

DVD Select: Select your Oscar winner now

by Robert_J_Hawkins

Well, it's Oscar time, and once again I'm taking a huge hit in the wallet.

The nominations have been announced and, as has been the trend, darn few of these movies will be out on DVD before the Feb. 24 awards ceremony - possibly because this is the earliest ceremony in 20 years.

'AWAY FROM HER' - Julie Christie has been nominated for a best actress Oscar for her work in the touching drama 'Away From Her.' CNS Photo courtesy of Lionsgate Films. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin So it's off to the theater I go - to pay my \$9.50 ticket (plus service charge if I prepay online) and my \$9 for cold popcorn and thin soda.

And what will I see in theaters? Certainly "There Will Be Blood" and "No Country for Old Men," as both are still going too strong to be released on DVD. Same for "Sweeney Todd," "Charlie Wilson's War," "The Kite Runner," "The Diving Bell and the Butterfly," "Atonement" and "Juno." These films are currently enjoying the "Oscar effect" - that sudden uplifting of revenues that comes as the curious are drawn to such titles on the

strength of being nominated.

The year's big exception to this rule is "Away From Her" for which Julie Christie - as a woman of grace descending into Alzheimer's disease - has received a best actress nomination. Sarah Polley's screenplay adaptation is also up for an Oscar. "Away From Her" has been available on DVD since September.

Other nominated films are available on DVD, released in the past couple of months. They include:

"Eastern Promises" for which Viggo Mortensen's gruff Russian gangster merits a best-actor nod.

"Once," the scruffy Irish musical about making scruffy Irish music, nominated for best original song ("Falling Slowly").

"Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End," a juggernaut trilogy that operated under its own set of rules but managed nominations only for makeup and visual effects.

"The Bourne Ultimatum" similarly drew crafts nods for sound mixing, sound editing and film editing - but none for Matt Damon's ability to outwit the really bad guys.

"Transformers" also is recognized for sound mixing, sound editing and visual effects.

The animated feature nominees "Ratatouille" and "Surf's Up" are available. The third, "Persepolis," is just making its way through theaters. "Ratatouille" also got a nod for best original screenplay. Go figure.

"3:10 to Yuma," a tense remake of a classic Western, is up for best original score (by Marco Beltrami).

Eddie Murphy's "Norbit" is nominated for makeup because everyone loves a guy in a female fat suit ... but, then, why wasn't John Travolta nominated for "Hairspray"?

"La Vie En Rose" was not nominated for best foreign film, but Marion Cotillard is up for best actress and the film is in the running for costume and makeup.

"No End In Sight," a documentary on the Iraq morass, and Michael Moore's indictment of the health-care system, "Sicko," are both up for best documentary feature, as is "Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience." Of the remaining two, "War Dance" arrives April 15, and no date is set yet for "Taxi to the Dark Side."

Some Oscar contenders will be arriving in the next few weeks. Among them:

On Feb. 5, "Elizabeth: The Golden Age," for which Cate Blanchett is up for best actress and the film for best costume; the wonderful musical "Across the Universe" (best costume); and the Western "The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford" (cinematography, Casey Affleck as supporting actor).

On Feb. 12, "Gone Baby Gone" (best supporting actress for Amy Ryan).

On Feb. 19, "Michael Clayton" (best picture, best actor for George Clooney, best supporting actor for Tom Wilkinson, best supporting actress for Tilda Swinton, best director and original screenplay for Tony Gilroy and original score for James Newton Howard). "American Gangster" (best supporting actress for Ruby Dee). "In the Valley of Elah" (best actor for Tommy Lee Jones).

On March 4, "Into the Wild" (supporting actor for Hal Holbrook, film editing).

On March 18, "Enchanted" (nominated for three original songs).

Balloting for the Oscars ends Feb. 19. Look for a few more nominated titles to be given release dates before then.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"The Invasion" (Warner Bros., 2 1/2 stars) Like Will Smith in "I Am Legend," it is up to a superstar to save humanity. In this case, Nicole Kidman discovers why people are turning into emotionless blobs - it has to do with an alien virus that spawns when you sleep. A fair remake of a remake of a classic (the 1956 film "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers"). It also stars Daniel Craig.

