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They may be young, but these teens carry a movie as easily as an iPhone

By **RANDEE DAWN**
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Elsie Fisher was one of several young actors who carried much of the weight of their films this season. Her tips for directors who work with teens: "Treat teenagers like people. You don't have to pander to them." (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

Awards season is full of prestige roles for veteran actors with big names — but just scratch below the surface of many of this year's lineup and you'll discover great performances from the newer, younger set. In films like "Wildlife," "Vox Lux," "Leave No Trace" and "Eighth Grade," adolescent actors go up against some of Hollywood's best and brightest — and truly give us hope for cinema's future. Here are four leading lights who are ready for their close-ups:

Elsie Fisher (Kayla, "Eighth Grade")

Age: 15 now; 14 when filming

Working next to giants: "I was a really big fan of Bo's [Burnham, director-writer] comedy before the film," says the Californian-born actress. "But after the first audition, we jumped into the script and there was an immediate friendship between us."

Directing the director: "Directors need to treat teenagers like people. You don't have to pander to them when you're working with them — just be respectful. They're just kids, people who don't pay taxes yet."

Playing myself: "Kayla was totally relatable for me; she's portrayed in a way that allows you to empathize with her actions. She's a confused teenager — and I know I'm a confused teenager — so it's hard not to relate to her. Eighth grade was especially tough for me in my life; my social life was really awkward that year, and I was considering stopping acting, but it's much better now."

Thomasin Harcourt McKenzie (Tom, "Leave No Trace")



Thomasin Harcourt McKenzie stars as Tom in Debra Granik's "Leave No Trace." (Scott Green / Bleecker Street) (Scott Green/Bleecker Street)

Age: 18 now; 16 when filming

Name game: Originally McKenzie's character was named Caroline, but director Debra Granik changed it. "It happened during the rehearsal period, or maybe even a week into filming," says the New Zealand-born McKenzie. "I feel like Tom suits the character a lot better than Caroline; it's gender-neutral and fitted her personality."

Directing the director: "Because teenagers are younger than directors, their opinions or ideas aren't always taken seriously. Debra treated me as her equal, but in general, teenagers are treated like kids on a set. "

Learning experience: At one point in the film, McKenzie's character works with a beehive, which the actress loved. "Listening to their buzzing and the warmth they generate from the hive was incredible. And the smell of the hive — the whole thing for me was calming and empowering as well, holding these tiny beings that could band together and kill me if they wanted or felt the need to."

Ed Oxenbould (Joe, "Wildlife")

Ed Oxenbould appears in "Wildlife" by Paul Dano. (Sundance Institute)

Age: 17 now; 16 when filming

Working next to giants: Oxenbould struggled not to be intimidated by actors Jake Gyllenhaal and Carey Mulligan or director Paul Dano. "I had to figure out a way to deal with that," says the Australian actor. "It's overwhelming. But they make you feel so relaxed — you never feel like they're in a different realm. They're so grounded."

Directing the director: "So often you get dialogue for [young people] that's rigid and unnatural. I sometimes help directors on set and say, 'We don't say that anymore.' Paul handled everything with so much confidence and passion — I never felt nervous."

Playing myself: "In some ways, Joe is like me; he's a quiet, passionate character, a keen observer. I have experienced some of what he's experiencing when his parents are fighting — but not the same way Joe does. I'm from a loud family that really likes to voice their opinions!"

Raffey Cassidy (Celeste/Albertine, "Vox Lux")

Raffey Cassidy in a scene from "Vox Lux." (Atsushi Nishijima)

[»](#)

Age: 17 now, 16 when filming

Working next to giants: Despite having co-stars that included Natalie Portman, Jude Law and Willem Dafoe, Cassidy, who's from England, swears she wasn't intimidated. "You say, 'Oh, my God, I'm going to work with Natalie Portman today,' and then when you meet them, you forget about it — they're normal people."

Directing the director: "All the directors I've worked with have had [portraying teens] completely right. ["Vox Lux" director Brady Corbet] had previously been an actor, so the way he gave direction — he knew how to make sure I completely understood."

Mentor moment: "I learned things from everyone; I ask a lot of questions on the set. I find it really interesting to learn what everyone else has to do on the set; everyone in their different professions added to my knowledge of how a film set works."

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