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Who will Oscar shine on?

We speculate on which stars will win big at awards tonight

Deborah Nicol
The Desert Sun
February 25, 2007

Oscar night is my Super Bowl.

My favorite teams may not always make the playoffs, but I find myself swept up in the excitement of cheering for the best contender and booing when an overly hyped film wins an award.

It will be no surprise when the leading actor categories become a royal affair. **Helen Mirren** completely embodies the traditional stoicism of Her Royal Highness in **"The Queen."** As she arrives at the realization that public opinion matters, her internal breakdown seeps through so subtly that one may mistake her self-pity for compassion.

Meryl Streep's performance in **"The Devil Wears Prada,"** however, is not only not a leading role, it is practically a cartoonish cameo. If the Academy threw her name into the hat out of habit, they should have turned to **"A Prairie Home Companion."** **Naomi Watts'** role in the snubbed **"The Painted Veil"** is far more deserving.

Holding court with Mirren is **Forest Whitaker** in his charismatic role in **"The Last King of Scotland."** The most difficult performances are often the most understated, but Whitaker proves that duplicity is a heavy task when alternating between leadership and magnetic viciousness.

Ryan Gosling delivers a tough performance as an earnestly dedicated teacher with a drug addiction in **"Half Nelson,"** but the role is not quite as meaty as Whitaker's sadistic dictator. **Peter O'Toole** is thrown a bone for his role as a lecherous old actor in **"Venus."** Seven times an Oscar bridesmaid but never a bride, he is given pity rather than a worthy nomination.

The supporting actor nominations have been derived from showy movies where actors claw for attention. The one standout is **Jackie Earle Haley's** disturbingly self-aware portrayal of a convicted pedophile in **"Little Children."** He invokes mercy for a character that could have easily been a one-dimensional criminal.

The supporting actress race presents a more complex contest. Though **Jennifer Hudson** has a promising future and can certainly belt out a song, her role in the fervently hyped **"Dreamgirls"** does not contain the depth of other performances. As a fragile deaf teenager desperate for affection, **Rinko Kikuchi** brings **"Babel"** full circle and deserves the Oscar for performing the daunting task of screaming with a muted voice.

Though the acting categories pull performances from both English-speaking and international films, the best picture category continues in cowardice to separate itself from foreign language film. This is particularly ridiculous in a year that nominated **"Babel,"** a film by a Mexican director and **"Letters from Iwo Jima,"** a film spoken almost entirely in Japanese.

The foreign language films and documentary features continue to receive a backseat to best picture, though their honors are no less deserving. The Palm Springs International Film Festival should be applauded for presenting every submission from these categories. Hopefully mainstream theatres will learn to acknowledge the significance of these films.

In the meantime, the best picture and directing nominations are mostly well-distributed films of distinction. **"Little Miss Sunshine"** is the quirky underdog submitted to prove that the Academy can think outside the box. **"The Departed"** is the Academy's apology to **Martin Scorsese** for six unsuccessful nominations, though with slipping Boston accents and action over substance, the trend should



Jim Cooper, The Associated Press
Gonzalez Inárritu for "Babel"

KEEP TRACK OF ACADEMY AWARD WINNERS TONIGHT BEST PICTURE

"Babel"
"The Departed"
"Letters from Iwo Jima"
"Little Miss Sunshine"
"The Queen"

BEST DIRECTING

Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, "Babel"
Martin Scorsese, "The Departed"
Clint Eastwood, "Letters from Iwo Jima"
Stephen Frears, "The Queen"
Paul Greengrass, "United 93"

BEST ACTOR IN A LEADING ROLE

Leonardo DiCaprio, "Blood Diamond"
Ryan Gosling, "Half Nelson"
Peter O'Toole, "Venus"
Will Smith, "The Pursuit of Happyness"
Forest Whitaker, "The Last King of Scotland"

BEST ACTOR IN A SUPPORTING ROLE

Alan Arkin, "Little Miss Sunshine"
Jackie Earle Haley, "Little Children"
Djimon Hounsou, "Blood Diamond"
Eddie Murphy, "Dreamgirls"
Mark Wahlberg, "The Departed"

BEST ACTRESS IN A LEADING ROLE

Penelope Cruz, "Volver"
Judi Dench, "Notes on a Scandal"
Helen Mirren, "The Queen"
Meryl Streep, "The Devil Wears Prada"
Kate Winslet, "Little Children"

BEST ACTRESS IN A SUPPORTING ROLE

Adriana Barraza, "Babel"
Cate Blanchett, "Notes on a Scandal"
Abigail Breslin, "Little Miss Sunshine"
Jennifer Hudson, "Dreamgirls"
Rinko Kikuchi, "Babel"

ANIMATED FEATURE

"Cars"
"Happy Feet"
"Monster House"

COSTUME DESIGN

"Curse of the Golden Flower"
"The Devil Wears Prada"
"Dreamgirls"
"The Painted Veil"

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