

Big stars, little films

Long before the premieres, the Academy Awards and the names emblazoned above a cinema marquee, every actor was simply an actor looking for work – wherever in the world they found humble beginnings, destined for great things

From Timothée Chalamet’s teenage appearances to Harrison Ford’s turn as a bellhop, these are the early chapters in the careers of some of the world’s most celebrated stars.

TIMOTHÉE CHALAMET

The scale of Timothée Chalamet’s current career makes his earliest work particularly intriguing. He has become a leading figure in contemporary cinema, moving from the intimate drama of *Call Me by Your Name*

to the vast productions of *Dune* and the musical spectacle of *Wonka*.

His first screen appearance was considerably more modest. Chalamet appeared in an episode of *Law & Order* in 2009, followed by small television parts before joining *Homeland*. His feature-film credits began with *Men, Women & Children*, and he appeared briefly in Christopher Nolan’s *Interstellar* as the younger version of Casey Affleck’s character.

At the time, there was little indication of how quickly his

career would accelerate. *Call Me by Your Name* changed that. His performance as Elio Perlman earned him an Academy Award nomination and established a distinctive screen presence: intelligent, vulnerable and capable of carrying a film almost entirely through subtle changes in expression. His early television work now feels like a fascinating prelude to a remarkably fast ascent.

JESSICA CHASTAIN

Jessica Chastain’s career developed through persistence rather than an overnight transformation. After graduating from Juilliard, she spent years appearing in television productions, building experience in a succession of guest and supporting roles.

Among them was an appearance in *Veronica Mars*, while her early feature work included the independent drama *Jolene*, in which she played the title role. These projects gave her valuable screen experience without immediately making her a household name.

The turning point came in 2011, when Chastain appeared in six films, an extraordinary workload that included *The Tree of Life*, *Take Shelter* and *The Help*. Her performance as Celia Foote in *The Help* brought an Academy Award nomination, followed by another for *Zero Dark Thirty* the following year.

Her Oscar for *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* in 2022 arrived after years of carefully chosen performances. Looking back at those early credits, the achievement feels less like sudden discovery and more like the culmination of a long apprenticeship.

JAKE GYLLENHAAL

Jake Gyllenhaal’s first acting experiences came unusually early. Raised in a filmmaking family, he entered the profession as a child, making his film debut in *City Slickers* in 1991. At 11, he played the son of Billy Crystal’s character. More substantial work followed, including a role in his father’s film *A Dangerous Woman*. As Gyllenhaal grew older, his performances became increasingly ambitious. *October Sky* gave him his first significant leading role, but *Donnie Darko* truly announced him as an actor worth watching.

Since then, Gyllenhaal has repeatedly gravitated towards complicated material. *Brokeback Mountain*, *Zodiac*, *Prisoners* and *Nightcrawler* each offered radically different characters, while his performances have often explored obsession, isolation and moral uncertainty.

That makes the young Gyllenhaal in *City Slickers* particularly fascinating. The performance belongs to a child actor, yet knowing what came later gives those early scenes an intriguing historical dimension.



LEONARDO DICAPRIO

Leonardo DiCaprio’s early credits contain one particularly unexpected entry: *Critters 3*, a 1991 horror sequel. Hardly the obvious starting point for a future Oscar winner, but DiCaprio was already working steadily. That same year, he joined the cast of *Growing Pains*, playing Luke Brower, a teenager taken into the Seaver household. His development soon became impossible to ignore. In *This Boy’s Life*, he appeared opposite

Robert De Niro, while *What’s Eating Gilbert Grape* demonstrated a dramatic ability that earned him his first Academy Award nomination at only 19 years old.

Then came *Romeo and Juliet* and *Titanic*. The latter changed his professional life completely, turning him into one of the world’s most recognisable young actors.

Rather than remaining associated with conventional leading-man roles, DiCaprio subsequently pursued demanding

collaborations with directors including Martin Scorsese, Christopher Nolan and Quentin Tarantino. The contrast between those later films and *Critters 3* makes his early career one of Hollywood’s more remarkable role transformations.

NICOLE KIDMAN

Nicole Kidman’s earliest work offers a particularly enjoyable piece of Australian cinema history.

At just 15, she appeared in *BMX Bandits*, a Sydney-set

adventure comedy film that became a popular Australian production of the 1980s. Kidman subsequently worked extensively in Australian film and television, gradually moving from teenage roles towards more demanding dramatic parts. Her international breakthrough came with *Dead Calm* in 1989. The psychological thriller, filmed around the Australian coast, placed Kidman alongside Sam Neill and Billy Zane and gave international audiences a much stronger sense of her ability. From there, her career expanded across continents and genres. She has played writers, aristocrats, musicians, mothers, detectives and historical figures, moving with equal confidence between cinema and television.

Seeing her as a teenager in *BMX Bandits* therefore offers more than nostalgia. It captures an actor at the beginning of a career that would eventually span decades and continents. ➤





Left: DiCaprio with Brad Pitt and Margot Robbie on the red carpet for *Once Upon A Time in Hollywood* **Below:** George Clooney with Ryan Gosling at *The Ides of March* premiere in Los Angeles in 2011

MARGOT ROBBIE

Margot Robbie's first major acting chapter unfolded on one of Australia's best-known television streets.

She joined *Neighbours* in 2008 as Donna Freedman, initially in a supporting capacity before becoming a regular. The experience provided the young actor with the discipline of a long-running daily production and introduced her to Australian audiences.

After leaving the series, Robbie moved to America. Her international breakthrough arrived with Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*, where she played Naomi Lapaglia opposite Leonardo DiCaprio.

Her subsequent career has combined acting with increasingly significant producing responsibilities. She received Academy Award nominations for *I, Tonya* and *Barbie*, while films such as *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* demonstrated her ability to move comfortably among some of the industry's most prominent filmmakers.

For anyone familiar with her later work, the *Neighbours* footage is a fascinating reminder of how different a star's first professional world can be from the one they eventually inhabit.

BRAD PITT

Brad Pitt spent several years accumulating small credits before Hollywood fully recognised his potential.

His earliest film work included appearances in *No Way Out*, *No Man's Land* and *Less than Zero*, while television provided a succession of guest roles. He appeared in programmes including *Dallas*, *Growing Pains* and *The Facts of Life*.

Then came *Thelma & Louise*. His role as J.D. was relatively limited, but the film established an immediate screen presence that could not easily be overlooked.

What followed was a career remarkable for its variety. Pitt moved between mainstream entertainment and challenging material, working with directors including David Fincher,

Quentin Tarantino and the Coen brothers. He became an actor equally comfortable carrying a major studio production or disappearing into an ensemble.

Those early television appearances are a reminder that charisma alone does not create a career. Even one of Hollywood's most recognisable faces spent many years building towards his big breakthrough.

GEORGE CLOONEY

George Clooney's story is a useful counterpoint to the child stars.

His breakthrough arrived relatively late, after years of television work.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, he appeared in numerous series, including *The Facts of Life*, *Roseanne* and *The Golden Girls*. He was a working actor, but hardly a household name.

That changed when he joined *ER* as Dr Doug Ross in 1994. The medical drama made him internationally famous and provided the platform for a substantial film career.

Clooney subsequently demonstrated that his ambitions extended well beyond acting. *Out of Sight*, *Three Kings* and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* established his film credentials, while *Good Night, and Good Luck* revealed his ability as a director and producer.

His early television appearances are therefore less a glimpse of an obvious superstar than evidence of something more interesting: a career that took time to find its ideal scale. ■

