Excepting a few quibbles – Where's Richard Gere? Where's Dennis Quaid? How did The Time Machine get nominated for anything?! – reactions to this year's Oscar nominations have been remarkably subdued, with a minimum of bitching. Let's fix that! The following are my ideal lineups for the top six categories, the Academy's choices be damned.

Note: An "(A)" denotes an Academy Award nominee; bold denotes my personal favorite.

Best Picture
Bowling For Columbine
Far from Heaven
The Hours (A)
The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (A)
The Pianist (A)

No exaggeration: This year's Best Picture slate is, for me, the most wholly satisfying roster the Academy has come up with since I've been alive. For a while, it seemed entirely possible that one of the nominees would fall victim to the *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* juggernaut, especially when that film's cast trumped the actors from
Gangs of New York
and
The Pianist
for a Best Ensemble nomination from the Screen Actors Guild. (Last year, SAG's Best Ensemble nominees matched the Best Picture contenders five-for-five.) Thankfully, the Academy wasn't biting, and came up with five choices that form a perfect merger of the accessibly highbrow and the well-produced middlebrow. In fact, of the five nominees, the only one I think
doesn't
deserve its nomination is the surest best to win:
Chicago
. The movie is enjoyable as all get-out, but it's such an over-edited, anything-for-an-effect creation that it actually leaves your memory
while you're watching it
. Despite its cleverness and considerable entertainment value,
Chicago
is little more than a lightweight blockbuster with snob appeal – just what the Academy adores.

Meanwhile, bully to the voters for going with *The Hours*, *The Pianist*, and *The Two Towers* (though the film deserved about a half-dozen more nods than it received). Further huzzahs for the inclusion of the mostly marvelous
Gangs of New York
; the film would have made my
own
roster if Scorsese had found a way to excise the fraudulent Leo-and-Cameron love story, which continually grinds the film to a halt. Instead of
Gangs
and

Chicago
, then, I'd have found room for the stunning '50s re-creation
Far from Heaven
and my personal champion of 2002, Michael Moore's provocative
Bowling for Columbine
, which
is
nominated for Best Documentary Feature but deserved a shot at the bigger prize. Both films are particularly extraordinary for what it is they
aren't
– passive.
Heaven
has viewers in a dither over whether it's merely a slick homage to '50s melodramas or a staggeringly emotional deconstruction of them, and Moore's film – well, I doubt anyone still needs to be told that more than a few fights have broken out over its effectiveness. I'm guessing that both
Heaven
and
Columbine
will spark debate years down the road; what better qualification for artistic greatness could there be?

Best Director
George Clooney (*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*)
Alfonso Cuaron (*Y Tu Mama Tambien*)
Todd Haynes (*Far from Heaven*)
Peter Jackson (*The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*)
Roman Polanski (*The Pianist*) (A)

Although I have yet to see it, I'm thrilled that the Academy nominated *Talk to Her*'s Pedro Almodovar, who has been doing wickedly entertaining, thought-provoking work in Spain for over two decades, even though his nod came at the expense of Peter Jackson, which is a tad baffling. (What is the
Lord of the Rings
opus if
not
a director's showcase?) Following the Best-Picture-equals-Best-Director equation, then, the Academy's choices were a predictable lot:
The Hours
' Stephen Daldry,
Chicago
's Rob Marshall,
Gangs of New York
's Martin Scorsese, and Roman Polanski, the only one who'd make my personal roster. (Again, Scorsese
would

have made my cut ... if only two-thirds of
Gangs
were considered.) I loved
Repulsion
and
Rosemary's Baby
and
Chinatown
, and I'm still not sure if Polanski's direction has ever been finer than it is in
The Pianist
. He finds a way to combine his notoriously cynical worldview and gifts for terror and suspense with deep love and even tenderness; just when you think you have Polanski all figured out, he shocks you with something brand-new to his
oeuvre
: compassion. It's a masterful work of direction.

So, in a perfect world, Polanski would stay, Jackson would squeeze in, and they'd be joined by Clooney, who finds a perfect visual equivalent for a story that's too weird *not* to be believed; Cuaron, who turns an erotically charged sex fantasy into a moving tale of political, economic, and romantic turmoil; and my personal choice, Haynes, whose stylized direction could have gone wrong in about a thousand different ways – how easily
Far from Heaven
could have become a cartoon! – and never falters. Not once.

