There will be blood: Oscars vs. writer's strike â€¦ and the winner is ...

by Lee Grant

In the wake of a tumultuous writer's strike that has crippled the film and TV industry, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced its Oscar nominations Tuesday with some of Hollywood's biggest stars in the mix.

George Clooney, Johnny Depp, Cate Blanchett and Tommy Lee Jones received acting nominations but the question remains whether they'll cross a picket line at the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood on Feb. 24 when the Oscars are presented during a telecast on ABC, comedian Jon Stewart hosting.

Both sides in the labor dispute - the Writers Guild of America and the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers - were scheduled to meet Tuesday in informal talks.

The Academy is planning two shows, according to Hollywood trade publications - the usual three-hour extravaganza complete with red carpet arrivals, and a trimmed down, alternate version if the strike, now in its third month, stretches that far.

Meanwhile, smaller films, most well-received by critics but not always successful at the box office, dominated the nominations.

"No Country for Old Men," about a coin-flipping psychopath (Javier Bardem) hunted by a wizened West Texas sheriff (Tommy Lee Jones), and "There Will Be Blood," the tale of a nasty California oil baron (Daniel Day-Lewis), each received eight nominations.

Day-Lewis, who won an Oscar in 1989 for "My Left Foot," was nominated in the best acting category, and Bardem for best supporting actor. Jones, who won a supporting actor Oscar in 1993 for "The Fugitive," received a best acting nomination this year for another film, "In the Valley of Elah," in which he plays a former military man searching for his son, missing since returning home from Iraq.

The year's box office heavyweights - "Spider-Man 3" ($337 million), "Shrek the Third" ($321 million), "Transformers" ($319 million), "Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End" ($309 million), "Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix" ($292 million) and "I Am Legend ($248 million) - were all but ignored. "Transformers," an adventure based on the venerable kids toy, earned three nominations, all in technical categories.

It was a year for older actors. Hal Holbrook, 83, who performed his "Mark Twain Tonight" at the opening of downtown San Diego's Balboa Theater last Saturday, received a supporting actor nod for his poignant performance as a lonely retired man who finds a reason to live after befriending a young fellow on the road in "Into the Wild."

Ruby Dee, 84, Harlem drug lord Denzel Washington's mom in "American Gangster," earned a supporting actress nod. Julie Christie, 66, a best actress nominee for her tender turn in "Away From Her" as a woman in a long, loving marriage now slipping into Alzheimer's, won an Oscar more than 40-years ago for "Darling."

On the younger side, Irish actress Saoirse Ronan, 14, who begins the lie that starts a horrific series of events in "Atonement," was nominated for best supporting actress.

Cate Blanchett, who won an Oscar in 2004 for "The Aviator," was nominated in two categories - best actress in a leading role for "Elizabeth: The Golden Age," and supporting actress, impersonating Bob Dylan in "I'm Not There."

"Michael Clayton," a thriller with George Clooney as a legal "fixer," and "Atonement, based on Ian McEwan's best-selling novel set in 1930s England, each received seven nominations. Clooney, a best actor nominee this year, won a supporting actor Oscar in 2005 for "Syriana."

A number of small-budgeted films like the sweet "Juno," the story of a pregnant, snippy high schooler, received four major nominations - best picture, best actress for Canadian Ellen Page, 20; best director (Jason Reitman), and original screenplay for former stripper Diablo Cody, 29. The movie, which cost a mere $7.5 million, has already taken in $85 million at the box office.

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