

The 12 Most Underappreciated Films of My Lifetime

by Brandon Kruse

Back in January, PoopReading.com contributor Joe Mulder penned a terrific column about [the most underappreciated movies of his lifetime](#). And the idea for that column actually sprung from a conversation between Joe, myself, and fellow PoopReading.com contributor Jameson Simmons that took place back in March 2008. So needless to say, I'm a little late getting around to this.

The topic began as a question about the underappreciated status of the 2000 Bonnie Hunt-directed gem *Return to Me*. I loved that movie, though I'm sad to say that now that I've finally sat down and compiled my list, it didn't make the cut. Consider this an honorable mention.

So here, in alphabetical order, are my picks for the 12 Most Underappreciated Films of My Lifetime (January 1971-Present). (The 70s are completely unrepresented, but then again, pre-*Jaws* and *Star Wars* was really a different era for the movies, wasn't it? Plus, Joe didn't have any picks from the first nine years of his life either, so at least I'm not alone in this.)

Flirting With Disaster (1996)

As I stated [back in February](#), I feel this is one of the 20 Best Comedies released in the last 25 years. It's that good. The cast is stellar (especially with the benefit of 13 years worth of hindsight), a top-notch group that shows how great really well-done ensemble comedy can be: Ben Stiller in his first true lead role. Josh Brolin in the first noteworthy role of his adult acting career. Probably the funniest work Téa Leoni has ever done. A quartet of seasoned comedy vets in Alan Alda, Mary Tyler Moore, George Segal, and Lily Tomlin. The role that showed us just how funny and talented Richard Jenkins is (and if you aren't thankful for that, you should be). There's also Patricia Arquette, who I'm rather ambivalent about, though she's solid here. With script and direction from the always-interesting David O. Russell.

It has memorable characters, terrific plotting, and it's highly quotable, including a hilarious misunderstanding of one married couple's last name. But how many people have even heard of it? It made 15M in its initial box office release. I don't recall ever seeing it mentioned in any Best Comedy lists. (Apparently it was nominated for the American Film Institute's "100 Years, 100 Laughs" list back in 2000, but the list of nominees was 500 long, so where's the honor in that? *Bedtime for Bonzo*, *Private Benjamin*, and *The Ghost and Mr. Chicken* made that cut, for God's sake.)

The Impostors (1998)

I owe this one to Jameson and Joe, who have touted it for a long time. I can't say I always agree with them (they loved

The Whole Nine Yards, I did not), but in this case, they were dead on. *The Impostors* is a rare treat: an under-the-radar comedy that delivers huge laughs. And if the ensemble in *Flirting With Disaster* is stellar, the ensemble here is out of this world. It goes 14 deep with recognizable names (including more Richard Jenkins!).

Look, I had never heard of this movie until *The Two J's* (rhymes with "blue jays" – coined!) brought it to my attention. The only way this thing sees the light of day is via word of mouth. So do your part – check it out and spread the word.

Lone Star (1996)

The fantastic 1988 baseball film *Eight Men Out* and the underrated 1991 urban drama *City of Hope* made me a John Sayles fan in the early 90s, so I was primed for the release of *Lone Star*. And when it came out, I was living in Chicago, working at The Second City, where we had a reciprocal arrangement with a couple of local movie theaters that allowed all SC employees to get free movie tickets during off-hours. So after I saw and loved *Lone Star* the first time, I began cajoling friends and co-workers to go see it, personally escorting many of them ("You haven't seen it? Let's go right now!"). I think I saw it 5 or 6 times total.

It has a novel-esque feel, with multiple characters and storylines (spanning over two different time periods), plus a little humor, a mystery to unravel, and a terrific central performance by Chris Cooper. It got the traditional Best Original Screenplay consolation prize nomination at the Oscars, but it deserved a Best Picture nod. It's that good. (It wasn't better than *Fargo*, so it didn't deserve to win, but it was far, far better than *The English Patient*. But that's probably damning it with faint praise.)

Lost in America (1988)

It has received its share of recognition – it won the National Society of Film Critics award for Best Screenplay, and it was ranked #80 on Bravo's "100 Funniest Movies" list and #84 on the American Film Institute's "100 Years, 100 Laughs" list – but I still think it's one of those films that, if you asked 10 people if they'd seen it, seven or eight would say no, or perhaps even go "Have I seen what??" Which is a shame, because it's one of the greatest comedies of all-time.

