

To Leslie, Andrea Riseborough and the Academy Awards: The real scandal is corporate dominance and racial politics

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Some episodes in social or cultural life are more revealing than others.

A controversy has erupted surrounding the unexpected Academy Award nomination of Andrea Riseborough as best actress for her role in *To Leslie*, a low-budget film.

The nomination has appalled executives at the giant conglomerates that run the entertainment business and their media front men and women, along with the racialists who anticipated the nod would go to either Viola Davis (for *The Woman King*) or Danielle Deadwyler (for *Till*), both African American actresses.

In effect, Riseborough's nomination disrupted various plans, on which, in turn, a great deal of money and prestige were riding. An Academy Award nomination often adds millions—or even tens of millions—of dollars to the total income a studio earns from a given film, while a win brings in even more. Nominations and wins can also substantially increase the “market value” of a producer, director or performer.

To Leslie was filmed in only 19 days during the height of the pandemic. Its budget was less than \$1,000,000. Distribution rights were acquired by Momentum Pictures, which gave it a limited theatrical release in October 2022 earning only \$27,000 and an on-demand streaming release.

The film, set in West Texas, follows a woman with a troubled past and present, Leslie “Lee” Rowlands (Riseborough). Six years before the principal portions of the film take place, Leslie won \$190,000 in a lottery. We learn that she thoughtlessly and very publicly went through the money in various ways, including alcohol and drugs. At some point, as her financial and emotional condition unraveled, she abandoned her son James.

Now, a hopeless alcoholic, virtually homeless, Leslie seeks out her son and two embittered friends for help. She burns those bridges too, finally finding a menial job in a motel paying \$7 an hour. At a particularly low point, she gives up drinking and attempts to turn her life around.

To Leslie is not flawless, it has contrived and overwrought elements, but it unquestionably and sincerely strives for psychological and social realism. Riseborough is no doubt a fearless and committed performer.

The film provides glimpses, even if it does not probe them, of the wretched economic conditions that frame and render comprehensible the substance abuse disaster occurring in the US. Some 140,000 people die annually from excessive alcohol, while 92,000 succumbed to drug overdoses in 2021. Meanwhile, another 47,000 Americans committed suicide last year.

Those associated with *To Leslie* and their friends and colleagues initiated a campaign late last year to promote Riseborough's candidacy for an Academy Award nomination. Various prominent figures, struck by her work in the film, ultimately lent their support to the British actress, including Sarah Paulson, Patricia Clarkson, Cate Blanchett, Debra Winger, Ed Harris, Amy Ryan, Anne Archer, Frances Fisher, Charlize

Theron, Edward Norton and numerous others. The effort succeeded in winning over a sufficient number of the Academy's 1,336 actors' branch members to gain Riseborough the nomination, announced January 24, which the *Los Angeles Times* described as “one of the most shocking... in Oscar history.”

Ostensibly, an Academy Award is supposed to go to a work or an individual deserving recognition on the basis of artistic merit. The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences' official rules assert that the body's awards are handed out annually “to honor outstanding artistic and scientific achievements.” In a blurb that AMPAS tacks on to many of its official pronouncements, the organization boasts of its efforts in “celebrating and recognizing excellence in filmmaking.”

In the debate over *To Leslie*, however, that pretense has been thrown overboard, and crass commercial interests have come to the fore. *Deadline* felt obliged to note that “*To Leslie* took in a little over \$27,000 during its brief theatrical release in October, making it among the lowest-grossing movies ever to score an Oscar nom.”

As we noted in 2016, the pompously named Academy was “set up in 1927 at the instigation of Louis B. Mayer, the head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and perhaps the highest-paid individual in America at the time, essentially to forestall unionization of the film industry. In corporatist style, Mayer hoped that by setting up an ‘Academy,’ with various branches, film artists and workers would feel they were part of the industry and not make any unreasonable demands.” AMPAS has always been and remains a creature of the large studios, now subsidiaries of giant conglomerates.

The “shocked” official response to the Riseborough nomination brings this fact home with a certain degree of force. It underscores the largely embalmed, scripted character of the voting process and the ceremony itself. Those who challenge it might well expect to be termed “outside agitators” or “wreckers.”

Obviously angered and thrown into confusion by Riseborough's unanticipated nomination, the Academy launched a “review of the campaign procedures around this year's nominees, to ensure that no guidelines were violated.” According to AMPAS regulations, a film's supporters are not permitted to campaign directly for the work, by asking Academy members to vote for it or by denigrating its competitors. Every observer understood that the “review” in question was aimed at the campaign for *To Leslie*.

Again, taking into account the nature of the Academy, a formidable institution of the American establishment, one ought not to be astonished by the breathtaking hypocrisy of this investigation.

Hollywood studios circumvent the ban on direct campaigning for Academy Awards by a dozen different, well-practiced means. As journalist Tom Chapman explained in 2021, the “studios take out trade

ads, create glossy PR packages branded with the words ‘For Your Consideration’, and invite press to junkets to drum up interest in their nominees.”

