

# MONTHLY MOVIES

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Movie Review column for *Dvino Magazine*, a monthly production of *The Laredo Morning Times*.

January 2024

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## 2023: Looking back at a year of films

**By T. Rob Brown**

**F**locks of birds continue to travel farther south for the winter, as in the new animated film *Migration*. Rising or falling, various objects represented the sunset of 2023 and the dawn of a new year. It's time to reflect on the films of 2023.

Most of us are familiar with Times Square's ball drop. Numerous other cities also drop a ball, but unusual things also get dropped. OK, a disco ball drop in Baltimore may not sound unusual, but how about a red crab drop in Easton, Maryland? In Prestonsburg, Kentucky, they raise a star.

In St. George's, Bermuda, they drop a paper-mâché Bermuda onion covered in Christmas lights. In Miami, they hold "The Big Orange Drop" while other Florida cities drop various citrus fruits, like Brooksville, which drops a tangerine, or Sarasota, which drops a glowing pineapple. A Lego brick is even dropped at Legoland in Winter Haven, Florida. The list continues around the country with buzzards, opossums, hogs, jugs, a sardine, a wild blueberry, and even an Indy car in Indianapolis.

In my hometown of Kansas City, Missouri, the Comedy City improv theater's troupe members drop Michael "The Doughboy" Maslak, while draped in lights.

Texas offers a few unique New Year's Eve drops/raises: San Antonio raises the elevator at the Tower of the Americas, a giant "Texas-sized" mirrored ball formerly descended in McAllen, Austin formerly dropped a Lone Star but now drops a simple mirrored ball in the Austin Woods neighborhood, and Houston offers two experiences—one a Lone Star raise and the other called the Noon Ball Drop at the Children's Museum of Houston to celebrate New Year's Noon.

Does Laredo have its own special drop? If not, perhaps we should invent one utilizing something culturally significant to Laredoans. Perhaps we could raise or lower the seven flags that have flown over Laredo.

No matter how you celebrated the New Year, I hope you have a great one and let's review 2023's films. Due to the screenwriters' strike, it feels like this year was a bit lacking—sure, we had some strong films, but we didn't have variety or too many original blockbuster ideas. I fear for 2024's cinema, also due to those strikes.

Granted, I didn't see every film released last year; my opinions are based only on those I watched. Let's break them down in each category for best of the year.

To begin, this was a weak year for the following: holiday films, musicals, romantic comedies, and martial arts films. Opposite, we had a variety of choices in the following: drama, superhero, animated, and action.

For the category of Best 2023 Holiday Film, I watched the following, listed alphabetically: *Candy Cane Lane*, *Exmas*, *It's a Wonderful Knife*, *Silent Night*, and *Wonka*. Over the holiday break, I found myself disappointed by Eddie Murphy's and Amazon Prime's *Candy Cane Lane*; this film was a mess. On the other hand, Timothée Chalamet lit up the screen in the prequel to *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971). I give this category to *Wonka*. This fun film tells the tale of how Wonka became the famous chocolate maker, long before meeting young Charlie. It shows us Chalamet's range and that extends beyond his sci-fi powerhouse *Dune* (2021) and the forthcoming *Dune: Part Two* (scheduled for March 1, 2024). It's also a story about the human spirit and never giving up on your dreams.

Sure, it didn't closely follow Wonka's history from the original Roald Dahl novels, which I read as a child: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) and *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* (1972). In the sequel novel, part of it focuses on how Wonka first meets the Oompa Loompas—this varies from what we see in the film, but not enough to harm the property or destroy childhood memories.

We see smaller roles in the film by famed U.K. actors Rowan Atkinson and Matt Lucas, as well as U.S. actor Keegan-Michael Key. Since the original books were written by a U.K. author, it's good to see U.K. representation in the film. Obviously, the biggest U.K. name in the film is Hugh Grant (*Love Actually* (2003), *Notting Hill* (1999)) who plays the Oompa Loompa. His role is humorous and odd, to be expected. Earlier in 2023, he also starred in a comedically odd, yet wonderful, role as Forge Fitzwilliam in *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*. In recent years, Grant moved away from rom-coms.

"I got too old and fat and ugly to do romantic comedies, obviously," Grant told Drew Barrymore, host of *The Drew Barrymore Show* on Dec. 11. "So, I got offered more interesting things." Grant costarred with Barrymore in the rom-com *Music and Lyrics* (2007).

Unfortunately, I didn't get to see *Journey to Bethlehem*, which might have won this category. It stars Milo Manheim as Joseph, Fiona Palomo as Mary, Joel Smallbone as Antipater, and screen legend Antonio Banderas as Herod. Christian music artist Lecrae plays Gabriel.

On a side note, I saw *Silent Night* but found some of the editing and cinematic choices odd. There is a scene where we're shown three different angles of the main character's wife in the hospital hallway and each shot zooms in on her eyes, yet there is no visible emotion—such as crying—so the shots are jarring and unnecessary for storytelling. The action sequences in the film are good, but not up to the John Wick standard.

Directed by Paul King, *Wonka*, Rated PG, stars Chalamet, Grant, Calah Lane, Key, Paterson Joseph, Lucas, Mathew Baynton, Atkinson, Sally Hawkins, and Jim Carter. At 1 hour and 56 minutes, it received a certified-fresh 83% on the Tomatometer and a 91% audience score at Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 7.3/10 on the International Movie Database.

