

# 75th Academy Award nominations: as eclectic and confounding as ever

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The nominations for the 75th annual Academy Awards, announced February 11, offer recognition to the most disparate and mutually contradictory group of works. As usual, the nominations seem to express a groping in the dark more than anything else, with the occasional happy choices. Granted that the 5,800 members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences are limited in their selections by the films that have appeared in the previous year, nonetheless, they often add their own confusion, eclecticism and outright disorientation.

The inane musical *Chicago*, about two women competing for tabloid supremacy, directed by Rob Marshall, with Catherine Zeta-Jones and Renée Zellweger, gathered 13 nominations, including best picture, best director and three acting nominations.

*Gangs of New York*, Martin Scorsese's pernicious depiction of nineteenth century gang warfare in the slums of New York, was nominated in 10 categories, including best picture, best actor and best director. *The Hours*, a self-involved look at critical moments in the lives of three women, including author Virginia Woolf, received nine nominations, best picture among them.

On a more positive note, *The Pianist*, Roman Polanski's moving film version of the memoirs of Wladyslaw Szpilman, a Jewish musician who survived the war in hiding in Warsaw, was nominated for seven awards, including best picture, best actor and best director.

*About Schmidt*, Alexander Payne's work in which a middle-aged, middle class American recognizes the essential emptiness of his life, received two nominations. Jack Nicholson was tipped for best actor in the film, receiving his twelfth nomination, making him the most-nominated male actor ever. Meryl Streep, nominated for best supporting actress in *Adaptation*,

became the most-nominated actor ever, with her thirteenth such honor.

The best actor category has three worthy nominees, Nicholson, Adrien Brody in *The Pianist* and Michael Caine in *The Quiet American*.

Caine's was the only nomination received by Phillip Noyce's film, one of the few intelligent films released last year, based on the novel by Graham Greene. The work treats the activities of the CIA in Vietnam in the latter days of French colonial rule. It is telling that Caine, one of the most respected and honored figures in the film industry, was obliged to fight simply to have the film shown in US cinemas.

The British actor, in the words of an *Associated Press* journalist, "started a crusade to ensure that *The Quiet American* was released in theaters amid fears that it would go straight to video because it critiques American intervention overseas." Not only does it criticize American foreign policy, it portrays a US government operative carrying out a terrorist operation and blaming it on Washington's enemies.

*The Quiet American* was one of the first major victims of the effort by the Hollywood film studios, using September 11 as a pretext and with Bush administration encouragement, to crack down on "unpatriotic" and "anti-American" sentiments.

Caine told the press, "It's been a long, long journey. I just wanted to see whether I could get a nomination. And I've got one, I'm happy now and my work is done."

Along with the four mentioned, the other best picture nominee is *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. Nicolas Cage (*Adaptation*) and Daniel Day-Lewis (*Gangs of New York*) also received best actor nominations, while Salma Hayek (*Frida*), Nicole Kidman (*The Hours*), Diane Lane (*Unfaithful*) and

Julianne Moore (*Far From Heaven*) were nominated for best actress. Moore was also nominated for best supporting actress for her role in *The Hours*.

Christopher Walken, one of the most unpredictable and intriguing actors currently working, received a supporting actor nomination for his role in Steven Spielberg's *Catch Me If You Can*.

Radical gadfly Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine*, a confused look at America's "gun culture," received a nomination in the best documentary feature category. Despite its muddled outlook, Moore's film contains moments and insights that US and international audiences ought to see.

Of course, the substance or lack of substance of the films nominated means little to the studio executives whose careers and incomes are materially dependent on Academy Award success. A nomination, and even more so an award, can mean tens of millions of dollars at the box office for certain films.

To industry insiders the Academy Awards appears as a conflict between competing studios. From this point of view, Miramax, a Disney unit, was considered the big winner Tuesday. Three of its films, *Chicago*, *Gangs of New York* and *The Hours*, featured prominently in the nominations. The various publicity machines will go into high gear between now and March 23, the day of the award ceremony. As the *Financial Times* puts it, "the studios will now slug it out over the next few weeks in the trade papers, with high-profile adverts and marketing campaigns to secure the votes of Academy members."

The self-absorption and marketing cynicism for which the film industry is so justly famous are particularly distasteful this year, as the nominations were announced on the eve of a US assault on Iraq. An article on the Zap2it web site notes: "A postponement of the Oscars in the event of war could create havoc, much like the delay of the Emmys [television awards] after the Sept. 11 attacks two years ago. For ABC-TV, the commercial time that sells for up to \$1.4 million for a 30-second-spot would be lost if the show is canceled."

The article also raises a question as to whether figures in the film industry associated with anti-war positions will be allowed a forum: "The biggest problem anticipated this year is that politically oriented actors might make protest speeches to the one billion audience

members worldwide who will be watching the show. So far, Sean Penn, Susan Sarandon, Dustin Hoffman, Vanessa Redgrave, George Clooney and Richard Gere—all of whom have made public anti-war statements, or have made political speeches at past Oscars—have not been slated as presenters."



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