Well before the 2009 Academy Award nominations were announced this morning, Oscar-watchers were abuzz over the potential excitement in this year's major categories. Would *Slumdog Millionaire*'s seemingly unstoppable march toward a Best Picture win be derailed by a surge of popular support for *The Dark Knight* or even - gulp! - *WALL•E*? Would the season's continued award-splitting between *Milk'* s Sean Penn (recipient of 15 pre-Oscar citations thus far) and *The Wrestler'* s Mickey Rourke (14 and counting) allow Clint Eastwood to sneak in a career-achievement win for *Gran Torino* ? Would Kate Winslet receive her long-overdue trophy for Best Actress in *Revolutionary Road* , or for Best Supporting Actress in *The Reader* ... or could the performer, as she did at the Golden Globes, actually walk away with *both* awards?

The excitement was fun while it lasted, huh?

Granted, we still have the Penn/Rourke showdown to look forward to, and Winslet might now be in a better position for an Oscar victory than she was prior to 5:40 a.m. PST. But to quote the Facebook message I received minutes after the nominations were announced, this year's line-up is incredibly "meh" - no Picture or Director nods for *The Dark Knight* (despite eight nominations overall, which is nothing to sniff at); *WALL•E*

(six nominations) receiving its
fait accompli
Animated Feature recognition but denied a shot at the big prize; Clint - with
Gran Torino
and
Changeling
giving him shots at Actor, Picture, Director, Score, and Original Song - completely shut out; and Winslet, in one of the morning's few pleasant surprises, getting a Best Actress citation for
The Reader
(which is the category that performance
belongs
in) instead of
Revolutionary Road.

Other surprises? Well, after being ignored by nearly every Oscar precursor under the sun, Michael Shannon received a long-shot Supporting Actor nod for *Revolutionary Road*, and the Original Screenplay category found room for Courtney Hunt's
Frozen River
and Martin McDonaugh's
In Bruges
.
(It was a happy morning for playwrights; in addition to McDonaugh, of
The Pillowman
fame, there were nominations for David Hare, Peter Morgan, and John Patrick Shanley.)
Veteran character actors Richard Jenkins (
The Visitor
) and Melissa Leo (
Frozen River
) got an invitation to the February 22 ceremony. And while
The Curious Case of Benjamin Button
was the expected leader in total nominations - 13 in all, the highest tally since 2002's
Chicago
-
Slumdog Millionaire

racked up 10 without having any of its actors nominated.

Two of those nominations, by the by, were for Best Original Song - "Jai Ho" and "O Saya" - which begs the question: Where the hell is Bruce Springsteen's nomination for *The Wrestler*? And why, with *WALL•E'* s "Down to Earth" filling out the roster, were only three songs nominated instead of the typical five? (You could've stocked the category with tunes from *High School Musical 3* all by *itself.*)

Other notable dissings: Golden Globe winner (and recipient of nine *other* pre-Oscar accolades) Sally Hawkins for *Hap py-Go-Lucky* ; *Waltz with Bashir* for Animated Feature (though the cartoon documentary is among this year's Foreign Language Film nominees); Woody Allen's *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* screenplay; *The Wrestler* for anything *other* than Rourke and Supporting Actress contender Marisa Tomei; *The Dark Knight* for Original Score (especially after the Academy tumult regarding its eligibility); *Rachel Getting Married* for anything *besides* Anne Hathaway ... .

Written by Mike Schulz
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