his devastating paralysis, or Anamaria Marinca's unforgettable role in "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days" as a dauntless heroine struggling to make sure her best friend will survive an illegal abortion in 1980s communist Romania. But here's one you probably haven't read about and, unfortunately, may never get to see.

As a Beirut doctor with a mysterious connection to a series of gruesome murders in Ghassan Salhab's leisurely, existential thriller "The Last Man" (which played last year at the Tribeca Film Festival), French-Lebanese actor Carlos Chahine is every inch a movie star, an Arab-world blend of Brando, Yul Brynner and Russell Crowe. Handsome, cue-ball bald and superbly masculine, Chahine also has an inwardness and uncertainty befitting a character who may be wrestling with homosexual impulses, or losing his sanity, or something much worse. Chahine has mostly played bit parts on French TV, but like Salhab, the writer-director of this mesmerizing and taxing film, he seems prepared to play a major role in the transnational renaissance of Arab cinema, fueled by European production funds, that is only now beginning to emerge.

Watching bad acting in a bad movie is irresistible (if small-minded) fun, but for sheer cinematic torture there's nothing like watching *good* actors struggle against a terrible film. For my money, "Reservation Road" hit an unusual trifecta of atrociousness: It paired Joaquin Phoenix and Mark Ruffalo, two of our best screen actors, in a doubly painful story -- painful because it was sentimental and implausible crap, and painful because it included the death of a small child, the most emotionally wrenching subject matter imaginable -- *and* it marked the final descent of Irish writer-director Terry George ("Hotel Rwanda") into hopeless Hollywood hackwork. As the father and accidental killer of the dead kid, respectively, Phoenix and Ruffalo try to out-smolder and out-mumble and out-obsess and out-mental-illness the pure, sadistic, sober-sided dreadfulness of the movie, but every actorly nuance only digs the grave a little deeper. If produced with a cast of TV no-names for the Hallmark Channel, this movie would have been a lot more honest and probably more watchable as well.

Mary Harron, screenwriter and director of "I Shot Andy Warhol," "American Psycho" and "The Notorious Bettie Page"

My favorite movie of the year was "There Will Be Blood." My favorite performance of the year was Tilda Swinton in "Michael Clayton," because who else would have found that kind of depth in that character? Among underrated performances I would choose Philip Bosco in "The Savages." It's the kind of acting that doesn't get nominations because it's so understated: an austere and painfully truthful portrait of a dying man. Also, Ben Foster was spectacular in "3:10 to Yuma" -- I'm surprised he wasn't nominated for an Oscar. Some other fine supporting performances: Heath Ledger and Charlotte Gainsbourg in "I'm Not There," Ethan Hawke in "Before the Devil Knows You're Dead." **Matt Singer, host of IFC News**

"Once" vs. "Music and Lyrics": It was the best romance and the best musical of last year: an older musician and a younger one, falling slowly in love as they race to complete a demo under deadline. No, not "Once"; I'm talking about "Music and Lyrics," starring Hugh Grant and Drew Barrymore.

Actually, they're practically the same movie and they're both quite good. Granted, one cost about \$150,000 and the other probably spent that much on hair and makeup alone (from the looks of the film, the stars of "Once," Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová, didn't even wear makeup). As a result, they look totally different as well: One was shot run-and-gun with a grainy DV camera on the streets of Dublin, while the other features a glamorous New York City buffed to a high-gloss shine. But both effectively evoke the same things: the cruel world of show business, the giddy thrill of creation, the redemptive power of music, and the beauty of artistic collaboration. And

they both have their stars performing sparkling pop songs (admittedly, Grant and Barrymore didn't write theirs).

It's just a shame that "Once" has garnered oodles of critical acclaim (and an Oscar for best original song) while "Music and Lyrics" has already been forgotten, another Hollywood product destined for the discount bin of movie history. It's maybe not as "arty" as its Irish cousin, but it's got just as much charm and quite a bit more humor. And if you can get that "Pop! Goes My Heart" song out of your head after you've seen it, you're a better man than I.

Great acting is a team effort: 2007 was a great year for memorable performances and, unfortunately, an even better year for fine performances that have been too quickly forgotten in the rush to shower their costars with accolades. I don't mean to diminish the achievements of Julie Christie in "Away From Her," Javier Bardem in "No Country for Old Men," or Daniel Day-Lewis in "There Will Be Blood" -- all deserved Oscar nominees and front-runners in their respective categories -- but rather to remind people that their accomplishments would not be possible without the outstanding but overlooked work by their respective costars Gordon Pinsent, Josh Brodin and Paul Dano.

In all three cases, the former do the Jon Lovitz-type "ACTING!" with big capital letters and an exclamation point: They suffer mental illness, they are brutal, charismatic murderers, they are flamboyant capitalists. But the latter arguably bear the more difficult roles: carving out more nuanced characters while trying not to get swallowed up by the whirlwind of disease, pageboy haircuts, and milkshakes. Their task is crucial but thankless: provide the audience a filter through which to view the other, larger-than-life characters, then let their costars bogart all the glory.

So kudos to these forgotten all-stars. If acting really is about reacting, then these guys gave the best performances of 2007.