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Academy Awards 2011: A banner year for men?

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Jeff Bridges as Rooster Cogburn and Hailee Steinfeld as Mattie Ross in "True Grit" (Paramount Pictures/Lorey Sebastian)

2010 was not a particularly great year for mainstream film.

Stories about men dominated the films up for Oscars and it is my guess that these will sweep the awards -- and deservedly so in terms of art.

Films are often in production for years so there is no real way to balance releases though we know that stories about men dominate -- male experiences and points of view (wait until you see the upcoming ?The Adjustment Bureau? with Matt Damon or check out the 2009 documentary ?Oh My God?.)

This year?s slate of nominees is the least racially diverse as well in terms of actors, filmmakers, and stories. Will it always be the (usually white) male and point of view that represents the universal human experience through U.S. cinema?

The ten nominees for Best Picture include most of the best movies, but they left off ?Conviction? [1] and ?Get Low? [2], where Robert Duvall gives the performance of a lifetime.

Two documentaries, ?Countdown to Zero,? [3] about the continuing nuclear threat, and ?Waiting for Superman? [4], about the crisis in public education in the United States, deserved nominations as well.

I was able to see all the films nominated in key categories listed here [5] except for seven.

It seems opportune to take this opportunity to protest that the Academy ignored the Millennium trilogy from Sweden, based on the best-selling novels by Stieg Larrson, beginning with ?The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo.? [6]

Certainly difficult to watch (especially the first film), but when the final film of the trilogy ended, I felt sad because I would miss this flawed group of characters and their good hearts that drove them. Now a U.S. version is in the works, with ?Dragon Tattoo? due out this year.

I don?t think even director David Fincher (?The Social Network?) and Daniel Craig, the new James Bond, in the lead, can top the originals. We tend to ruin great original films from other countries, or just do a so-so job. Case in point ?Mostly Martha,? a German film, was remade as ?No Reservations.? So-so.

Here?s my take on who I hope will take home the Oscar this year.

Best Film: ?The King?s Speech? stands out in the only category that allows ten nominations. It is the story of King George VI (Colin Firth) and the unconventional speech therapist (Geoffrey Rush) who helps the future king overcome his stutter. I hope and think it will win, though I could live with ?The Social Network?, ?127 Hours?, ?Winter?s Bone? or ?True Grit? taking home the Oscar.

?The Kids are All Right? deals with the issues of a lesbian couple raising children and the complications that arise when they find their sperm donor father. While it has social and cultural relevance as family is being continually redefined, I don?t think the film rises to a level of an Oscar. This film, along with ?The Fighter? and ?Black Swan? stand out more for individual performances than the story they seek to tell.

Best Actor: This is between Colin Firth, whom I think will win and should, in ?The Kings Speech?, Jesse Eisenberg in ?The Social Network,? and James Franco in ?127 Hours.? This is where Robert Duval deserved notice because his performance soared over that of Jeff Bridges in ?True Grit? and Javier Bardem in ?Biutiful.? I think Colin Firth will win.

Best Actress: A tough category because there just were not enough films with great roles for leading women this year. Why Hailee Steinfeld, almost the only female actor in ?True Grit,? wasn?t nominated here I have no idea. She deserved it.

Natalie Portman as the darkly driven ballerina in ?Black Swan? seems favored to win, or even Annette Benning in ?The Kids are All Right.? I think Jennifer Lawrence in ?Winter?s Bone? [7] would be an awesome upset. She plays a daughter who stands up for her family when her drug-dealing father disappears in a film that too few people saw.

Best Supporting Actor: This is between Geoffrey Rush as the speech therapist in ?The King?s Speech? and Christian Bale as the flawed half brother to a future boxing champion in ?The Fighter.? It has to be Christian Bale.

As I was leaving the theater everyone was talking about Christian Bale?s performance; we knew we had witnessed something extraordinary, a moment when you understand that acting is a transcendent art.

Best Supporting Actress: Kudos to all those nominated, but no one -- even veteran actresses -- is even close to Hailee Steinfeld in ?True Grit.? [8] She was only thirteen when she made the film. The Coen brothers who directed, show us once again, that they are geniuses.

Best Documentary: In a category with all fine films, I hope ?The Inside Job? gets it because we, as a people, need this uncompromising film to teach us financial ethics and morals. If we do not understand the history and cause of the financial crash of 2008

[9] we are doomed to repeat it.

If ?Exit through the Gift Shop? wins, however, I would be okay with it. This off-beat story of guerilla art and artists and a quirky man who learned to manipulate the creation of popular culture to make millions by turning nothing into something, is worth watching. Highly entertaining and just a little bit weird.

?Restrepo? [10], however, is the film my heart would like to see win.

Best Director: All the directors nominated are deserving, but I am going with David Fincher for ?The Social Network.?

Best Writing for Adapted Screenplay: If it were possible to give all the nominees an Oscar, I would say, ?Do it!? However, ?The Social Network? [11] by Aaron Sorkin (?The West Wing? and ?A Few Good Men?) is most deserving.

Best Writing for Original Screenplay : My choice and hope is David Seidler for ?The King?s Speech?.

Best Animated Feature: ?Toy Story 3? [10] will probably win, but my favorite is ?How to Train Your Dragon? [6]. It is original, entertaining, and is all about empathy as the foundation for understanding others and making peace.

Best Cinematography: ?True Grit? or ?127 Hours?? ?127 Hours? had to have been the most challenging to film and ?True Grit? fused all the elements of the film beautifully through the filming. I will be happy with either one, though don?t count out ?The King?s Speech?.

Best Art Direction: This goes to ?Alice in Wonderland.? [12] It may have been short on story but wonderful artistry.

Best Visual Effects: Tough category filled with brilliant efforts. The stories are fantasy or science fiction, so creativity is on overdrive. But I am going with ?Alice in Wonderland? just because it was so much fun and the others have all been done before.

Best Music for Original Score: ?The Social Network? did it for me.

Best Original Song: ?If I Rise? from ?127 Hours? is very moving, but I have a hunch ?We Belong Together? from ?Toy Story 3? will bring it home.

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