"King of California" (Millennium Films, 2 1/2 stars) Michael Douglas stars in this film as a wacky fellow just out of a psychiatric ward who convinces his daughter (Evan Rachel Wood of "Across the Universe") to help him hunt buried Spanish treasure in a Southern California suburb. It's funny, heartwarming and ultimately uplifting - so how come nobody's heard of it?

"Trade" (Lionsgate, 2 stars) Kevin Kline is a Texas cop who unites with a young Mexican boy trying to find and rescue his 13-year-old sister, abducted by sex-slave traders. Their journey takes them from the Mexico-U.S. border to a New Jersey suburb. DVD extras include a commentary track, two short featurettes and deleted scenes.

"The Nines" (Sony, 2 stars) Ryan Reynolds gets metaphysical as Gary, a troubled actor; Gavin, a TV script writer; and Gabriel, a game designer. Three different stories but with a unifying secret. Most folks hate it because it lacks complete clarity and linear storytelling. If you can live without those, the payoff is rich and provocative. And there is a God. Also stars Hope Davis and Melissa McCarthy. Commentary provided by director-writer John August and Reynolds, among others.

"The Comebacks" (Fox, 1 star) A spoof on heroic sports movies. Misfits are turned into contenders. Yup.

"Bordertown" (Mobius Entertainment, 2 stars) Rooted in reality - in the industrial border town of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, hundreds of young girls have ended up dead. It is a story crying to be told. Jennifer Lopez plays a Chicago reporter who heads for the border to write that story. She enlists the aid of a onetime lover (Antonio Banderas) turned news editor in Juarez, Mexico. Both find their lives threatened when they dig too deep.

Also this week: Bust out in happy feet at "Feel the Noise"; cringe for Cuba Gooding Jr. again in comedy "Daddy Day Camp"; bad girls win in comedy "Charm School"; thieves unite to rob a bigger thief in action-comedy "Ladron Que Robba a Ladron" ("To Rob a Thief"); a neurotic and a free spirit marry for better then worse in romantic comedy "Ira and Abby"; stuff happens while driving the boss's furniture and niece to Los Angeles in "Moving McAllister."

IT CAME FROM TV

"Jackie Gleason - Genius at Work" (MPI) To me, he's always been a misogynist blowhard, but to others that's comedy, baby. Gleason knew where he was headed on television in 1950 when nobody else had a clue.

"Pioneers of Television" (Paramount/PBS) This four-part documentary looks at the early days of the tube as it examines sitcoms, late-night talks shows, variety and game shows. DVDs also include interviews with Phyllis Diller, Dick Cavett, Florence Henderson, Betty White, Merv Griffin, Jonathan Winters and Tim Conway.

Also: The fifth season of "JAG"; the first season of the Glenn Close drama "Damages"; the SciFi Channel "Lake Placid 2" with none of the clever campiness of the original. There is, however, a giant croc.

FROM THE VAULTS

"El Cid" (Genius Products) Martin Scorsese introduces this two-disc box set of the epic tale of a Spanish knight determined to drive the Moors from his homeland. The mighty Charlton Heston and smoldering Sophia Loren star in this 1961 big-screen classic. The set includes reproductions of the original souvenir program and the El Cid comic book, as well, and a half-dozen featurette films and vintage radio interviews by Heston and Loren.

"Life of Brian" (Sony, 1979) A Monty Python timeless classic. Brian (Graham Chapman) is mistaken for a new messiah in A.D. 33, and the usual Pythonesque madness ensues. DVD box set includes a newly discovered tape of the first read-through of the script; a new hour-long documentary, five deleted scenes and more.

"Groundhog Day" (Sony, 1993) Annoying, insincere and self-absorbed TV weatherman Phil Connors (Bill Murray) is stuck in Punxsutawney, Pa., doomed to repeat Groundhog Day until he gets the being human part right. Also stars Andie MacDowell and Chris Elliott. The best work Bill Murray ever did. DVD extras on the 15th anniversary edition include an interview with director Harold Ramis, newly discovered deleted scenes and more.

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