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Counterpoint to the Oscars

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constructing this story, writer-director Richard Linklater created a container for storytelling that is far more authentic than the usual film fare, certainly more authentic than other coming-of-age stories and stories about children. He gets excellent work from the two children at this film's center, and also great work from the parents, played by Patricia Arquette and Ethan Hawke, who deserve to win Oscars for their performances. The film is full of nuance about how kids and parents can be both good and perfectly awful, sometimes in the same moment. The film has been justly criticized for depicting an unrealistically white Texas in which the only Latino character is a crude stereotype; though that isn't okay, I still think the film succeeds on its own terms, and I hope Linklater has absorbed that very fair criticism in the midst of all the praise he has justly received.

4. Wes Anderson's films are famously not for everyone, and I will cop to being a fan, though not of every one of his films. "The Grand Budapest Hotel" is one of his best. It is characteristically quirky, laughout-loud funny, and packed with interesting characters who are both comic and soulful. He has achieved a meticulous and dazzling visual style here that feels both borrowed and original; Anderson loves old things and puts them to fresh use. And the film's plot centers around a very ugly and complicated part of European history, which gives the whole enterprise an air of tragic wistfulness that makes it linger in one's memory. Like all of Anderson's best films. I expect to revisit this one

5. "Metro Manila" was my favorite film of last year's PIFF, and I am really disappointed that the film achieved neither a theatrical release nor the critical acclaim that it deserves. That's the price that director Sean Ellis paid for following the path that the Filipino story he sought to tell led him; he worked with Filipino actors, relied on them to translate the story into Tagalog, and accepted the challenge of directing in a language he didn't understand. Those choices surely dimmed both the film's commercial prospects and its chances for awards recognition (since it doesn't look like typical award-worthy fare), but the payoffs in terms of the authenticity and depth of this story are profound. This film literally took my breath away when I first saw it, and I highly recommend taking its absorbing journey into the lives of marginalized people.

6. I admired the film "Whiplash" and am happy for its Oscar nominations for best picture and best supporting actor (J. K. Simmons). However, the antidote to the philosophy of Simmons' character -- a conserva-

tory band director who espouses the view that great music requires sadistic abuse at the hands of a mentor--can be found in the transcendent "Keep On Keepin' On." This documentary--my hands-down favorite of the year--explores the relationship between jazz trumpeter Clark Terry, who played with the likes of Dizzy Gillespie and Count Basie and was a mentor to Quincy Jones, and a young sight-impaired pianist, Justin Kauflin. Kauflin is merely the latest in a long, long line of musicians who Terry has mentored and loved into doing their best musical work, and here one sees a relationship that is profoundly life-giving to both men. Both are struggling with health issues and life challenges, and both speak the language of music so well that listening to and watching them is a very moving revelation. This is love Sandra, having persuaded the boss to hold a re-vote the following Monday, sets out to persuade a majority of her colleagues to change their minds. Marion Cotillard perfectly captures Sandra's fear and agony, and the story unfolds to demonstrate the array of ways in which people respond when called upon to think about interests other than their own. This acutely perceptive film tells a particular and somewhat ordinary story very well; it also functions as a metaphor for the ways in which we humans often badly assess the stakes of our constant battles for resources and energy. There is much, much to think about here.

9. I little suspected that "Dear White People" would end up on my top 10 list when I first saw it, because it was so uncomfortable to watch. That discomfort turned out

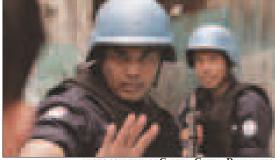


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The harsh realities of life in Manila are depicted in a scene from 'Metro Manila,' one of 'Opinionated Judge' Darleen Ortega's most favorite films of 2014.

personified--and it works.

7 "Ida" is another of the films I saw first at last year's PIFF, and it is a beauty. Set in Poland in 1962, it follows a young novice nun's reluctant journey into her own history, where she discovers that she is a Jew and that her family history contains terrible tragedy. The director cast a veteran to play Ida's hardbitten aunt, who has managed her trauma by grabbing at destructive power, and chose a young woman he encountered in a coffee shop to play the title character. Both choices paid offrichly, and the latter actress (who had never acted before) perfectly captures the soul of a young woman at a crossroads, whose years of spiritual practice prepare her to struggle with questions she had not thought to examine.

8. The films of Belgian directors Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne are concerned with realistically depicting the day-to-day struggles of the working class, and "Two Days, One Night" is their very finest work to date. Its main character, Sandra, about to return to her factory job after a medical leave, learns that her job has been eliminated by a vote in which her foreman presented her colleagues with a choice between receiving a significant bonus or keeping Sandra in her job. What follows is a weekend in which to be so rich with ideas and tools for struggling with them that this clever film won me over with its sheer ambition. It tosses up a whole host of questions about race that no other film has dared to touch, and then wisely resists answering them. This film contains challenges for everyone on the spectrum, and that kind of rare courage and originality deserves a shout-out in any year.

10. Finally, another of the films I saw first at last year's PIFF, "Finding Vivian Maier" tells the story of an obscure life that contained actual buried treasure, and gives one pause to reflect on how often the same may be true of those we overlook. Its subject spent her life as a nanny to a number of Chicago families, while obsessively documenting her observations of the world in beautiful and artistic photos which she never developed, and which were later discovered by the filmmakers. The film applies a kind of reverence to the exploration of a very odd person with a keen eye for outsiders, and invites reflection on the neglected art of attentiveness.

Darleen Ortega is a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals, the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her column Opinionated Judge appears regularly in The Portland Observer. Her blog is opionionatedjudge.blogspot.com.