

# Movies

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real or imagined. That's much of the allure of writer-director Jeff Nichols' film: It keeps us guessing until the very end, and even the ending is open for interpretation. "Take Shelter" is both daring thematically and striking aesthetically, even as it pierces at the heart of the most relatable, everyday anxieties we all experience. And it features a tremendous lead performance from Michael Shannon as a husband and father in rural Ohio whose nightmares grow more vivid and urgent.

8. "Hell and Back Again" — Director and photographer Danfung Dennis has crafted a documentary about the war in Afghanistan with the mesmerizing, dreamlike artistry of a feature film. And yet he maintains the bracing, intimate realism needed to authentically tell a story about battle, survival and redemption. Dennis' structure is similar to that of "Martha Marcy May Marlene." He jumps back and forth between a 25-year-old Marine sergeant's return to his North Carolina hometown and the mission that left him seriously wounded. He is so in the thick of things, he'll repeatedly make you wonder how he got that amazing shot.

9. "Beginners" — Cute narrative gimmicks abound here, ones that might have seemed too cloying or self-conscious, but writer-director Mike Mills makes it all work with humor and poignancy. He also draws lovely, natural performances from Christopher Plummer and Ewan McGregor as a father and son who are finally getting to know each other, truly, toward the end of the father's life. And Melanie Laurent, who was so striking as the daring theater owner in "Inglourious Basterds," shows a softer side here, and an effortless gift for comedy, as the young woman who teaches McGregor's character how to fall in love, for once, as a grown-up.

10. "Bridesmaids" — Director Paul Feig's film takes the typically cliched wedding movie genre and completely upends it and reinvents it into something surprisingly daring and alive. But it also takes the Judd Apatow-style buddy comedy, with its mixture of raunchiness, neurosis and sentimentality, and tailors it to female experiences and sensibilities. That the film achieves both of these ambitious goals simultaneously while remaining (mostly) hilarious is a testament to the power of Kristen Wiig as co-writer and star, and to the awesomely eclectic ensemble cast of strong comediennes who surround her.

The top 10 films of 2011, according to AP Movie Writer David Germain:

1. "The Artist" — Enough with 3-D. Enough with super widescreen Technicolor. Enough with all the talking. Cinema finally is back where it belongs with this boxy, black-and-white, silent gem about a 1920s screen idol whose career is muzzled by the talkies. Director Michel Hazanavicius lets us all in on his wondrous dream, a film whose every moment delights with grand visual tableaux, lush music, ageless performances by Jean Dujardin and Berenice Bejo and the most adorable dog this cat lover has ever seen. Lud-dites unite. Silence really is golden.

2. "Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy" — Somewhere, Obi-Wan, er, Alec Guinness is smiling down on Jedi protege Gary Oldman. OK, so Oldman never apprenticed with Guinness, who did what seemed the definitive version of John le Carre's spymaster George Smiley in two miniseries 30 years ago. But Oldman makes the role completely his own, inhabiting Smiley's stillness and impenetrability, somehow conveying the man's subsurface passion while barely twitching a muscle. Director Tomas Alfredson and his phenomenal cast tell a fiercely cerebral, meticulously paced spellbinder, masterfully compacted from le Carre's sprawling novel.

3. "Hugo" — If we must have 3-D talking pictures, they all should be held to this standard. This is the only film I've told friends must be seen in 3-D. Martin Scorsese makes the third dimension not just eye-catching but essential to the experience. Scorsese's 3-D en-folds viewers in 1930s Paris, letting fans walk right alongside his two child heroes as they restore a bitter old man's faith and sense of wonder. And what a trip back to the moon it is to see Scorsese's affectionate re-creations of film pioneer Georges Melies' silent fantasies.

4. "Le Havre" — Finnish director Aki Kaurismaki's simple tale of a French shoeshine guy and an immigrant youth is sly and stealthy. Sweet yet unsentimental, understated yet rich in spirit, the film is populated by old souls who are a joy to watch, led by Andre Wilms as the shoeshiner who steps into the guardian angel role for an African boy who is in France illegally. The film hints that good deeds are a reward in themselves — but karma just might toss a little magic your way

for doing the right thing.

5. "The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo" — Rooney Mara. Wow. It seemed a thankless task to follow Noomi Rapace, the electrifying lone-wolf in the Swedish-language adaptation of Stieg Larsson's best-seller. But Mara goes deeper and darker with a controlled detonation of a performance in David Fincher's Hollywood version. As a disgraced journalist who teams with Larsson's avenging angel, Daniel Craig is an anchor of cool rationality around which Mara revolves like a demon. Fincher — one of the least sentimental directors around — and Larsson's harsh emotional terrain are an ideal match of filmmaker and material.

6. "50/50" — Who says cancer

can't be entertaining? Inspired by his own medical battle, screenwriter Will Reiser tells an authentic tale where laughter, lust, selfishness and duplicity don't go away just because of a little tumor. Every cancer patient should have a lewd, crude friend like the one Joseph Gordon-Levitt has here in Seth Rogen. Director Jonathan Levine juggles a jangle of emotions and keeps them all in the air, while the cast — including Anna Kendrick, Angelica Huston and Bryce Dallas Howard — makes every moment genuine.

7. "Submarine" — Richard Ayoade's directing debut is dead on in the emotions — from blissful obsession to abrupt indiffer-

ence — that accompany first love and teen desire. Craig Roberts as a big-eyed Welsh romantic and Yasmin Paige as a rebellious firebug are the unlikely but most adorable couple in all of Wales. Their tender story is sweetly shadowed by that of Roberts' dowdy parents (Sally Hawkins and Noah Taylor), seemingly a pair of dead fish who just might have a little spawning left in them.

8. "The Help" — You get a Big Hollywood Social Message — and you leave the theater with that feel-good spring in your step. First-time director Tate Taylor does a slick, smart job adapting childhood pal Kathryn Stockett's best-seller about black maids in 1960s Mississippi spilling the beans on their white employers.

And where to begin with the performances? Viola Davis, Emma Stone, Octavia Spencer, Jessica Chastain, Bryce Dallas Howard — we can go on and on. Working-class help or idle gentry, every woman in the film is polished to brilliance.

9. "Troll Hunter" — This deliriously weird mock documentary is a wild ride through remote and alien landscapes of Norway, where huge, hideous trolls — yes, trolls — are on a bloody rampage. Director Andre Ovredal adds his own mad spin to the found-footage horror story a la "The Blair Witch Project" and "Cloverfield." Purportedly shot by filmmakers who disappeared while chronicling the exploits of

a professional troll hunter, the film is a fresh, visceral take on the monster movie, loaded with impressive special effects and warped, wicked humor.

10. "The Muppets" — Somewhere back in the 1980s, there were two shows a college girlfriend and I never missed: "SCTV" and "The Muppet Show." Director James Bobin, Jason Segel and Amy Adams team for a gentle, loving rebirth for Kermit and pals, filled with those schmaltzy, toe-tapping Muppet tunes and giddily corny gags. The movie is an elaborate production, but it feels guileless and timeless. Don't know what became of the college girlfriend. But it's nice having the Muppets back in our lives. Mah na mah na.

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