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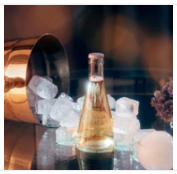
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# The 13 Best Film Performances by Actresses in 2020

This year's crop of female-fronted performances is deep, from steadfast stars to rising talents.



**Kate Erbland**
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In a year filled with its own myriad disappointments, one thing remained reliable: the ability for some of our brightest performers to shine their light on a variety of thrilling roles. From steadfast stars like Viola Davis, Frances McDormand, Youn Yuh-Jung, and Carey Mulligan to rising talents like Haley Bennett, Anya Taylor-Joy, Jessie Buckley, and Letitia Wright, this year's crop of female-fronted performances is deep.

As always, there were also plenty of exciting breakthrough performances this year, as we've already documented in a stacked list of rising stars of screens both large and small, but the women who qualify for this list of the best film performances by actresses have fully arrived in every sense of the term. Ahead, the 13 best performances by actresses in 2020.

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## Haley Bennett, "Swallow"

The on-screen ingestion — and evacuation — of a tack, AA battery, marble, and dirt is horrifying enough, but so much of what makes Carlo Mirabella-Davis' "Swallow" so deeply unsettling is Haley Bennett's performance as Hunter, a young woman driven to compulsive swallowing of inedible items in response to her newfound anachronistic life as a housewife to an entirely uninterested husband. And it's Bennett's eyes that sell the skin-crawling premise of the film, so much of which takes place with Hunter locked away, alone and hurting, in a gorgeous country house.

We realize how someone could be driven to such a thing by the way Hunter so longingly stares at a cup of ice sparkling just as bright as her own eyes. The relief she feels after her focused study of a marble gives way to her first ingestion of a non-food item. And the satisfaction she experiences after passing it, parading through the house to safely store the marble. The result is a more sensitive, heart-wrenching take on body horror, one that's made stronger by focusing just as much on the graphic acts as their psychological cause. —*CL*



**“I’m Thinking of Ending Things”**

## Jessie Buckley, “I’m Thinking of Ending Things”

After raising eyebrows with her raw and jangled performance in 2008’s “Beast,” and then barnstorming through “Wild Rose” with a full-throated fire that won her a whole new world of fans, Jessie Buckley entered 2020 on the precipice of international stardom. That status might still be a bit out of reach until she lands a Marvel movie and stops following her restless muse to far more interesting places, but in the meantime she’ll have to settle as one of the gutsiest and most intuitive actors in the world today — elastic and completely alive in a way that roots all of her work in the here and now even as it becomes unstuck in time around her. Some of what Buckley is asked to do in her role as the shapeshifting Young Woman at the heart of Charlie Kaufman’s “I’m Thinking of Ending Things” is virtually unprecedented in narrative cinema (e.g. becoming possessed by the ghost of Pauline Kael), yet Buckley leans into them all with such go-for-broke grace and intuition that you hardly clock the strangeness.

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does just the right amount. She conveys the inertia of being in a relationship that's past its expiration date, and also the white-hot terror of realizing that it won't just end on its own. It's a performance that manages to be in the moment and outside of it at once, as if Buckley were both the subject of a Wyeth painting and simultaneously the person looking at it. We've never seen anything like it, and yet it feels like Buckley is still just getting started. *—DE*

## Viola Davis, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"

One of the more powerful scenes in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" tracks a volatile Viola Davis as the title character, as she speaks absolute truth to power about not being valued as a Black woman, instead being seen as essentially a piggy bank. It's hard to watch that moment and not be affected, especially as a person of color. "All they want is my voice," she says. "Well, I've learned that. And they gonna treat me how I want to be treated, no matter how much it hurts them."

Gertrude "Ma" Rainey Pridgett, was the real-life "Mother of the Blues" who knew her worth and refused to be taken advantage of, and Davis nails it. She already has an Oscar, an Emmy, and a Tony, which puts her on a very short list of performers to achieve the proverbial "Triple Crown of Acting." She's also the first Black actress to do so. The Julliard grad has been impressing for almost 30 years, on stage and on big and small screens, playing almost every stereotype, from mammies to maids. But Ma Rainey is unlike any character Davis has played before. It's about time. *—TO*



**Viola Davis in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"**

Netflix

"The Assistant" is so good because of two women: director Kitty Green and star Julia Garner. This harrowing day in the life of a young woman's grim office routine makes riveting theater out of the mundane acts of complicity that enable one man's misdeeds. Green paints her single location set in drab greys; all overhead fluorescents and tasteless stock furniture. All that's left to focus on is Garner, whose character remains unnamed just like her mostly absent boss, and she carries the film with quiet intensity.

