

Awards Season Films Awash in Edgy Roles for Young Actors

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Fans of 2012's "Moonrise Kingdom" take note: There's an Easter egg of sorts hidden in "Manchester by the Sea" that should delight you: Lucas Hedges and Kara Hayward. Casting director Douglas Aibel first hired the pair as virtually untried preteens for the quirky Wes Anderson film — and four years later, put them back on screen again in "Manchester."

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"Lucas was the first person I thought of when I read the ["Manchester"] script," Aibel says. "There was a risk that his character could be an annoying smart aleck, but Lucas brought this emotional truth and emotional vulnerability that

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broke the role open.”

Hayward, who plays one of his girlfriends in “Manchester,” came more coincidentally to the new film, though four years ago she hadn’t even acted. “She didn’t want to be an actress; she just showed up for the open call and a few months later was shooting this leading role,” Aibel recalls.

Finding young actors for emotionally demanding, awards-season powerhouse roles is not for the faint of heart, and clearly when a winner, or two, comes along, casting directors hold on to their gems. There are thousands of wannabe young actors out there, many of whom have better access than ever to casting directors thanks to the rise of self-tape submissions, and many can end up in a film with serious Oscar potential before they even hire an agent.

But with more raw material to sift through, casting directors have to work even harder to ensure they’re hiring a rare bird: a child who can be believable in some truly extreme (if fictional) circumstances.

“Lion’s” casting team, headed up by Kirsty McGregor, possibly had one of the most daunting tasks of the season, wading through around 2,000 auditions and audition tapes over four months to find the right Indian children to play the film’s leads. After narrowing those faces down, they workshopped around 200 hopefuls and ultimately ended up with first-time actors Sunny Pawar and Abhishek Bharate.

“With Abhishek we never had any doubt [that he could play the demanding role], but with Sunny it was more of a leap of faith,” McGregor says. “We spent a lot of time in the audition process, so we felt he could cope, but bear in mind — he was 5 or 6 years old at the time. You have to avoid kids who can’t handle the repetition and hours of filming — many children don’t have the patience, but Sunny did.”

“Kids get distracted very quickly,” says Yesi Ramirez, who cast multiple child and teenage actors for “Moonlight,” all to play the same pair of boys growing up together. “You don’t want that distraction to carry over to set. I try to give them something to do — I give building blocks, which help them focus.”

Even with slightly older young actors, casting directors have to be aware of the

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psychology of the teen and preteen mind. Shaheen Baig hired Lewis MacDougall for “A Monster Calls,” but apart from the virtual newcomer’s skills as an actor, she needed to know he could be subtle in a way that didn’t come naturally to a boy his age.

“Lewis has wonderful instincts and a huge emotional landscape he wasn’t frightened to access,” Baig says. “Young boys at that point in their lives are trying to hide their emotions, so it’s hard to find young actors who are comfortable enough with who they are, who can emote.”

Mark Bennett, casting director for “20th Century Women,” also had to locate a nuanced teenage actor, and found Lucas Jade Zumann through a self-tape and a recommendation from another casting director. “The character needed to seem a bit green, but the actor could not be,” he says. “He was a character who listens and reacts; this is not a film where characters explain, ‘This is why this was significant and taught me about life.’ Listening on camera and responding authentically is more difficult than giving a kid dialogue to perform.”

Trying to cast a large family living in unique circumstances is also no easy task, and that’s what Jeanne McCarthy had to do for “Captain Fantastic,” a story about six children, and their dad, who live off the grid.

“You wanted to find kids who seemed connected emotionally and physically,” she says. “You had to find kids who were believable as kids who’ve grown up living in the woods and in nature — and also kids who could give over in their imagination to the situation of the film.”

Finding the right child, one who listens and can be present, who isn’t distracted and who feels right for the role is only the start of the long list of challenges casting directors face — they must deal with correct accents (think of “Manchester’s” specific New England cadences), visas (McGregor could only hire children who could obtain visas to film in Australia), and the occasional skittish or inappropriate parent.

Still, even when all of those factors come together nicely in one package, there’s yet one major hurdle: Can the child play in the big leagues? One of the final steps in the hiring process involves pairing up the film’s adult actors with the youngsters, to see if there’s chemistry and if they can hold their own.

In the case of “Fences,” Jovan Adepo had to face off in an emotionally charged audition with none other than the film’s director and star Denzel Washington. Casting director Victoria Thomas had admired Adepo for years, but had a hard time finding the right part for him — and was sure the role of Washington’s son in the film was right. But Washington did not make it easy.

“You can’t be intimidated,” Thomas says. “That’s a lot of power and force coming at you — and in the very first auditions [Washington] did with the actors he came right at them. He even went a little over, just to see how they’d react. You have to know right away if they can stand up to you as an actor.”

The ones that can take the heat, say casting directors, are always thrilling to discover — all note that the fun of casting the exact right person never grows dull.

“Sometimes, you don’t have an ‘a-ha, they’re perfect’ moment,” McCarthy says. “But when you do them, it’s so satisfying. When everything and everyone lines up and you feel like you’ve helped — you collaborated with the director and really bring something exciting to the project. It feels wonderful.”

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