

The 2001 Academy Award nominations: all in all, not much

By David Walsh
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Amidst the usual media fanfare, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences announced the nominations for its annual Oscar awards Tuesday morning. The award ceremony will take place in Los Angeles on March 25.

Disturbingly, *Gladiator*, an unpleasant film set in ancient Rome that combines sadism and family values, won the greatest number of nominations, 12, including best picture, best actor for Russell Crowe and best director for Ridley Scott. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, directed by Taiwanese filmmaker Ang Lee, was nominated in 10 categories, including best picture, best foreign language picture and best direction. Lee's film is an elegant, rather empty work. As is so often the case, a remarkable trend in foreign filmmaking (in this case, the wave of East Asian films of the 1990s) has lapped onto Hollywood's shore in one of its most diluted and palatable forms.

Films directed by Steven Soderbergh, presently doing the least interesting work of his career, received considerable attention from the Academy. Soderbergh was nominated in the best direction category for both *Erin Brockovich* and *Traffic*, the first time a director has received two nominations in that category since 1938 (when Hungarian-born Michael Curtiz was nominated for both *Angels with Dirty Faces* and *Four Daughters*—not among his best work either).

Both Soderbergh films were nominated for the best picture award, while Julia Roberts received a nomination for best actress in *Erin Brockovich*, Albert Finney for best supporting actor in the same film and Benicio Del Toro in the latter category for *Traffic*. The writers of the two Soderbergh films were named in the two screenplay categories and *Traffic* was nominated for achievement in film editing.

The British film about a working class boy who

aspires to artistry, the sincere and sometimes moving *Billy Elliot*, received three nominations—for best directing (Stephen Daldry), supporting actress (Julie Walters) and screenplay (Lee Hall). *Chocolat*, more mediocre Scandinavian “magic realism” from director Lasse Hallström, was named in a number of categories. Ed Harris was rewarded for his years-long effort to get the story of painter Jackson Pollock to the screen, receiving a nomination for best actor in *Pollock*. Joan Allen and Jeff Bridges were nominated for their performances in the weak political drama inspired by the Clinton impeachment scandal, *The Contender*.

It was inevitable that Tom Hanks would be nominated for his performance in the pointless *Cast Away*. Losing 50 pounds for the film's “second act,” as Hanks did here, is reckoned a sign of extraordinary devotion to the motion picture arts and sciences in Hollywood. The fact that the film's *drama* never gets off the ground in any serious fashion and that it offers nothing but banalities apparently failed to dampen the voters' enthusiasm.

The widespread support by Academy voters for *Gladiator*, coming upon its victory at the Golden Globes award in January, is not a healthy sign. A few processes no doubt intersect in any such nomination. First, and not to be slighted, is the massive amount of money (in the tens of millions of dollars) expended by the studios to promote their products to the Academy's 5,607 voting members. (In most categories, except best picture, balloting for nominations is restricted to the members of the branch concerned.) Second, the failure or disappointing box-office numbers of a number of would-be blockbusters (*The Perfect Storm*, *Space Cowboys*, *The Replacements*, *Remember the Titans*, *Proof of Life* and others) left a gap into which *Gladiator* happily slipped. Third, there is the general

disorientation, cynicism and emptiness that permits such a choice.

This year's nominations are no doubt a wildly eclectic group. Academy President Robert Rehme commented on the "diverse" character of the nominated works, declaring, "In fact, it's the year of diversity." This is putting a good face on things. At this point one is almost obliged to make the same comment yearly, that the nominations "suggest some of the tensions at work in the American film industry as well as a great deal of its confusion" (*WSWS*, 17 February, 2000). We will simply note that several of the more interesting English-language films made this year, including Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet*, John Waters' *Cecil B. DeMented* and Terence Davies' *The House of Mirth*, received no nominations, nor did any of their performers.

How many of the American films nominated, varied stylistically as they may be, indicate either unease with the present state of things or a concern with broader social problems, or exhibit a spirit of protest, even interpreting these qualities in the most generous manner? One might name *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* by the Coen Brothers (nominated in two categories) and Kenneth Lonergan's *You Can Count on Me* (for which Laura Linney was nominated as best actress)—neither of which was a satisfying film.

Quills and *Before Night Falls* raise questions of intellectual freedom and history, only to treat the former in a superficial manner and the latter hardly at all. *The Contender* is Hollywood liberalism at its most wishful. *Wonder Boys* and *Almost Famous* are essentially trivial, *Requiem for a Dream* too hysterical and both Soderbergh's films too obviously efforts at crowd pleasing. All in all, judged by the work *it chooses to honor*, American commercial filmmaking remains in a pretty wretched state.

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