

# Entertainment

## All roads lead through 'Rings'

But other films will make strong showings at tonight's Oscars



Peter Jackson's film *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* is favored to win best picture, but the best director race is much less predictable.

Photo illustration/  
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### The nominees

#### Best Picture

- *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*
- *Lost in Translation*
- *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*
- *Mystic River*
- *Seabiscuit*



Sean Penn

#### Actor in a Leading Role

- Johnny Depp *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*
- Ben Kingsley *House of Sand and Fog*
- Jude Law *Cold Mountain*
- Bill Murray *Lost in Translation*
- Sean Penn *Mystic River*

#### Actor in a Supporting Role

- Alec Baldwin *The Cooler*
- Benicio Del Toro *21 Grams*
- Djimon Hounsou *In America*
- Tim Robbins *Mystic River*
- Ken Watanabe *The Last Samurai*



Charlize Theron

#### Actress in a Leading Role

- Keisha Castle-Hughes *Whale Rider*
- Diane Keaton *Something's Gotta Give*
- Samantha Morton *In America*
- Charlize Theron *Monster*
- Naomi Watts *21 Grams*

#### Actress in a Supporting Role

- Shohreh Aghdashloo *House of Sand and Fog*
- Patricia Clarkson *Pieces of April*
- Marcia Gay Harden *Mystic River*
- Holly Hunter *Thirteen*
- Renée Zellweger *Cold Mountain*

#### Directing

- Fernando Meirelles *City of God*
- Peter Jackson *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*
- Sophia Coppola *Lost in Translation*
- Peter Weir *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*
- Clint Eastwood *Mystic River*

Complete list of nominees:  
[www.oscar.com](http://www.oscar.com)

By WILLIAM BOOTH  
The Washington Post

LOS ANGELES — Back in Washington, around the water coolers at the Pentagon, they talk about this idea called “incestuous amplification” as a bad thing.

In the echo chamber of Hollywood, however, incestuous amplification — “the reinforcement of set beliefs among like-minded people creating a situation ripe for miscalculation” — is what they call a movie studio.

This town embraces incestuous amplification! Which leads us to this year's nominations for the Oscars. People, it's groupthink run amok.

Best Picture? As if you need to ask. Best Actress? Best Actor? The town appears to have made up its mind. Whether the 5,816 voting members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences agree, well, the envelopes, please.

But hope for surprise springs eternal. The guessfest of Oscar prognostication is an annual rite. Really, being nominated, gosh, that's enough.

Wouldn't it be pretty to think so. “Some part of you does want to be included,” concedes Peter Weir, Best Director nominee for *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*. And try as he might, Weir admits that some part of his “Stone Age brain” takes over, the acid boils in his throat, “and you really want to win.”

Here's the buzz:

#### Best Picture

We don't need to get Miss Cleo back to her tarot cards to see the future. Close your eyes and imagine a fuzzy-faced man in need of a haircut waddling up to a stage, his ample gut spilling out of an ill-fitting Armani tuxedo; he pushes his glasses to his sweaty nose, his eyes grow misty and then he accepts the golden statue, saying something about how beautiful it is that a movie about courage and friendship and faith should be so honored. The Hobbits go nuts.

The conventional wisdom so favors Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* that it seems to be sucking the fun out of everything. “I know we're the favorite among the people who speculate on these things,” Jackson says. So the Kiwi is wary of a jinx. “I have the most appalling butterflies,” he confesses, as he continues to hover up awards from the Golden Globes, the Producers Guild, the Directors Guild, the British Academy Awards.

The feeling is that Jackson has earned it — literally. His trilogy grossed \$2 billion in worldwide box office receipts; the movies are technical marvels; they have heart; Liv Tyler makes one want to actually learn to speak Elvish; and, my God, they shot for 264 consecutive days in New Zealand. All that, and Jackson brought the beloved trilogy to the screen — and didn't screw it up.

But wait. Some adults in the academy might be uncomfortable giving their Best Picture vote to a movie starring Gimlee the Dwarf. And the voters are downright unlikely to anoint *Master & Commander* or *Seabiscuit*, since neither film drew a nomination for its actors.

In recent years the academy has warmed up to movies that look and act like independents, but are really studio projects.

