



Barry Levinson appears to be the most likely to win the Oscar for best director for his work with Tom Cruise and Dustin Hoffman in "Rain Man."

'Best' bet: Got to be Levinson

By Dan Greenberg
staff writer

Oscars for best director and best picture are closely associated, since audiences tend to assess a nation picture's total impact — "Boy was that a good movie."

Seldom do viewers say, "Ah, that was the costume department's work, the editor, the cinematographer, the choreographer and the director blended it all together."

But what does a director do? Just tell the actors where to move and how to say their lines? How much of "Rain Man's" appeal was Barry Levinson's doing and how much was Dustin Hoffman's magnificent performance? What about photography, music, makeup, costuming and other departments?

The final product, the impact of the film we screen depends not only on what we see, but in what order the shots are arranged. Perhaps film editors — the people who cut and arrange the shots — deserve more credit than they get.

Of course, the director controls the footage an editor has to work with. Hitchcock shot so tightly that there was no way to edit other than according to his plan. Some overshoot to such an extent that an editor can create a half-dozen different products with varying appeals and impact.

Traditionally, directors were considered artistic leaders in motion picture production, while administrative duties were handled by producers.

MOST DIRECTORS (and producers) in Hollywood's golden studio age were constrained by corporate directives and their individuality was severely limited. Although there were always "larger than life" directors who "did it all" — Chaplin, D.W. Griffith, Sergei Eisenstein, Ingmar Bergman, Fellini — in the past several decades, the idea of "director" has been replaced by the concept of "filmmaker."

Of course today's filmmakers — Scorsese, Coppola, Woody Allen, Spielberg, Lucas, among others — don't "do it all." They have large staffs who provide invaluable and very extensive services. But the basic concept of films, their style, theme, mood and atmosphere no longer evolve as corporate decisions. The filmmaker tells the staff how things should look, sound and feel. Since today's filmmaker usually works from the director's chair, we now praise (or blame) the director/filmmaker for the final product.

That makes it difficult to discuss best picture and best director separately. Often, many films are nominated in both categories. In about 75 percent of the academy's 61 years, these two awards have gone to the same picture. This year it's three out of five, including the two top contenders — "Mississippi Burning" and "Rain Man" — with "Working Girl" being the third to nab best di-

rector and picture nominations. Interestingly enough, all three films also earned prestigious best director nominations from the Director's Guild of America. The fourth best director Oscar nomination went to "A Fish Named Wanda," also a DGA nominee.

THE DIRECTOR'S Guild and the Academy differed on one selection. The academy's fifth selection for best direction was Martin Scorsese's controversial "Last Temptation of Christ," while the DGA wound up its list by tapping Roger Zemeckis for "Who's Afraid of Roger Rabbit."

Martin Scorsese has one earlier nomination to his credit, for "Raging Bull," and "Last Temptation" was an unexpected nomination, hardly a mainstream selection.

While the film was interesting and "looked" good, to my mind it was too controversial, received more publicity than exhibition and Scorsese probably will be passed over for those reasons.

British film and television director Charles Crichton is another long shot for "A Fish Named Wanda," his first Oscar nomination. He's hardly a household name in this country despite the fact that he directed Alec Guinness to his first nomination for "Lavender Hill Mob" in 1952.

Besides Crichton's lack of major status, "Wanda," no matter how funny and how successful, is a comedy in a competition that favors drama.

Mike Nichols is the king of nominations in this crowd, having three previous nominations — "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," "Silkwood" and "The Graduate," for which he won. Coincidentally, that movie was Dustin Hoffman's first nomination.

THAT BRINGS us to the two main contenders, Alan Parker for "Mississippi Burning" and Barry Levinson for "Rain Man." Neither have won before although Parker was nominated for "Midnight Express" and Levinson garnered two nominations as screenwriter for "And Justice for All..." and "Diner."

"Mississippi Burning" is either a perfect political statement or a questionable one, depending upon your politics. So that seems to go against Parker, despite the fact that he has made a powerful statement about Klan oppression of blacks, a statement whose effect depends on a lot of good performances tied tightly together.

While the argument may rage forever, it seems to me that film is general is a collective art, and Dustin Hoffman's superb performance in "Rain Man" is to his credit and also reflects well on Levinson for drawing out that performance.

"Rain Man" is a film that avoids politically sensitive issues and, most important of all, was the best effort of the year. So let's give Levinson the statuette he deserves. He was the best director.

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