I don't blame those people. It has some obstacles to overcome. It's almost 25 years old. The above-the-title names are Albert Brooks and Julie Hagerty (and they are in fact about 90% of the entire movie). The plot, about a couple that cashes in their savings to get out and see the country in a Winnebago, isn't exactly high concept. If you're browsing in the video store or assembling your queue on Netflix, it probably isn't going to jump out at you. But trust me, trust the NSFC, trust Bravo and the AFI, or trust anyone else who's ever seen it: it is absolutely worth your time.

Pennies From Heaven (1981)

Imagine if Adam Sandler, fresh off of *Billy Madison*, immediately starred in *Punch-Drunk Love*, and didn't have the benefit of many comedians before him paving the way for audiences to accept a funny guy in a serious role. That's pretty much what happened with Steve Martin and *Pennies From Heaven*, a movie musical whose biggest crime was following Martin's huge hit, *The Jerk*. Even Martin himself apparently later admitted the timing was a mistake.

Which is unfortunate, because *Pennies From Heaven* is a superbly crafted film, featuring a dark, complicated main story interspersed with musical numbers that serve as fantasy sequences for the characters. And Steve Martin is great – it was a gutsy choice to star in this project, to play such an unsympathetic character, and while public perception may have been against him, his work here does not disappoint. Even if you don't like musicals (and I generally don't), you may like this one.

A Perfect World (1993)

Jameson has, for years now, been waging a one-man war against the tidal wave of praise being directed at the late-career directing work of one Clinton Eastwood, Jr. (specifically since 1995, starting with *The Bridges of Madison County*), stating that his films have been far too morose and overhyped by critics. I have generally disagreed with him on this, but I suspect I'm going to make him very happy when I say this: *A Perfect World* is better than *Mystic River* and *Million Dollar Baby*, Eastwood's two biggest Oscar darlings of the last decade.

It got overshadowed by *Unforgiven*, which won Best Picture earlier that same year, and probably even fell victim to unfair expectations. (There aren't many films out there that could live in the shadow of *Unforgiven*.) But it shares some of that movie's complex characterization and moral ambiguity, just on a smaller scale. And to be fair, it didn't go completely unnoticed – Janet Maslin, reviewing for *The New York Times*, called it "the high point of Mr. Eastwood's directing career thus far," and the French film magazine *Cashiers du Cinema* selected it as the best film of 1993. (I can't go quite to that extreme myself – 1993 was an awfully good year – but I heartily encourage such praise for a film that could use it.)

Scrooged (1988)

Of all the films on this list, this is the one that I can't really expect a whole lot of other people to get on board with. It's admittedly flawed. But as a fan of Bill Murray and Michael O'Donoghue (a former SNL writer/performer and co-screenwriter here), I love it. The dark, cruel comedy of O'Donoghue and the freewheeling, sarcastic comedy of Murray are a pretty good match, but that's undercut a bit by the mishmash of tone and style among the other performers, no doubt encouraged by director Richard Donner, who was a

terrible choice for this film and clearly out of his element. The fact that the movie is still watchable, enjoyable, and funny despite this is testament to the genius of Murray and O'Donoghue (who reportedly loathed the theatrical version of the film – though to be fair, O'Donoghue spent much of his life loathing just about everything).

Also, nowhere else will you find a collection of on-screen talent this bizarrely eclectic: Bobcat Goldthwait, Karen Allen, David "Buster Poindexter" Johansen, Carol Kane, Robert Mitchum, Alfre Woodard, Buddy Hackett, Mary Lou Retton, Robert Goulet, Lee Majors, John Houseman, and the Solid Gold Dancers. It's like the casting director threw darts at a wall (then perhaps also threw walls at those darts).

All I can say is, despite all its flaws, I find it hilarious and even occasionally touching, and it is by far my favorite adaptation of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*.

Stranger Than Fiction (2006)

In a world made safe for comedians crossing over to drama (or, in this case, dramedy), Will Ferrell trades in his goofy man-child persona for a beautifully restrained performance as an IRS tax auditor who starts to hear voices and thinks he might be the main character in a novel as it's being written. It's an inventive, whimsical, moving story with a supporting cast (Dustin Hoffman, Emma Thompson, Maggie Gyllenhall) that knocks it out of the fuckin' park. For me, Best Film of 2006 comes down to this and *The Prestige*, and as you might expect, both were ignored by the Oscars (*The Prestige* got noms for cinematography and art direction). (I strongly considered putting *The Prestige* on this list, but decided it wasn't truly underappreciated because the praise it received from critics and online voters was, well, prestigious.)