*Lost in Translation*, Sofia Coppola's movie, however, might seem to be just too slight in its scope to justify a vote. It is a miniature. Exact. Precise. Unique. But the kind of painting that goes in the

hallway. While *Mystic River* is the sort of art that gets hung up over the fireplace. Sweeping. Adult. Heavy. If it's not about Frodo, we think the academy will pass on the midlife crisis of *Translation* and choose Clint Eastwood's Greek tragedy set on the riverbanks of Boston.

#### Best Actress

Is it just us, or do the blondes with excellent zygomatic bone structure tend to run together? Naomi Watts. Charlize Theron. Samantha Morton. Too much of a good thing. Hard to keep track, like models on the catwalk.

Which is why the nomination of Keisha Castle-Hughes, the 13-year-old New Zealand ingenue, for her role as the reluctant shaman in *Whale Rider* was such a gushy surprise.

Though pretty and poised, she is still a kid. At the Oscar nominees luncheon, Keisha went to the podium and bumbled that she had just meet Charlize! So sweet. So forget it. A child actor, no matter how deft her performance (and it is), is not going to be crowned Best Actress — not in this crowd.

Not when the favorite is Theron, for her turn as the truck-stop hooker and serial killer Aileen Wuornos in *Monster*. The academy just loves dishy actresses who put on the prosthetic dentures, trowel on the liquid latex and pack on a couple of pounds of tallow. It is the Hollywood equivalent of throwing yourself on a hand grenade. Noble.

Remember last year's winner? It was Nicole Kidman — by a phony nose. But Theron does more than hide behind the gimmick of neglected epidermis. Theron says in Wuornos she tried to show a human being “wanting to be loved, to fit in, not wanting to be betrayed.”

Or else. (Wuornos, who confessed to the murders of a half-dozen men, was executed by the state of Florida in 2002.)

Theron says *Monster* was unique, in that “complicated roles for women are very rare.” She says: “We're not perfect. We're not just mothers and nurturers.” Apparently not. Sometimes, she could have said, “we're psycho killers.”

Hollywood loves this kind of self-serving twaddle. But *Monster* was a hard movie to watch, and if the academy is feeling light and lively, there is an outside chance for Diane Keaton, the playwright with the monster mansion in the Hamptons in *Something's Gotta Give*. The feeling is that Keaton gave a wonderfully broad comedic performance that saved the film from its formulaic self. Keaton is now Old Hollywood. Bonus points for Keaton from the academy, which skews toward the over-50 set, because she took off her clothes — right on, sisters! — and showed that Annie Hall has been spending time on her LifeCycle.

#### Best Actor

Eastwood says his ensemble crew of actors in *Mystic River* was so good, so professional, so focused, that he merely mumbled something about what marks he wanted them to hit for the cameras, and then got out of the way. He is being modest.

Eastwood says Sean Penn brought such emotion to his role as a working-class Boston tough who grieves for the loss of his daughter that the director tried to capture his scenes in one or two takes. “Sean can play with such intensity — you don't want to burn him out,” Eastwood said. Penn, who has matured into a master, will likely win Best Actor.

Unless Bill Murray takes it. In *Lost in Translation*, Murray manages to employ his riffy humor with moments of spare tenderness in a complex performance as a fading actor who washes up in Tokyo to film a whiskey commercial, and finds himself staring into the mortal abyss of a midlife crisis.

Director Coppola was smart enough to just let Murray go. Some of the film's best minutes weren't in the script; it was Murray improvising. Coppola says that she wrote the screenplay for Murray and that if he had turned down the role, “I wouldn't have made the film.” (If Coppola wins a screenwriting award, she oughta share it with Murray.)

Johnny Depp as the foppish privateer in *Pirates of the Caribbean* was an odd choice for a nomination. Depp's eccentric turn saved a movie that, let's be honest, is based on a ride at Disneyland. His makeup artist, Ve Neill, who dolled Depp up in mascara and eyeliner — she could win, but Johnny, avast ye mateys, no.

Sir Ben Kingsley was intense and captivating in *House of Sand and Fog*, but the movie has faded in recent months — plus the worldly wise academy voters might find its premise unbelievable. A California house with ocean vu for sale for \$175,000? Who were they kidding?

