

The 80th Annual Academy Awards: A mostly routine affair

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The 80th Academy Awards ceremony was held in Los Angeles on Sunday and proceeded as one might have expected. The broadcast was scripted and stage-managed to a point where any sense of spontaneity or liveliness was largely drained out of it.

The tone of this year's show struck one as perhaps even more self-congratulatory than usual, thanks in part to clips played throughout the ceremony in which past Oscar winners discussed how overwhelmed they felt by the honor.

With attention focused on glamour and celebrity, little of the reality of daily life in the US found expression in the broadcast. At a time when the country is gripped by financial crisis resulting in record home foreclosures, when colonial wars are being fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, very little of this emerged in a broadcast honoring the most popular art form of the past century.

There was, however, a sense that the 100-day writers' strike had shaken up Hollywood. Not for nothing did host Jon Stewart joke that the town "needs a hug."

Stewart commented on the writers' strike in his opening monologue, saying he was happy that the fight was over and hoped the awards show was a chance to make up. He acknowledged, however, that some "collateral damage" remained.

Stewart's job as Oscar host was to defuse any tension over real-world concerns, to reassure and relax. He was there to breathe the sigh of relief on behalf of the Academy.

While the ceremony was lacking, most of the films nominated this year suggest that the ugly truth about American capitalism is making its way into the work of at least certain filmmakers, albeit with limited results. *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will Be Blood*, the

favorites of the Academy this year, are dark works. One tells the story of a desperate man who risks his life to hold onto a briefcase of money he took from a gang of drug dealers, the other is about a brutal oil tycoon.

However serious the intentions of the filmmakers, however, their products suggest they are simply overwhelmed by the present state of things.

By no means a great film, the Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men* won Best Picture, with the Coens also picking up awards for Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Director. In one of their acceptance speeches, the Coens, with a tinge of cynicism, suggested their work was a continuation of the playful home movies they made when they were children. They thanked the Academy "for letting us continue to play in our corner of the sandbox."

Javier Bardem, the star of *No Country for Old Men*, won in the category of Best Supporting Actor, with the Academy continuing an unfortunate pattern of often awarding talented performers for their least interesting work. Bardem is an actor capable of making genuine contributions. One thinks of his performance in *Mondays in the Sun*, for example.

In *No Country for Old Men*, however, he plays an enigmatic psychopath whose job is to track down the stolen loot from a drug deal gone wrong. Portraying a character intended to represent pure evil and perhaps bad luck, Bardem was not afforded much of an opportunity to display the best of his abilities.

Michael Clayton, a film about the murderous cover-up of a corporate scandal and undoubtedly the best of the American films nominated, won in just a single category. Tilda Swinton was awarded the Best Supporting Actress trophy for her performance in the film. George Clooney and Tom Wilkinson, both of whom performed admirably in the film, lost in the Best

Actor and Best Supporting Actor categories respectively.

In a show with few noteworthy moments, there was at least one interesting episode that must be mentioned. When it came time to announce the awards for the documentary film categories, actor Tom Hanks appeared on stage with a special announcement. To honor their service, several US soldiers in Baghdad would present the award for Best Documentary Short, via satellite.

Immediately following this, in a decidedly strange juxtaposition, the Best Documentary Feature award was given out. Among the nominees were *No End in Sight*, *Operation Homecoming* and *Taxi to the Dark Side*, all of which deal in one way or another with the war in Iraq.

Taxi to the Dark Side won the award, and director Alex Gibney made the only significant reference to the war and the Bush administration's system of torture, saying "I think my dear wife Anne was kind of hoping I'd make a romantic comedy, but honestly, after Guantánamo, Abu Ghraib and extraordinary rendition, that simply wasn't possible." He added, "Let's hope we can turn this country around, move away from the dark side and back to the light."

One got the impression the US soldiers were brought in to offset or neutralize the sting of the antiwar sentiment that was likely to emerge in the acceptance speech of the winning nominee in the documentary category.

All in all, the Academy avoided anything that might "scandalize." There was little that did not go according to plan.

One refreshing exception to the generally routine proceedings was the presentation of this year's Honorary Oscar. The award was given to renowned production designer and art director Robert Boyle.

Boyle is credited for devising, among other notable scenes in Alfred Hitchcock films, the barren, "middle of nowhere" setting in *North by Northwest* which shows Cary Grant's character being chased by a crop duster—perhaps one of the most famous scenes in film history.

Boyle spoke intelligently about his art in a videotaped interview played before his arrival on stage. The art director said that he had tried in his career to present "an architectural truth" which gave way to "an

emotional truth." In the acceptance speech that followed, Boyle spoke warmly of directors he'd worked with during his career, including Hitchcock and Don Siegel.

Another welcome moment came when Stewart brought Marketa Irglova, co-composer of Best Song winner, "Falling Slowly," back onto stage after the orchestra had not permitted her to make an acceptance speech. Returning to the microphone, she offered her encouragement to struggling independent artists.



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