When she speaks, it's mostly to arrange a car or cancel a meeting. She's quieter in the cab with a young girl, curtly answering her questions about the hotel where she is dropping her. The biggest chunk of dialogue she gets is during a harrowing scene when she tries to report misconduct, and is waved off with magician-like gaslighting. But Garner doesn't need grand monologues or declarations to deliver her quiet but powerful performance. Her face says it all, and it's fascinating to watch the horrors unfold around her though her watchful eyes. —*JD*

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## Vanessa Kirby, "Pieces of a Woman"

New to film awards contention is Vanessa Kirby, who scored a BAFTA win and an Emmy nomination as rebellious fashionista Princess Margaret in Netflix's royal saga "The Crown." Kirby earned raves at Venice for her shattering performance as a woman who loses her child during a grueling (and one-take) home birth in "Pieces of a Woman," which was scooped up by Netflix.

Her star is rising: Kirby also scored Venice kudos for her supporting role in Mona Fastvold's lesbian love story "The World to Come" (Bleecker Street). Kirby is raw and vulnerable in "Pieces of a Woman" as a young professional who is shattered by the death of her baby daughter within minutes of her birth, which Kornél Mundruczó filmed in an astonishing 30-minute take. The aftermath of the loss takes its toll on her job, her partner (Shia LaBeouf), and her mother (Oscar-winner Ellen Burstyn), with whom Kirby has a memorable face-off. Both could land in Oscar contention, and certainly deserve to. —*AT*



**“Nomadland”**

## Frances McDormand, “Nomadland”

Frances McDormand never ceases to surprise with her quirky yet grounded performances. But after winning her first two Best Actress Oscars as the cunning Marge in “Fargo” and the fierce Mildred in “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri,” she turns in a career-defining, meditative performance as Fern, who embodies the pioneering spirit of “Nomadland.” This was a passion project for McDormand, who recognized the timeliness of the story about migrant laboring, and found a kindred spirit in the 61-year-old widow, who is forced to hit the road in her van when her mining town and life vanish as a result of the 2008 recession. McDormand produced the adaptation of Jessica Bruder’s non-fiction book, “Nomadland: Surviving America in the 21st Century,” and tapped director Chloé Zhao (“The Rider”) to helm this sweeping road picture, which became the perfect collaboration.

It’s all told through the eyes of the majestic Fern during her travels to the Badlands of South Dakota, the Nevada desert, and the Pacific Northwest, meeting a host of colorful characters who inspire her to embrace change and reinvent her life (all played by actual nomads with the exception of David Straithern). It’s like a cross between “The Grapes of Wrath” and a neo-realist drama. But it’s McDormand’s proud, weathered face that becomes the transcendent image of “Nomadland,” wonderfully captured by cinematographer Joshua James Richards, particularly during her sunrise and sunset strolls. They convey the beauty of the American west and the renewal of Fern’s humanity. *—BD*

## Elisabeth Moss, “The Invisible Man” and “Shirley”

It’s hard to think of a year in recent memory that hasn’t featured a tour de force turn from Elisabeth Moss, but delivering two equally riveting film performances in one year is a feat few can claim. Though her roles in both “The Invisible Man” and “Shirley” could not be more

"The Invisible Man," Moss plays a woman hanging by a thread as she is haunted by the stalking specter of her abusive ex-boyfriend. Though her terrified Cecilia is a bundle of nerves for most of the film, Moss imbues her with a wild conviction that strengthens the character into far more than a helpless victim, making her triumphant revenge all the more satisfying.

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In Josephine Decker's loosely interpreted Shirley Jackson "biopic," Moss embodies the eccentric horror novelist with an egomaniacal spirit that is as oddly compelling as it is unnerving. Just as she does to her young devotee Rose (Odessa Young), Moss' Shirley keeps the audience constantly on edge with her flights of fancy and fits of rage. Too often the scene-stealer, Moss has excellent scene partners in Young and Michael Stuhlbarg as her husband Stanley, who each hold their ground enough to make Moss up her game. As she did in "Her Smell," Moss proves she is a master genre blender: she can make the highbrow lowbrow, fill in the dark edges with lighthearted fun. It's a joy to watch her Shirley unravel, and disturbing to watch her delight in cruelty. Only Moss could have pulled it off. —*JD*



**"Promising Young Woman"**

Cassie is a meticulous note-taker, keeping track of names and numbers in a tidy little notebook she keeps stashed under her bed. That's for the best, because if someone happened to find said tidy little notebook and its list of men's names and all those neat little hashmarks, they might get the wrong idea about what it all means. Cassie is done with people getting the wrong idea about things — mostly, she's done with people getting the wrong idea about something as basic as empathy and humanity and respect — and her tidy little notebook is assisting her on that mission.

Emerald Fennell's raucous debut, "Promising Young Woman," twists its buzzword-laden, spoiler-free synopsis — it's a #MeToo rape revenge thriller with bite! — into something fresh and totally wild. Thank both Fennell's wicked mind and star Carey Mulligan's somehow even *more* wicked performance for that: cooked up by Fennell and dizzyingly embodied by an incendiary Mulligan, Cassie is an anti-heroine for our times, and a wholly unique one at that. The Sundance smash hit electrified audiences back in January, boasting one of Mulligan's best performances in a career marked by them, as she digs deep into a candy-colored, totally twisted part and comes up with something fresh and, God love her, genuinely frightening. —*KE*

## Amanda Seyfried, "Mank"

Marion Davies is the punching bag of "Citizen Kane," as it's long been presumed the Hollywood actress was the source of inspiration for Kane's overbearing and naïve second wife Susan Alexander. Fortunately, Davies' wit and charisma is fully restored in "Mank," thanks to Amanda Seyfried's career-best performance.