Finally, there's Jude Law, the lovesick AWOL rebel in *Cold Mountain*. Nice work. Polite applause. Maybe next year.

#### Best Supporting Actor

Alec Baldwin said he initially tossed aside the script for *The Cooler* after reaching the scene where his character, throwback casino boss Shelly Kaplow, has to slap around a pregnant lady who was caught scamming his club. “I don't want to do this,” Baldwin remembers thinking. His agent told him to turn the page and read on. Baldwin says he is glad he didn't fold.

*Cooler* is a comeback of sorts for Baldwin, who has settled uneasily into an increasingly interesting career as a character actor.

At the Oscars, he faces some stiff competition. Djimon Hounsou was born in Benin and living as a homeless man in Paris when he was discovered and made into a model. Now he's an Oscar nominee for *In America*, portraying a magical and mysterious character dying of AIDS in Jim Sheridan's immigrant fable. Hounsou could do it.

There's also Benicio del Toro, who played an ex-con trying mightily to follow the Lord's path through a valley of shadows in *21 Grams*.

Del Toro, however, already won an Oscar in 2000 for his Tijuana cop in *Traffic*, and the academy is probably not ready to serve him with another one so soon. “This is a cool bunch of names to be associated with,” del Toro says. That should be enough.

The odds favor Tim Robbins, who channels Lennie from *Of Mice and Men* (tell me about the rabbits, George) in his portrayal in *Mystic River* of Dave, the kid who got in the car and thereafter spent his life as a floating wreck, half-submerged in rage at the abuse he suffered.

#### Best Supporting Actress

We hear Holly Hunter is throwing a luncheon for her fellow nominees for Best Supporting Actress — a bit of sisterly bonding, and a classy gesture, says a very pregnant-with-twins Marcia Gay Harden, who in *Mystic River* played a confused, terrified and lonely wife whose misjudgments about her husband's bloody hands turn the movie toward its ultimate tragedies.

Hunter is up for her 12-stepping mom in *Thirteen*, the film about teenyboppers from hell. She was awesome, as usual: so vulnerable, so real, a distillation of a certain template of modern motherhood, hip yet frail, loving but confused.

But everyone seems to be smitten by Renee Zellweger, the cornponic farmer's daughter in the Civil War epic *Cold Mountain*. Why is everyone so smitten? We confess deep, deep mystification. We never got *Cold Mountain*, and just because Zellweger stuffed a couple of walnuts in her cheeks and went all hill-billy, well, enough said. Harvey Weinstein of Miramax loves her. And she completes us. But perhaps the academy will come to its senses.

Because it should be a four-way race among her competitors. In addition to Harden and Hunter, Patricia Clarkson plays, in *Pieces of April*, a mother dying of cancer who tries to reunite with her daughter. It's funnier than it sounds. Clarkson has major Indie Street Cred. While filming *Pieces*, her dressing room was a bathroom at a gas station. Her Oscar nom is praise enough — for now. Plus, she says her next roles might garner one or two more zeros on her paychecks.

And finally: On the cover of *Entertainment Weekly* was the line: “And who the heck is Shohreh Aghdashloo?” She's the Iranian-born actress in *House of Sand and Fog* who plays Kingsley's generous, suffering wife. We don't think she will get a Little Golden Man, but she will now get some roles in Hollywood, and that is a good thing.

#### Best Director

Musical chairs. We figure academy voters will be able to split their votes. For example, if they give the Hobbits their Best Picture prize, they can award Eastwood for *Mystic*. Or vice versa. Or surprise us and let the kids sit at the grown-up table by inducting Coppola, who is, after all, Hollywood royalty.

The nominee in this category whose work was the most outstanding might be Fernando Meirelles, the Brazilian director of *City of God*, who took an amateur cast composed almost completely of street toughs from the slums of Rio and created a world as real and rich as that of *The Godfather*. The film shocked middle-class Brazilians and awakened politicians there to the dead-end lives being wasted in shantytowns. The government responded by bringing programs for sports, culture, education to the slum that served as the film's setting.

“For me,” Meirelles says, “this is the best award for the film.”

If that's not perspective, what is?