

The 81st Annual Academy Awards: Lifeless for the most part

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The 81st Annual Academy Awards were held in Hollywood, California Sunday night. The star-studded celebration saw Australian actor Hugh Jackman serve as host. With a background in musical theater, Jackman proved pleasant enough, never taking himself too seriously and was an improvement, by and large, over several other hosts in recent memory.

While producers made a number of changes in the hopes of drawing in more viewers, Sunday night's production at the Kodak Theater was not fundamentally different from previous broadcasts. Hollywood can't seem to help itself. One saw the same overblown and disappointing musical numbers and the often tasteless decor to which one has become accustomed through the years. There was an air of complacency and self-congratulation throughout the evening which was hardly justified by the quality of so many of the works nominated.

Whether the organizers were conscious of the need for it or not, a certain degree of restraint in the face of an unfolding economic calamity seemed to be in the air.

The *New York Times* suggested that Jackman, the first non-comic to host the event in 30 years, was chosen because he wouldn't "deride Hollywood ... The movie industry was in no mood for mockery, and perhaps in no condition for it. Every Oscar ceremony tries to reclaim old Hollywood glamour; this one tried to suit the times by reverting straight to old Depression-era glamour."

The awards ceremony producers, according to the *Times*, offered "the kind of glittery escapism that movie stars provided during the Great Depression." The acknowledgement of parallels between the present situation and the 1930s, with the implicit recognition

that hard times face wide layers of the population, went no farther than the most superficial elements of style and choreography. No one handing out or receiving an award made a single reference to the mounting economic hardship.

Slumdog Millionaire, directed by Danny Boyle, took home eight awards, including most notably Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Cinematography. The film has been the subject of considerable critical praise as well, and there are moving scenes to be found in it, along with valuable images of the desperate conditions in the slums of Mumbai. Moreover, the sight of the Indian cast and crew members crowded on stage was at the very least a reminder of a world outside southern California.

However, even if one were willing to admit *Slumdog Millionaire* was likely the "best" of the films nominated in the Best Picture category, one must add it is not a great film by any means. The work is burdened with a sentimental and conventional rendering of its love story, as well as some very unfortunate overtures to "hope" and "destiny." It's a disappointing film for the most part.

David Fincher's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, nominated for 13 awards, took home only three, all in technical categories. These were by and large the only categories in which the film could have been considered successful. If the work was inspired as far as its special effects and make-up design were concerned, it was lacking in virtually every other area. There was little of real life to be found in it.

With the possible exception of Sean Penn in the Best Actor Category, the most serious films and performers were passed over during the ceremony. *Waltz With Bashir*, among the very best films of 2008, lost to the Japanese film *Departures* in the Foreign Language

category. British writer-director Mike Leigh was nominated in the Best Original Screenplay category for his excellent film *Happy-Go-Lucky*, as was Courtney Hunt for her film *Frozen River*, one of the few films nominated that contained a sensitivity to life as millions of people face it in the US. Leigh and Hunt lost out to the less successful *Milk*, written by Dustin Lance Black.

Actress Melissa Leo, who gave an outstanding performance in *Frozen River*, lost to Kate Winslet in the Best Actress category. Winslet is a talented performer, whose compassion and sensitivity appeals to a great many people. However, neither *The Reader* (for which she won the award Sunday night) nor *Revolutionary Road*, her other major performance this past year, are artistically coherent or compelling films.

It's interesting, and telling, to note that the only real reference to social inequality in the awards ceremony came during Halle Berry's introduction of Leo. Berry said, in a comment presumably written for her, that Leo's character in *Frozen River* had lost everything but, "in the best American sense," retained hope. To put it charitably, this is a serious misreading of the film, which paints a bleak picture of working class life in upstate New York.

The Academy chose to honor the late Australian actor Heath Ledger with a Best Supporting Actor trophy for his performance as The Joker in *The Dark Knight*. Ledger, who died in January 2008, was an intriguing and promising actor and Academy voters no doubt wished to pay tribute to his memory. One can't avoid the fact, however, that *The Dark Knight* was among the least serious films in which the talented young actor appeared.

One also found it difficult to understand the Academy's decision to award Penelope Cruz the Best Supporting Actress award. Without holding Ms. Cruz responsible, her performance in Woody Allen's very poor *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* was unconvincing and caricatured. That this false portrait of a "Latin spitfire" of an artist impressed the Academy's voters, alas, tells us a great deal about their conceptions of life and art, which have apparently been shaped by too many of their own bad movies.

The only political issue to emerge during the Oscar broadcast on Sunday was gay rights. Sean Penn, who won Best Actor for his portrayal of gay rights activist

Harvey Milk in *Milk*, forcefully spoke out against California's ban on gay marriage, declaring supporters of the ban should "reflect and anticipate their great shame and the shame in their grandchildren's eyes if they continue that way." Of Barack Obama, Penn added, "I'm very proud to live in a country that is willing to elect an elegant man president"—a peculiar and non-committal comment, which, nonetheless, won applause. Obama, it is worth mentioning, is not a supporter of same-sex marriage.

The reactionary ban on gay marriage in California is a significant attack on democratic rights and those who spoke out on the issue did so sincerely. But the comments were limited to that single issue. And this, in a state that is for all intents and purposes insolvent, with tens of thousands of government workers facing layoffs. Nor were there any comments about the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, including the recent dispatch of another 17,000 troops to the latter country. On the whole, there was little, if anything, that rocked the boat.

Partially as a result, the Academy Awards broadcast was a decidedly "lifeless" affair, in virtually every sense of the word. There is considerable talent, verve, intelligence in the Hollywood community, but at present it is exercised on mostly insignificant projects.

One will see how differently things will look in the coming years. The economic crisis which found little expression in the awards ceremony or in the films nominated will make itself felt. There will be social upheavals in the US, as well as other parts of the world. The present stagnant artistic climate will dissipate, which will make it possible for the artists to begin considering the great questions of our time.

In particular, it will not eternally be possible to exclude the class struggle and the reality of American life from American films.



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