For the category of Best 2023 Musical Film, I watched the following: *The Little Mermaid*, *Wish*, and *Wonka*. In the end, I have to also give this category to *Wonka*. The other two films didn't fill me with childlike wonderment like *Wonka* did—it brought back nostalgia and a longing to rewatch the 1971 original. The songs were both familiar and new, with some original numbers.

For the category of Best 2023 Sci-Fi Film, I watched the following: *65*, *Asteroid City*, *The Creator*, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*, *Jules*, and *Transformers: Rise of the Beasts*. Overall, it still wasn't a strong year for sci-fi. Initially, I thought this category would go to runner-up *Guardians Vol. 3*. Despite *Guardians* being my favorite Marvel Cinematic Universe franchise and I'm listening to its soundtrack as I write this article, I have to give this category to *The Creator*. This film was original, interesting, great effects, but a strong and compelling story with enough mystery to keep us interested and enough moral dilemma for the audience to relate to the characters' experiences.

I'm not saying *Guardians Vol. 3* didn't have all or most of those elements, but *The Creator* was more true to sci-fi.

*The Creator*, Rated PG-13, directed by Gareth Edwards, stars John David Washington, Gemma Chan, Ken Watanabe, and Sturgill Simpson. At 2 hours and 13 minutes, it received a 66% on the Tomatometer and a 76% audience score at Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 6.8/10 at IMDb.

For the category of Best 2023 Comedy Film, I watched: *Asteroid City*, *Barbie*, *Bottoms*, *Dumb Money*, *Haunted Mansion*, *Joy Ride*, and *Jules*. The win here has to go to *Barbie*. It doesn't deserve this just because it collected a phenomenal \$1.44 billion worldwide. A huge bankroll doesn't always mean it's the best film.

In this instance, it's a hilarious film—a fun ride across the worlds of make-believe and reality.

*Barbie*, Rated PG-13, directed by Greta Gerwig, stars Margot Robbie, Ryan Gosling, America Ferrera, Kate McKinnon, Issa Rae, Rhea Perlman, Will Ferrell, John Cena, Michael Cera, Kingsley Ben-Adir, Simu Liu, and Ncuti Gatwa. At 1 hour and 54 minutes, it received a certified-fresh 88% on the Tomatometer and an 83% audience score at Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 6.9/10 at IMDb.

For Best 2023 Rom-Com Film, I watched: *Exmas*, *The Out-Laws* and *Renfield*. The win goes to *Renfield*, easily the strongest here.

In Best 2023 Drama Film, I watched: *Air*, *Dumb Money*, *Godzilla Minus One*, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, *Missing*, *Napoleon*, *Oppenheimer*, *Radical*, and *Sound of Freedom*. This was a difficult and highly competitive category. Every film here is worth watching. In the end, it comes down to two: ***Killers of the Flower Moon*** and ***Oppenheimer***. This is the first time we've had a tie, but I love both films for different reasons.

For Best 2023 Superhero Film, I watched: *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania*, *Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom*, *Blue Beetle*, *The Flash*, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*, *The Marvels*, and *Shazam! Fury of the Gods*. This definitely went to ***Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3***. I need to list a runner-up: *Blue Beetle*. Unfortunately, Marvel's storytelling quality dropped in the past couple years and DC's storytelling seems to be up. *Blue Beetle* shows us that DC can have fun and write a good story with fair cultural representation that doesn't feel forced.

In Best 2023 Animated Film, I watched: *The Boy and the Heron*, *Elemental*, *Migration*, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*, *The Super Mario Bros. Movie*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem*, and *Wish*. This one goes to ***Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse***. Expanding on the first film, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), this film introduced us to the far-reaching nature of the Spider-Verse and what it means to all the Spider-People. I need a runner-up for *The Boy and the Heron*—this is the final film directed by Hayao Miyazaki of Studio Ghibli, which brought us notable Japanese anime films like *Princess Mononoke* (1997), *Spirited Away* (2002), and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2005). His final film went into storyboarding in July 2016. Due to pandemic delays, Miyazaki worked with a total of 60 animators to hand-draw the final epic of his career, completing animation in October 2022. It released in Japan on July 14, 2023, and hit U.S. markets later that year.

For Best 2023 Horror Film, I watched: *A Haunting in Venice*, *Five Nights at Freddy's*, *Haunted Mansion*, *It's a Wonderful Knife*, *The Last Voyage of the Demeter*, and *Renfield*. Keep in mind, I don't watch a lot of horror, so your favorites might not be included. I have to give this one to ***A Haunting in Venice***. Normally, a murder mystery wouldn't exactly fit into horror, but this one incorporates supernatural elements and a Halloween theme.

In Best 2023 Action Film, I watched: *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*, *Expend4bles*, *Fast X*, *Godzilla Minus One*, *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny*, *John Wick: Chapter 4*, *Meg 2: The Trench*, *Mission Impossible: Dead Reckoning Part One*, and *Plane*. This was another difficult category with lots of competition. Runner-up *Mission Impossible* really impressed me in this category, but it's hard to face down the king of monsters ***Godzilla Minus One***. This film had a great story, interesting characters, a unique challenge, and the big bad kaiju himself.

For Best 2023 Fantasy Film, I watched: *Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves*, *The Hunger Games: The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes*, and *Wonka*. Winner: ***Dungeons & Dragons***.

Our final category is Best 2023 Martial Arts Film. For this, I watched: *Expend4bles*, *John Wick: Chapter 4*, and *Silent Night*. This goes to ***John Wick: Chapter 4***.

Here's hoping for a great 2024: Happy New Year!

"The show must go on."