

94th Academy Awards nominations: *Don't Look Up*, *The Tragedy of Macbeth* and the rest

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The nominations for this year's Academy Awards in 23 categories were announced Tuesday morning during a half-hour live global stream, hosted by actors Leslie Jordan and Tracee Ellis Ross. The annual awards ceremony will be held Sunday, March 27 at the Dolby Theatre in Hollywood.

As has become the usual practice in recent years, the entertainment media spent the morning of the nominations program counting up the number of black, Latino, Asian, female and gay individuals named. The general conclusion was that Hollywood was continuing to show “progress” or make “strides” in “diversity,” although at an insufficiently rapid pace. This is virtually the only gauge by which the media and the upper middle class obsessed with race and gender in particular measure the success or failure of American and international filmmaking.

There is next to no discussion about the ability of writers, directors and actors to reflect accurately or richly the present circumstances confronted by massive numbers of people, circumstances dominated by pandemic, social inequality, poverty, war and the threat of authoritarianism.

Don't Look Up, the political satire directed by Adam McKay, which most directly and effectively speaks to these issues, received four nominations, for best picture, original screenplay, film editing and original score (Nicholas Britell). McKay's film, as the WSWs pointed out, “skewers the anti-scientific stupidity and criminality of the American political establishment, as well as the corrupt nexus of corporations, the government and the media.” When an angry, sharply focused film like this appears, which disrupts the official narratives, the media establishment always hopes to blunt the impact by minimizing its themes and lumping it in with the body of generally mediocre (or worse) work.

The latter includes Jane Campion's *The Power of the Dog* and Denis Villeneuve's science fiction effort *Dune*, which received the largest number of nominations, 12 and 10, respectively. Kenneth Branagh's autobiographical *Belfast* and Steven Spielberg's new version of the musical *West Side Story* were both named in seven categories, while Reinaldo Marcus Green's *King Richard* (about Richard Williams, the father of tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams) obtained six nominations. Guillermo del Toro's *film noir* remake, *Nightmare*

Alley, was nominated in four categories; *Being the Ricardos* (Aaron Sorkin), *Licorice Pizza* (Paul Thomas Anderson) and *The Lost Daughter* (Maggie Gyllenhaal) were all nominated in three, along with *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (Joel Coen), which also, in its own way, threatens to stand out.

In its round-up Tuesday, *Variety* expressed some concern that following “a record-breaking year for diversity at the Academy Awards, with nine actors of color nabbing nominations in 2021, the 2022 lineup featured just four actors of color: Ariana DeBose, Aunjanue Ellis, Will Smith and Denzel Washington,” although the publication was pleased by a possible award going to DeBose (*West Side Story*), “the first Afro-Latina actor (and the first openly queer woman of color) ever nominated.”

Following the victory of Chloé Zhao (*Nomadland*) last year, “the first woman of color (and second woman ever) to win best director,” according to *Variety*, this year's contenders notably include Campion, now “the first woman to earn a repeat nomination for best director,” and Ryūsuke Hamaguchi (*Drive My Car*), “the first helmer of Japanese descent to be nominated since Akira Kurosawa in 1986.” The journal notes that below the line “*Coming 2 America* stylists Stacey Morris and Carla Farmer nabbed nominations. This comes after Mia Neal and Jamika Wilson of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* became the first Black winners in best makeup and hairstyling last year.” However, the “the conversation about diversity doesn't only apply to race and gender—CODA actor Troy Kotsur became only the second deaf actor to be nominated for an Oscar, 35 years after his co-star Marlee Matlin won an Academy Award for *Children of a Lesser God*.”

For the *Hollywood Reporter*, the nominations Tuesday “reveal a gradual trickle-up effect for diversity, with added recognition for women and people from the global majority in both onscreen and behind-the-scenes roles.” The publication further noted that “DeBose and *King Richard*'s Aunjanue Ellis make for two Black nominees in the supporting actress field for the first time since 2018. While the lead actress race was shut out from women who hail from the global majority or have a disability, two Black Academy vets—*King Richard*'s Will Smith and *The Tragedy of Macbeth*'s Denzel Washington—are competing for lead actor.”

The *Reporter* went on relentlessly, “*Encanto*'s nominations

mark a couple of Oscar firsts for Latinas: producer Yvett Merino for animated feature, and composer Germaine Franco—the first Latina ever accepted into the Academy’s music branch—for original score. Their fellow Chicano artist Carlos López Estrada, one of the directors of *Raya and the Last Dragon*, also received a nomination for animated feature.” And so on, and so forth.

The list of productions eligible for academy awards this year included 276 films, the vast majority of them weak or irrelevant. *Minamata* (Andrew Levitas) and *A Hero* (Asghar Farhadi) are the two most obviously deserving films that were entirely and disgracefully ignored by Academy voters. *The French Dispatch* (Wes Anderson) and *The Electrical Life of Louis Wain* (Will Sharpe) are both flawed or limited works, but they deserved recognition more than a number of those nominated. In the feature documentary category, *Attica* (Stanley Nelson and Traci Curry) is certainly a worthy nomination, and to a lesser degree, so is *Ascension* (Jessica Kingdon).

In their Tuesday morning program, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) officials felt obliged to acknowledge the existence of the COVID pandemic by having a health care worker from Beaumont Hospital in Troy, Michigan read out the nominees in one of the categories. A New York City firefighter read out another list of nominees, as did two African-American students, one an acting student from Howard University in Washington, D.C. and another an eighth grader from Thaddeus M. Bullard Academy in Tampa, Florida. In an apparent gesture toward the much sought after “youth demographic,” self-styled “film enthusiast” Reece Feldman weighed in on the various nominations. At one point, co-host Ellis observed somewhat sarcastically that she and Jordan were positively “bristling with diversity.”

One “Thank you to all the health care workers” from Ellis hardly diverted the nominations program from its overall complacency and glibness, which bore an unpleasant resemblance at certain moments to *Don’t Look Up*’s “The Daily Rip.” Nearly one million people have died in the US. Approximately one-third of a million men, women and children among them have died since the most recent Academy Awards ceremony in late April 2021. Every level of government has abandoned or is in the process of abandoning any effort to control or suppress the virus.

Again, the endless demands for “diversity” have little or nothing to do with the sort of transformation that the film industry desperately needs. With a few honorable exceptions, there is not yet any *social* broadening of the subject matter, no paying attention to the conditions of the wide layers of the population in the US and globally suffering at the hands of a rapacious financial-oligarchic elite. “Diversity” largely means more job opportunities and larger incomes for a layer of African-American, Asian, Latino and female professionals, seeking to advance their interests against the “old guard” in

Hollywood.

In addition to *Don’t Look Up*, the one other recent film that viscerally addresses the current state of the ruling classes in particular, their violence, bloody-mindedness, ruthlessness, conspiratorial methods, cunning and deceit, is based on a play first performed some 415 years ago, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Tellingly, although Washington was nominated for *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, neither the film itself nor director Joel Coen was nominated in the appropriate category.

One thinks of Trump and Joe Biden and the entire governing cabal in the scene where Macbeth’s murder victim Banquo returns as a ghostly dinner guest. If the pandemic dead arose as one, the president or his predecessor might be entitled to express with amazement that

the times have been,
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end; but now they rise again,
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
And push us from our stools: this is more strange
Than such a murder is.

And as for its current strategy, which involves pressing ahead with the policy of mass death, the global ruling elite could repeat after Macbeth that

I am in blood
Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o’er.



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