

The 2018 Academy Award Nominations: A few worthy films, and others to fill quotas

By Hiram Lee
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The nominations for the 2018 Academy Awards were announced Tuesday morning in Beverly Hills, California. Guillermo del Toro's film *The Shape of Water* led with thirteen nominations. Christopher Nolan's World War II drama *Dunkirk* received eight nominations, while *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* received seven.

A total of nine films were nominated this year in the category for Best Picture. Among these, the more interesting works were *The Post* and *The Shape of Water*. The former is Steven Spielberg's film about the events surrounding the *Washington Post's* decision to publish documents exposing the US government's lies about the Vietnam War, while the latter is an intriguing fantasy in which a janitor working in a Cold War-era government laboratory falls in love with a kind of "creature from the Black Lagoon" held captive in the lab.

Rounding out the Best Picture category are *Call Me By Your Name*, *Darkest Hour*, *Dunkirk*, *Get Out*, *Lady Bird*, *Phantom Thread*, and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. These are slight films for the most part and, in the case of *Get Out* and *Three Billboards*, pretty rotten ones.

Get Out received four nominations all together, including Jordan Peele for Best Director and Best Original Screenplay, and Daniel Kaluuya for Best Actor. The popular horror film tells the story of a young African-American photographer who is captured by a family of affluent white people who intend to use him for their own devious needs. The film is animated by a racist outlook, and followed to its logical conclusions, leads viewers into right-wing territory.

Three Billboards is about a woman who launches a vindictive law-and-order crusade against the local police and men in general when investigations into her

daughter's murder stall out. It is a vengeful work well suited to the #MeToo hysteria that has overtaken Hollywood.

In the acting categories, Denzel Washington and Willem Dafoe received well-deserved nominations for Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor, respectively. Washington starred in *Roman J. Israel, Esq.*, playing an independent and oppositional attorney struggling to hold on to his principles under considerable social pressure. Dafoe was recognized for his performance as the manager of a run-down motel which is home to struggling and nearly homeless families in *The Florida Project*, one of the better films released last year.

Sally Hawkins and Octavia Spencer were both nominated for their performances in *The Shape of Water*, and R&B singer Mary J. Blige was nominated for her role in *Mudbound*, the interesting and sincere Netflix production about two families, one black and the other white, in postwar Mississippi. Meryl Streep was nominated, as she usually is, for her performance as *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham in *The Post*.

Veteran actor Christopher Plummer was nominated for *All the Money in the World*. The film about the real-life kidnapping of an heir to the J. Paul Getty fortune will go down in history for its shameful part in the sexual misconduct witch hunt.

Plummer's role was originally played by actor Kevin Spacey who was removed from the completed film by Sony studios and director Ridley Scott when accusations of sexual misconduct were made against him. Plummer was shoehorned into the role at the last minute for political reasons and financial calculations. The results are what one might expect under the circumstances. The Academy's decision to nominate him is little more than a nod to #MeToo.

Two years after the #OscarSoWhite campaign, and months into the #MeToo furor, the affluent guardians of morality and racial and gender quotas in Hollywood are keeping a close watch on things.

Most articles reporting on this year's nominations were simply running tallies of the number of African-Americans nominated or the number of films dealing with themes supported by feminists or LGBT activists. There has been little concern among these writers for the aesthetic quality of the films or performances involved. Works that take a deeper and broader look at social life, and a more complex view of humanity, or stunned us with their aesthetic invention, were sorely lacking in 2017. But these critics only see value in race and gender.

Brooks Barnes, writing for the *New York Times*, which has led the way in the witch hunt, was typical, writing, "Oscar voters tilted toward a new Hollywood era on Tuesday, giving first-time nominations to at least 35 people, inviting Netflix into the club, recognizing a woman in the cinematography category for the first time and bypassing actors and films tainted by sexual harassment allegations."

Some speculated, with good reason, that actor James Franco was denied a nomination for his role in *The Disaster Artist* because of the recent accusations against him currently circulating in the media.

The 90th annual Academy Awards ceremony will air March 4, with late-night comedian Jimmy Kimmel returning to host. Usually a stodgier affair than the Golden Globes, which was an open and ecstatic celebration of #MeToo this year, the Oscars may be more reserved, but some form of tribute to the witch hunt will undoubtedly be paid. Will there be voices of opposition? We will see.

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