It's that time of year once again: Oscar Picks 2004

Who will lord over the rest and who will get lost in the translation?

Review

Sean Hennen
Reviewer

After one of the most disappointing summers in recent memory, Hollywood rebounded in 2003 with a fall line-up that was utterly compelling. A satisfying mix of both commercial hits and indie darlings graced the silver screens during the closing months of last year, and we see those very same films now finding themselves making up the roster for the top awards at Sunday's Academy Awards.

The Oscar is the most coveted prize in movie business, and some of the best films in 2003 are now serious contenders to take home the little golden guy. It's quite a varied bunch poised to take home the famed statuette, and come Oscar night it's going to be a tight race. The outcomes should make for some surprising water cooler conversation the following Monday morning.
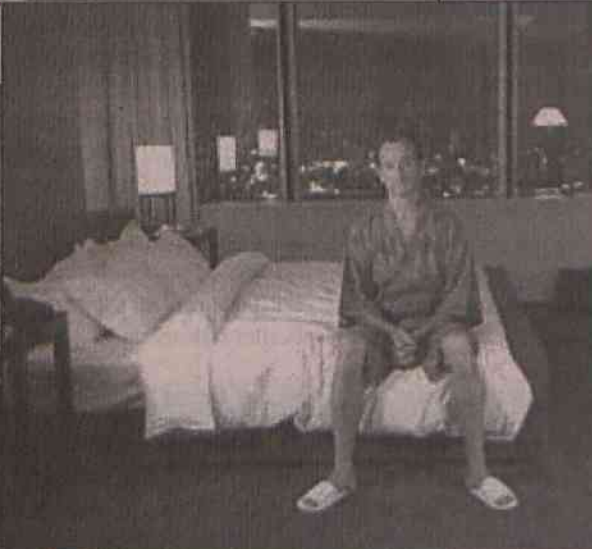
Best Picture

We'll start with the least open-ended category. Because despite the selection of salient motion pictures, no one is willing to put money against "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King." A guaranteed shoe-in if there ever was one at the award show, the third "LOTR" installment will take home the grandest award. While I love and respect each and every movie in the fantasy trilogy, it does feel a bit cheap knowing that the Academy has waited three years to bestow every major award on the concluding chapter of "LOTR."

Other entries like "Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World" and "Mystic River" show both ends of the budgetary spectrum of exceptional moviemaking, while "Seabiscuit" is the surprise nominee for this category that has many shrugging with

Photos courtesy of movies.com

And the nominees are...pictured clockwise from top are Charlize Theron (Best Actress, "Monster"), Elijah Wood (Best Picture, "Lord of the Rings"), Bill Murray (Best Actor, Best Picture, "Lost in Translation") and Naomi Watts (Best Actress, "21 Grams").

curiosity. The fifth entry, "Lost in Translation," stands as testament to the brilliance of small-scale filmmaking and serves a lovely dream-like bit of gorgeous movie magic that has captured imaginations since its release more than six months ago.

Who Should Win: "Lost in Translation."

Who Will Win: The ubiquitous "The Lord of the Rings."

Best Director

Every nominee in this category has orchestrated a piece of cinematic genius, but only one gets the gold idol. However, in all honesty, Clint Eastwood ("Mystic River") already has a best director Oscar; Sofia Coppola ("Lost in Translation") has a long, dazzling career ahead of her; and while Peter Weir ("Master and Commander") should have won by now, his effort isn't the best.

Of course, Peter Jackson will get this award for "The Lord of the Rings." He is deserving in every right, but by now the award for him feels as much a cop-out as the best picture category. Then there is Fernando Meirelles, the Brazilian virtuoso behind "City of God." Every film-buff out there needs to experience "City of God," if not in theaters then at least on DVD. Words cannot describe the intensity and sheer boldness of the movie.

Who Should Win: Meirelles has created a genuine masterpiece.

Who Will Win: Peter Jackson, no doubt about it.

Best Actor

This is a problematic category, seeing that tight loyalties will be neck-and-neck for Bill Murray's bittersweet, crowning achievement in "Lost in Translation" and Sean Penn's incendiary turn in "Mystic River." Each has easily turned in the finest performances of their extensive careers in the pair of films, and it will be interesting to see who the Academy chooses to award.

Rounding out the bunch are Jude Law ("Cold Mountain") and Ben Kingsley ("House of Sand and Fog"), neither of whom turned in the best works of their careers. Then there is Johnny Depp, the proverbial "man" whose astonishing work has been underrated and ignored more than any other working actor. Not only is "Pirates of the Caribbean" built upon Depp's savvy buccaneer captain, but the actor has been overlooked for nominations so many times before that this award would be long overdue.

Who Should Win: In a just world, Johnny Depp would take home gold.

Who Will Win: Bill Murray vs. Sean Penn; it's just too close to call.

Best Actress

Diane Keaton ("Something's Gotta Give") was the surprise win at the Golden Globes, but best bets are on Charlize Theron for her unglamorous role in the indie flick "Monster." Both Samantha Morton ("In America") and Keisha Castle-Hughes ("Whale Rider") haven't received enough publicity to stand a chance at winning, but Naomi Watts could pose a threat to Theron's chances for her comparably understated part in "21 Grams."

This category should boil down to the battle of the unattractive character studies, though Theron has the lead with her prosthetic nose enhancement a la Nicole Kidman, who won for 2002's "The Hours."

Who Should Win: Watts' turn was slightly less pretentious.

Who Will Win: Theron has the best shot.