Over the last year or so, I've encouraged several friends and family members to watch *Stranger Than Fiction*, with the following guarantee: if you don't like it, I'll pay the cost of your rental. So far, I haven't handed out a single cent.

The Ten (2006)

If you're a regular visitor to this site, first of all, bless you. Secondly, you have probably picked up on the fact that we're all pretty big fans of the former MTV sketch comedy troupe The State, and much of the film and TV work that they have done since. This film is practically the equivalent of a State reunion: written by Ken Marino and David Wain, directed by Wain, with appearances by nine of the 11 cast members of The State, all wrapped up in a sketch comedy format.

As with any sketch comedy endeavor, the quality is a little hit and miss. The overall concept is ten stories, each inspired by one of the Ten Commandments from the Bible. The first five sketches are brilliant and often hilariously funny; the second five feature more sporadic laughs, but are redeemed

by a solid closer. And the first half generates so much goodwill that you don't really mind it when things get spottier in the second half. It's one of those movies that, if you watch it with a group of friends/family who haven't seen it before but enjoy a good comedy, the laughs will be infectious and people will find themselves pleasantly surprised.

The Thing (1982)

This is another tough call. If you go by its reception when it was first released, it was absolutely underappreciated – it opened at #8 in the box office rankings, failed to even make its budget back in theaters, and received a number of bad reviews. Now its regarded as a bit of a cult classic, and pretty much everyone who watches it now (including Jameson) remarks on how well the special effects have held up over the years. But "cult classic" still suggests a lack of a wider audience, so I'm deciding that the underappreciated label fits.

I'm not a huge sci-fi/horror fan, but this one stands out because of a well-executed exploration of paranoia and some standout acting from the likes of Kurt Russell, Wilford Brimley, Keith David, Donald Moffat, Richard Dysart, David Clennon, and Richard Masur. (Most people will only recognize the first two names on that list, but I'll bet you've seen all of these guys in other movies or TV shows at some point. It's like an 80s character actor slumber party.) Much like I said with *Pennies From Heaven*, even if you don't normally enjoy this genre, I think you may find this one to be an exception.

Unbreakable (2000)

I'm of the opinion that this is M. Night Shyamalan's best film. I've always felt that *The Sixth Sense* was a little overrated; I saw it late in its theatrical run, and while I had managed to remain spoiler-free, I still found the twist ending predictable. And everything from *Signs* onward has either been a disappointing mess or downright terrible.

But *Unbreakable* still holds up (I can attest to this, having just re-watched it recently). It features the usual Shyamalan slow-building suspense and mystery, but here the reveals are doled out a little more frequently, which makes his requisite twist at the end feel less gimmicky than others. Unfortunately, continuing a theme in this column, it suffered by comparison to *The Sixth Sense*, and disappointed at the box office. And the worst part of that was that it put the kibosh on the idea that *Unbreakable* would be the first part of a trilogy. Too bad. I would've liked to see those other two films, and they might have saved us from *The Happening*.

Waitress (2007)

Waitress was the most well-known film, and sadly, the last, of writer/director Adrienne Shelley's career. She was

murdered less than three months before the film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, before she even got the chance to learn it was accepted into the festival. Upon release, it received a lot of critical praise, and that, likely combined with a fair amount of good word of mouth, helped it the box office, but it still hit that independent film glass ceiling, and topped out at just 19M.

In a just world, word of mouth will propel it to a long and fruitful life on DVD. It's a sweet, whimsical comedy built around absolutely stellar acting work by Keri Russell and Nathan Fillion. And as you watch it, you cannot help but feel the death of Shelley hanging over the whole thing, adding a poignancy, and once it's over, a palpable sadness. The story centers around an unwanted pregnancy and Russell's fears of becoming a mother, and Shelley had a daughter who was born shortly before the film was made, an experience that likely served as at least partial inspiration for the script. You can feel the love she must have felt for her daughter radiating from the film, and as a parent, that just devastated me. Still does.

It's funny, moving, wise, and lovingly well-crafted. It's a movie that gives you a glimpse at a genuine filmmaking talent, one that was just coming into full bloom, one that was taken away far too soon. It will steal your heart, and it will also break it.
