

EYE ON THE OSCARS:
TALENT RACE

Bradley Cooper plays a manic-depressive in "Silver Linings Playbook."

THESPS DISCOVER DAMAGED GOOD

Actors carefully calibrate emotionally wounded characters

By Diane Garrett

Getting the leading role in "Silver Linings Playbook" was scary for Bradley Cooper. He knew playing Pat Solitano, a manic-depressive prone to rages under extreme duress, would be a challenge. But he also knew director David O. Russell's penchant for improvising would really keep him on his toes.

Sure enough, Russell frequently rewrote his adaptation of Matthew Quick's novel on set and encouraged the cast to experiment on camera. The key, Cooper says, was finding the right tone for a very sensitive character with no emotional filter.

"He feels things we all feel, but they are amplified," Cooper says. "Events get the better of him."

Pat, newly sprung from a mental institution when the movie begins, is one of series of damaged characters this awards season, along with moonshine-swilling live wire Freddie Quell in "The Master" and Denzel Washington's boozy pilot in "Flight." The normal seeming school teacher played by Mary Elizabeth Winstead in "Smashed" turns out to have severe emotional problems as well; Christian Bale's Bruce Wayne is more emotionally wounded than ever in "The Dark Knight Rises."

Cooper says that the Pat moviegoers see

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Joaquin Phoenix's Freddie Quell in "The Master" is one of several emotionally troubled characters this season, along with Denzel Washington's substance-abusing pilot in "Flight."

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on screen is the toned-down version.

"We were very conscious of modulating Pat so that he's palatable, but stays true to character," Cooper says. "We really discovered it on camera."

Intent on winning back his estranged wife and job as a teacher, Pat is thrown further off balance by Jennifer Lawrence's Tiffany, a widow working through her own emotional issues. "He's white-knocking his life," Cooper says of Pat. "He thinks he will be OK if he gets his wife back and his job back, and then he starts to have feelings for Tiffany, which is very confusing for him."

John Gatins, the screenwriter for "Flight," says Washington recognized the challenge of playing Whip Whitaker, a gifted pilot with serious substance abuse issues, right away. Meeting for dinner, the actor told him, "this is really dangerous material," Gatins recalls.

On set, Gatins watched as Washington carefully "calibrated in every scene how inebriated he was. As big as the performance is, it's also very subtle," Gatins says.

Matthias Schoenaerts didn't worry about playing an emotionally stunted character that wasn't always likeable in "Rust and Bone."

"Apparently a lot has happened to him, and we don't know what," he says of Ali. "As an actor, I try to never judge."

All turns out to be just what Marion Cotillard's Stephanie needs after she loses her

legs training whales; he refuses to pity her and she in turn helps him with his fledgling fighting career.

"These two lost souls find each other," Schoenaerts says. "One is physically handicapped and one is emotionally handicapped. They need one another to find purpose in life and that's through love."

In the annals of films about damaged characters that makes "Rust and Bone" a two-fer. This year's wave of movies about emotionally damaged characters fit into a long line of projects "that cry out Oscar, Oscar," observes film scholar Jeanine Basinger. As awards season veterans know full well, overcoming afflictions, whether physical or emotional, tend to have a much better shot at statues than comedic roles.

"The bottom line is, people making movies are looking for stories about unusual characters, in unusual situations," says Basinger, the chair of film studies at Wesleyan U. in Connecticut. "Actors always want to be challenged," she adds. "Obviously, any time you are good at your craft, you want to push it to the highest level. A basketball player wants to play with LeBron James. Actors want the challenge of playing a character who is not ordinary."

Paul Thomas Anderson, for one, declines to apologize for Freddie Quell's rough edges in "The Master."

"He's certainly more appealing than a happy, undamaged person," says Anderson, who wrote and directed the film. "We don't need to see another movie about a happy, undamaged person." ■