The various corporate entities spend vast amounts of cash each year to promote their films. In 2019, for example, *Variety* noted that “Oscar campaign budgets for films seeking nominations in multiple categories... can run from \$20 million to \$30 million as companies compete with each other to out-wine and dine awards voters, according to insiders at the various studios and streamers.”

David Mouriquand at *Euronews* recently pointed out that the “broad ‘For Your Consideration’ bombardments include sent screeners, interviews, lavish luncheons, place advertisement and direct marketing campaigns, in order to get as many votes as possible... This boils down to: The more expensive the campaign, the more chances a film can win a nomination.” The process is thoroughly corrupt.

Mouriquand went on to suggest that this “whole system (or rigged game, depending how you look at it) means that smaller productions with little budget find themselves in an impasse and the Academy—who answers to studios—is embarrassed by anyone who contacts any voter directly about who to vote for through other (cost-effective) means.”

Comic and actor Marc Maron, who features in *To Leslie*, noted angrily on his popular podcast that the Academy “has decided to investigate Andrea Riseborough’s grassroots campaign to get her the Oscar nomination... Because I guess it so threatens their system that they’re completely bought out by corporate interests in the form of studios.”

Maron continued, “Millions of dollars [are] put into months of advertising campaigns, publicity, screenings by large corporate entertainment entities, and Andrea was championed by her peers... The Academy is [like], ‘Well, we gotta take a look at this. This is not the way it’s supposed to work. Independent artists don’t deserve the attention of the Academy unless we see how it works exactly. So, we’re going to look into this.’”

In the end, on January 31, the Academy grudgingly, “generously” determined that the campaign for the actress “does not rise to the level that the film’s nomination should be rescinded.” The investigation, deliberately or not, has certainly tainted a well-deserved nomination.

The racist assault on Riseborough’s nomination complements the corporate attack. Appropriately so. The growth of vast social inequality and the emergence of multi-billion dollar firms holding a stranglehold over the entertainment industry have been accompanied by the emergence and growth of an affluent African American layer in Hollywood and elsewhere, driven by selfish and grasping motives.

The media and this layer itself have reacted to the Riseborough nomination as though they had been robbed of an anticipated and well-deserved legacy.

Remarkably, saying more than he perhaps meant to, *Los Angeles Times* critic Robert Daniels asked rhetorically, “What does it say that the Black women who did everything the institution asks of them—luxury dinners, private Academy screenings, meet-and-greets, splashy television spots and magazine profiles—are ignored when someone who did everything outside of the system is rewarded?” One has to be irretrievably enmeshed in and supportive of the existing setup to pose the matter in this fashion.

Playlist complained that whatever “the intention of AMPAS Acting branch voters, the perception from some members is that a slew of powerful white women went overboard campaigning for another white woman over the detriment of two celebrated performances from black actresses [Davis and Deadwyler].”

The *New York Times*, of course, chimed in along the same lines. After first raising the spurious claim as to “whether the efforts on behalf of Ms. Riseborough had violated Oscar rules,” the *Times* ominously pointed to the possibility that Riseborough, “who is white, had secured a nomination that may otherwise have gone to a Black actress like Viola Davis... or

Danielle Deadwyler.”

The argument is preposterous. First of all, one needs to set Davis aside, because, although she is a fine actress, she was appearing in a ludicrous, cartoonish piece of historic falsification, *The Woman King*.

As for *Till*, its director, Chinonye Chukwu, did little to conceal her powerful and arrogant sense of entitlement in a statement issued after the Academy nominations were announced, observing sweepingly on Instagram, “We live in a world and work in industries that are so aggressively committed to upholding whiteness and perpetuating an unabashed misogyny towards Black women.”

Again, Chukwu leaves entirely out of the discussion any concern for the artistic or social merit of the films. She speaks as though someone had stolen a “slot” that had been reserved ahead of time for her. All she needed to do, apparently, was show up and claim her prize.

In objective terms, the case dramatized in *Till*, that of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old black boy from Chicago brutally tortured and shot to death in Mississippi in August 1955, is of immeasurably greater weight than the events dealt with in *To Leslie*. This racist atrocity had a galvanizing impact on US and world public opinion and played a role in setting in motion the mass civil rights movement.

However, *how* and *to what end* the event is treated is of paramount concern in the present discussion. As the WWSWS argued in its review of *Till*, the film’s great weakness, “corresponding to the contemporary obsession with race and gender,” lies in its treating “the murder as an almost purely black issue, as a crime committed by a group of evil white people—by implication at least, part of an never-ending struggle between blacks and whites in America.”

“This essentially ahistorical and moralizing attitude has artistic and emotional as well as political consequences,” we argued. “It helps explain the film’s decidedly pedestrian and largely uninvolved character. One is not left with the idea that an event of genuinely world-historical significance is taking place.”

From that standpoint, *To Leslie*, with its convincing portrayal of aspects of contemporary American life that speaks to the conditions of *all* sections of the working population, and which ends movingly, is a more valuable and insightful work.

To reiterate, the only “scandal” in the Riseborough case involves the ordinarily narrow and manipulated character of the Academy nominating process and the filthy role of racial politics.



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