Sporting an irresistible Brooklyn accent, Seyfried cuts through Davies' occasional clumsiness to show the actress was far smarter and in control of her surroundings than Susan Alexander Kane led many to believe otherwise. Seyfried's Davies knows she's been afforded endless luxuries as the mistress of William Randolph Hearst, but she's not emotionally immune to the realization that she doesn't exactly fit into the tycoon's elite circle. Seyfried's performance embodies the best of "Mank" as its an old school Hollywood performance with just enough shades of added humanity to make the character feel contemporary. For many moviegoers, "Mank" has opened the door to an entire new playing field in Seyfried's career. —*ZS*

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## Anya Taylor-Joy, “Emma”

Anya Taylor-Joy’s trim and ringleted matchmaker in Autumn de Wilde’s elegant Jane Austen Regency romance is alert, always thinking, responding, and planning. She never gives up as she flounces, charms, and flirts to make others do her bidding, from her devoted father (Bill Nye) to her neighbor and foil, Mr. Knightley (Johnny Flynn), who criticizes her as she keeps misreading her friends and getting into trouble.

“The sound of clocks is in every room in ‘Emma,’ ” director Autumn de Wilde told The New Yorker. “Emma’s life is orderly, beautiful, and ornate. But the clock’s not working anymore, in her life.” As in Scott Frank’s Netflix hit series “Queen’s Gambit,” Taylor-Joy’s saucer eyes and toothy smile convey intelligence and sensuous possibility, which neither foppish Mr. Elton (Josh O’Connor) nor observant Knightley can resist. (He sees the best in her.) Next up for the Argentine/British actress with the muddled accent: the young Imperator Furiosa. George Miller, like De Wilde and Frank, can discern a rising star. —*AT*




**“Kajillionaire”**

Matt Kennedy

As the improbably-named Old Dolio Dyne, Evan Rachel Wood is the moving puzzle at the center of Miranda July's "Kajillionaire." Raised by her hustling parents Robert (Richard Jenkins) and Theresa (Debra Winger), Old Dolio has been endowed with such a skewed understanding of the world that she can barely interact with it. An awkward, lanky character who avoids eye contact and stumbles through fragments of thoughts with a robotic stare, she begins the movie trapped within the hapless routine of her family's two-bit scams. Forced to spend each day engaged in her parents' schemes as they struggle to make rent as the illegal tenants of an L.A. bubble factory, the Dynes survive however they can; as a result, their daughter has become a frantic, unhappy blank slate.

Only once she meets the kooky Melanie (Gina Rodriguez) does Old Dolio start to wake up to the wonders of the world and the potential of a fully-defined personality. Though the material is a world apart from the badass antics of "Westworld," like that performance, the role allows her to once again play a woman coming to grips with her in-house programming and learning how to challenge its borders. She's the engine of the whole movie, as she plays someone who "doesn't know anything about tender feelings" and shrinks into her body on default — at least until she learns a new way. It's a dizzying, unclassifiable turn from an actress who manages to surprise at every turn. *—EK*

## Letitia Wright, "Mangrove"

"Today I am here as a member of the Black Panther Movement." So says Letitia Wright as Althea Jones-LeCointe enters the plot of "Mangrove" right in the nick of time. As restaurant owner Frank Crichlow (Shaun Parkes) contends with racist police who keep raiding his Trinidadian restaurant, Althea jumps into the fray, seeing the potential to capture a wider frustration over racial injustice felt throughout London's Notting Hill community — and beyond.

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A far cry from the measured Shuri in "Black Panther," Wright plays the real-life Jones-LeCointe as a frantic intellectual and activist firebrand who clarifies the historical weight of the decision to take to the streets in protest. Singling out their "power as a collective force," and pushing back against "the fragmentation our people have suffered throughout our history," Wright's character

will take it from our children, too. We are the example. We must bear this responsibility." She makes a convincing case that resonates across the ages, as Wright turns what could easily become a didactic role into a timeless and profound salute to change. —*EK*

**"Mangrove"**

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## Yuh-Jung Youn, "Minari"

Veteran South Korean actress Yuh-Jung Youn is the emotional core of "Minari," as director Lee Isaac Chung shaped her character, Soonja, based on his very own grandmother. As the offbeat elderly matriarch who keeps an immigrant family (led by Steven Yeun and Yeri Han) tied to their

That's especially so as her arc starts to downward-spiral toward dementia after a nearly life-ending stroke upends the film (and its central family) during the second act. Youn's generosity as a performer is best represented in the lovely chemistry she has with her small grandchildren, played Alan Kim and Noel Kate Cho. She's a classically eccentric grandmother and hardly a warm caretaker, but her acerbic sense of humor and no-nonsense style far overshadow that. Youn makes it all very believable, never falling into caricature or the expected, and carving her own new path in a career full of such charged choices. *—RL*

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