

Here's Why '10 Things I Hate About You' Will Always Be Heath Ledger's Greatest Role

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Ten years ago today, Heath Ledger unexpectedly passed away from what coroners eventually ruled to be an accidental drug overdose. His death was not only a shock for Ledger's friends and family members, but for his fans—having just completed his Oscar-winning performance as The Joker in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, Ledger was at the top of his professional game.

Ledger deserves all the kudos in the world for his performance as The Joker, as well as his turn as gruff, soft-spoken cowboy Ennis Del Mar in the groundbreaking *Brokeback Mountain*, his dramatic interpretation of a famous Australian outlaw in *Ned Kelly*, and even his odd but intriguing portrayal of Bob Dylan in *I'm Not There*.

So it might come as a surprise that the role for which I cherish Ledger most dearly is not one that received overwhelming critical acclaim or awards buzz (although in my opinion, an awards show that acknowledges above-average teen comedies should exist and would draw in just as many viewers as the Oscars). Indeed, Ledger's turn as misunderstood bad boy Patrick Verona in *10 Things I Hate About You* is one of his best performances and one of the most effective leading performances in a rom-com ever.



Ledger wasn't even 20 when *10 Things* premiered in March 1999, and before filming *10 Things* he had only been credited in two small Australian films, *Blackrock* and *Paws*. But little preteen me believed that Ledger, to whom the role of Patrick seemed to come so easily, was a seasoned Hollywood veteran.

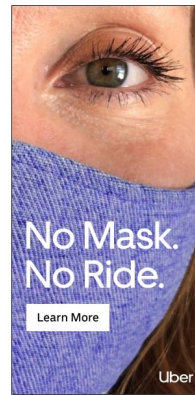
On the surface, Patrick Verona is pretty straightforward. He's got an unearned bad boy reputation that he doesn't seem to care about or want to shake—despite the fact that the rumour about him eating an entire duck (minus the beak and feet, of course) is patently false. He's a loner, someone who would much rather smoke and play pool on his own than accompany someone to a house party or a crowded club. But he eventually learns to open his heart and embrace non-solitary activities like paintball when he falls in love with Kat Stratford (Julia Stiles), an unapologetic feminist who's just as intelligent, stubborn, and cynical as he is.



Slowly but surely transforming your character from someone who doesn't believe in nor ever thinks about love into someone who's willing to serenade his object of affection in the middle of a school football field isn't easy. Many a rom-com leading man has failed (and will continue to fail) to make this transformation convincing, including Matthew McConaughey in *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* and Matthew McConaughey in *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*. But Ledger manages to toe the line between unfeeling tough guy and rebel with a heart of gold so carefully and so perfectly that the final, dramatic kiss between him and Stiles feels earned and inevitable rather than forced.

Of course, Ledger's performance would fall flat if it weren't for Stiles, whose character transformation is equally as effective and believable as Ledger's. But as an idealistic 12-year-old who carefully cut out pictures of Josh Hutcherson from her copies of *J-14* and *M* (and as an idealistic 22-year-old whose phone background is a picture of Oscar Issac), I can't help but be mesmerized by Ledger's effortless charm in *10 Things*, no matter how many times I watch it. And it's not just me. Despite being marketed to a North American audience, the *10 Things* producers not only decided to cast Ledger, a little-known Australian actor, over a known heartthrob like Leonardo DiCaprio or Mark-Paul Gosselaar, but also let him keep his Australian accent in the film. Yep, Ledger and his accent were so naturally charming that they decided to throw in a few lines about the Verona family's Aussie history just for kicks.

10 Things I Hate About You is and always has been my favourite romantic comedy of all time, thanks in large part to Heath Ledger's performance. And while many people will (and should) use this day to praise Ledger's dramatic performances, his rendition of "Can't Take My Eyes Off Of You" and his devastating, wordless reaction to Julia Stiles' "10 Things" poem should be remembered just as fondly.



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