

The New York Times

"Isaac Julien: The Best Movies Not Enough People Have Seen"

By Lovia Gyarkye

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Ivan Dixon (left) and Abbey Lincoln in Michael Roemer's "Nothing But a Man" (1964). Courtesy of the Everett Collection

'Nothing But a Man' (1964), directed by Michael Roemer

Roemer's feature — about a Black man and his wife (played by Ivan Dixon and the jazz vocalist Abbey Lincoln) facing discrimination and other challenges in 1960s America — is a favorite of the director Charles Burnett, 82. "Outside of Oscar Micheaux's films, it was one of the few films that really talked about what Black life was like," he says. "It was about common life, and a person trying to survive. It reminded me so much of the people in my neighborhood." When Burnett made his feature debut, "Killer of Sheep" (1978), he looked to this film for inspiration.



Michael Douglas in Curtis Hanson's "Wonder Boys" (2000). © Paramount Pictures/Photofest

'Wonder Boys' (2000), directed by Curtis Hanson

"'Wonder Boys' with Michael Douglas [about a professor with writer's block, based on Michael Chabon's 1995 novel] is just so simple and true," says the Canadian filmmaker and actor Xavier Dolan, 37. "Movies about the juxtaposition between a writer's journey and their everyday life are rare — I guess people think it's of little interest to the public."



Maka Kotto (left) and Eriq Ebouaney in Raoul Peck's "Lumumba" (2000). Entertainment Pictures/Alamy

'Lumumba' (2000), directed by Raoul Peck

"Criminally unseen" is how the director Ava DuVernay, 54, describes Peck's biographical drama about Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected prime minister of an independent Congo, whom Malcolm X called "the greatest Black man who ever walked the African continent." Lumumba was executed by the last remnants of the Belgian colonial empire six months after his election. "You're watching a story of a man that Western history has tried to erase," says DuVernay. Peck, a "Haitian master filmmaker who understands what empire does to its dissenters," she adds, "captures a moment when democracy was fragile and new and still trembling in the hands of people who believed in its promise. It reminds us that democracy has never been guaranteed. It lives or dies on the courage of those willing to defend it, often long after the institutions meant to protect it have fallen silent."



Isaac Julien (left) and Tilda Swinton in Julien's "Derek" (2008). Courtesy of Isaac Julien

'Derek' (2008), directed by Isaac Julien

In "Derek," Julien collaborated with Tilda Swinton to create a portrait of their friend and fellow filmmaker Derek Jarman, who died in 1994 of complications from AIDS. Rajendra Roy, 53, the chief curator of film at New York's Museum of Modern Art, recommends this documentary (structured around a daylong interview Jarman gave to the writer Colin MacCabe in the 1980s) not just as a love letter to the English artist, activist and forefather of New Queer Cinema but as a resource for anyone in search of guidance during fraught times. The movie, says Roy, is a reminder that "art can be 100 percent allied with — if not, you know, a driver of — an activist life."



A scene from Rungano Nyoni's "On Becoming a Guinea Fowl" (2024). Courtesy of A24

'On Becoming a Guinea Fowl' (2024), directed by Rungano Nyoni

Nyoni's second feature, which opens with an unexpected death, is a darkly humorous drama about a dysfunctional Zambian family, as well as a parable about how people live with trauma and abuse. The actress Danielle Deadwyler, 43, says it was "devastatingly underwitnessed" after its U.S. release last year. "This woman's oeuvre is playful, surreal, subtle and nuanced," she adds of Nyoni, who also directed the 2017 satire "I Am Not a Witch." "The storytelling is hilarious, and yet so poignantly dramatic and centered in the stakes of community."