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If you're looking to win your workplace's annual Oscar pool, you'll likely do pretty well this year just by going with *Slumdog Millionaire* for nearly everything, by picking *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* for the tech awards

Slumdog

isn't nominated for, and by not making wild-card predictions in the gimme categories. Heath Ledger is winning Best Supporting Actor and

WALL-E

is winning Animated Feature. Just accept it. Don't try to be a hero.

But for the first time since 2003, both Best Actor and Actress seem completely up in the air, and while I'm still hesitant about a bunch of my choices - particularly in the Foreign-Language, Documentary Feature, and notoriously unpredictable Short Film lineups - the following are my final guesses in the two Oscar categories that have been keeping me up nights. (That's an overstatement. I'm sleeping fine. I'm just really anxious to see how they play out.)

BEST ACTOR

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 16 February 2009 08:32

Richard Jenkins, *The Visitor*

Frank Langella, *Frost/Nixon*

Sean Penn, *Milk*

Brad Pitt, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

Mickey Rourke, *The Wrestler*

You can generally determine a competitor's status in the Oscar race based on the number of pre-Oscar accolades received, and in recent years, Daniel Day-Lewis, Javier Bardem, Helen Mirren, and Forest Whitaker all won so many precursor awards that their eventual Academy victories were practically *faits accomplis*. (This year, frontrunner *Slumdog* has racked up 17 Best Picture citations from guild and critics organizations, compared to

Milk

's five,

Benjamin Button

's two,

Frost/Nixon

's one, and

The Reader

's zero.) But in trying to predict the victor of 2009's Best Actor race, how do you determine a favorite when Sean Penn has 17 such victories, and Mickey Rourke has

16

? You don't, and given their Oscar-caliber portrayals, you probably won't hear much bitching about an undeserved win regardless of who gets the statuette. All you can do, then, is rely on specificity - exactly

which

precursor awards did the actors receive? - and momentum and that indefinable "buzz" ... and then you go with Rourke.

Sean & Mickey & Kate & Meryl... and Melissa: Predicting the Oscar Races for Best Actor and Actress

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