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Publicity paves way for Oscar contenders

By Tom Panzenhagen
special writer

SOON EVERY FILMGOER worth the salt on his popcorn will have an opinion on the Oscars. And entertainment writers, feature writers, columnists, political pundits — even sports reporters — will tell you who's going to win the annual awards. But these scribbles and would-be critics all will have one advantage: When they predict their winners, the nominees will have been announced. It's not hard to assess the five nominees in the four major categories — best film, director, actor and actress — and then pick the favorite, or perhaps give the nod to the "favored" darkhorse nominee, and then claim great insight into the motion picture business when three picks out of four prove providential.

What is difficult, however, is picking the nominees. Now that demands both insight and a genuine passion for public ridicule. So without further ado and for the first time anywhere, here's a list of the nominees for this year's Academy Awards.

FOR BEST FILM the nominees are:

- "E.T."
- "Sophie's Choice"
- "Tootsie"
- "The Verdict"

One factor permeates the three general types of films represented by these nominations: publicity. Every picture on this best-film list has garnered so much press that filmgoers really didn't

have to see the pictures to know what they're about or how good they are. Media hype made the films Oscar contenders, even though only two or three of them are genuinely potential award-winning works.

Regarding the film types: "Sophie's Choice," "Tootsie" and "The Verdict" are Oscar contenders because they are star vehicles. Each features a major star in an Academy Award performance, so it follows — unnaturally — that the films themselves are "Academy Award films."

"Gandhi" qualifies as an epic work — "70 years in the making," as the ads proclaim — and also because of its epic, larger-than-life qualities. And "E.T.," of course, makes the list because it's the most popular film of all time, and the Academy is not about to tell millions of filmgoers that they've been paying \$4 to see a second-rate flick.

If there's a darkhorse bet it's "Missing," the little-publicized film by director Costa-Gavras. Unfortunately, "Missing" premiered a full year ago, and it's unlikely that Oscar voters can remember that far back.

FOR BEST DIRECTOR the nominees are:

- Richard Attenborough, "Gandhi"
- Sidney Lumet, "The Verdict"
- Alan Pakula, "Sophie's Choice"
- Sidney Pollack, "Tootsie"
- Steven Spielberg, "E.T."

No surprises here; all the directors come from the best-film nominees. Richard Attenborough's 20 years of work will not go unrewarded. Sidney

Lumet and Sidney Pollack have paid their dues with strings of successful and critically acclaimed films, and Steven Spielberg can't be denied — not with "E.T." nearing the \$200 million mark. That leaves as the final choice Alan Pakula, who's handicapped by too few past hits and mixed reviews for "Sophie's Choice." Still he figures to beat out Costa-Gavras, who's been "missing" from Hollywood circles for the last year.

FOR BEST ACTOR the nominees are:

- Dustin Hoffman, "Tootsie"
- Ben Kingsley, "Gandhi"
- Jeremy Irons, "Moonlighting"
- Paul Newman, "The Verdict"
- Peter O'Toole, "My Favorite Year"

"Moonlighting" is an English film that's prospered from wonderful word-of-mouth. It hasn't played in many markets but already is being touted as a best foreign-film nominee and possible best-film contender. The former is likely, the latter unlikely, and Jeremy Irons, who starred in last year's "The French Lieutenant's Woman," at least should garner a best-actor bid.

Dustin Hoffman, Ben Kingsley and Paul Newman are can't-miss nominees for their "star-vehicle" performances. Kingsley's newcomer status will work against him in the best-actor voting but won't prevent him from winning a nomination. Newman certainly will get a bid — not only because he did an adequate job in "The Verdict" but because he's been denied an Oscar so many times before. It is, after all, a Holly-

wood tradition to reward longevity. Hoffman is the most certain shoe-in and Peter O'Toole the greatest longshot for nominations, but Tinseltown loves an actor who plays a drunk (witness Dudley Moore's acclaim for "Arthur"), so O'Toole seems the likely fifth choice.

FOR BEST ACTRESS the nominees are:

- Jessica Lange, "Tootsie"
- Susan Sarandon, "Tempest"
- Sissy Spacek, "Missing"
- Meryl Streep, "Sophie's Choice"
- Debra Winger, "An Officer and a Gentleman"

It's the safest bet since Henry Fonda for "On Golden Pond" that Meryl Streep will win for "Sophie's Choice," although that really doesn't concern us here. Jessica Lange, who won notoriety for "Tootsie" and praise for her portrayal of actress Frances Farmer (in a film released in select markets in order to qualify for the Oscars), could win an Oscar bid for either film, hence the asterisk next to her name. Debra Winger deserves, and will get, a nomination for her fine performance in the best-liked sentimental film of the year, "An Officer and a Gentleman."

Because it was a lean year for actresses — and because no foreign actress distinguished herself, as is so frequently the case — the Academy likely will compensate Susan Sarandon for her last year, when she should have won best actress for "Atlantic City," with a nomination even though her work in "Tempus" wasn't exactly sterling.



Dustin Hoffman is a struggling actor who masquerades as a woman and Sydney Pollack is a New York agent in "Tootsie." The film, its stars and director are likely to be among Oscar contenders.

The final spot boils down to Sissy Spacek ("Missing") and Julie Andrews ("Victor, Victoria"). Spacek is the probable fifth nominee — once again her selection would be a sure bet had not "Missing" been released so long ago. Andrews turned heads with her portrayal of a woman disguised as a man disguised as a woman, but "Victor, Victoria" is nearly as old as "Missing,"

and Andrews' performance in it not quite so distinguished as Spacek's. The actual nominations are due out Feb. 17. After that the Oscars are anybody's guess.

(Tom Panzenhagen is a freelance editor and film reviewer. He writes a weekly movie column that appears in many of the Observer & Eccentric newspapers.)

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