Best Actor
Adrien Brody (*The Pianist*) (A)
Daniel Day-Lewis (*Gangs of New York*) (A)
Richard Gere (*Unfaithful*)
Greg Kinnear (*Auto Focus*)
Sam Rockwell (*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*)

Much has been made in the press about the omission of Richard Gere, and I'll agree that he was unduly ignored – but not for *Chicago*. His tap-dancing lawyer is impressive, to be sure, but he gave two performances in 2002 that were even better, in
The Mothman Prophecies
and especially in
Unfaithful
, the movie he should have been cited for. His cuckolded hubby is a pitch-perfect rendition of betrayal, anger, and grief, made all the more amazing when you realize how little of what he brings to it is actually on the page. (His and Diane Lane's portrayals are masterpieces of filling sketchy roles with true human experience.) Like Adrien Brody, whose
Pianist
nomination is most deserving, he achieves his effects simply and honestly, and makes Jack Nicholson's nominated
About Schmidt
performance look even more like a con job; Nicholson, "subtle" though many find him here,

spends his entire screen time
commentating
on his hapless character and distancing “Jack” from Schmidt; Gere and Brody, and the astonishingly fine Daniel Day-Lewis, too,
inhabit
their characters fully and deliver career-best work without sacrificing truth.

I’ll reserve judgment on Michael Caine’s *The Quiet American* nomination until I actually *see* the film, and though Nicolas Cage was wonderful in
Adaptation
, I still think he has to pay penance for years of
Con Air
s and
Face/Off
s and
The Family Man
s. In their stead, allow me to suggest two sensational portrayals of showbiz insiders – Kinnear’s Bob Crane and Rockwell’s Chuck Barris – that simultaneously played off our shared knowledge of the two and showed them in new, oftentimes frightening lights, Kinnear with Crane’s Boy Scout image gone to seed, and Rockwell with Barris’ quest-for-fame gone psycho. The Academy loves actors who play celebrated media fixtures well – Angela Bassett’s Tina Turner, Martin Landau’s Bela Lugosi, Will Smith’s Muhammad Ali – but apparently not so much when they play them
disturbingly
well.

Best Actress
Maggie Gyllenhaal (*Secretary*)
Nicole Kidman (*The Hours*) (A)
Diane Lane (*Unfaithful*) (A)
Julianne Moore (*Far from Heaven*) (A)
Meryl Streep (*The Hours*)

I am completely at peace with the Academy’s Best Actress choices this year; there’s no glaring omission like last year’s Naomi Watts snub to get me all riled up. Kidman burrowed into her Virginia Woolf character in a way that seemed positively revelatory; Lane, as previously discussed, pounced on her slightly written role with a vengeance – there’s no denying the power in her oft-cited, post-coital train scene, a whirlwind of contrasting emotions; and Moore... well, I’m not sure how much else I can say about one of the greatest performances of the past 20 years. They should just give her the damned Oscar and be done with it. (Sad to say, though, that seems iffy at best.) I can certainly see the sense in nominating *Frida*’s Salma Hayek, for performing ably in her dream role and helping make the movie a sizeable hit, and
Chicago
’s Renee Zellweger, because ... y’know, who knew she could do
that
? I, though, would have replaced the latter two with Streep, giving a slowly-falling-apart

performance of such delicacy and nuance that you never wanted her scenes to end, and Gyllenhaal, who took what could have been an aggressively insulting character and turned her into a figure of uncommon pathos, humor, and yearning – *and* she did it in a film that would have been a complete botch without her. The year's other great actresses give their all to their films; Gyllenhaal positively *rescues* hers.

Best Supporting Actor
Cedric the Entertainer (*Barbershop*)
Chris Cooper (*Adaptation*) (A)
Willem Dafoe (*Auto Focus*)
Jude Law (*The Road to Perdition*)
Dennis Quaid (*Far from Heaven*)

Here's a rarity: My personal favorite choice is also the front-runner. I don't know anyone who saw *Adaptation* and didn't marvel at the powerhouse performance of Chris Cooper. He's so hilarious, so touching, so blisteringly *alive* that you can't imagine the movie without him, and his portrayal is even more impressive given Cooper's usual stoicism – who thought the man had it in him to be *wacky*? 2002 was filled with supporting performances that were no less surprising, but scant few made it onto the Best Supporting Actor lineup. While the fine performances of *Chicago*'s John C. Reilly, *The Hours*' Ed Harris, and *Catch Me If You Can*'s Christopher Walken all featured their share of surprises – Reilly can sing! Harris can wax poetic! Walken can be charming! – I'd have replaced this trio with Quaid, a heartbreaking figure of faux-propriety, '50s-style; Dafoe, a tormented hanger-on who crosses from repellant to tragic; and the incomparable Cedric the Entertainer, whose every incendiary, politically incorrect aside earns major laughs. And what's with the Paul Newman nomination for *The Road to Perdition*? Sure, he's a legend, but did anyone really think he gave a better performance than that same film's Jude Law, so feral and terrifying that he put the rest of Sam Mendes' waxworks opus to shame? Law has now been bypassed on deserving Oscar nods for such films as *Gattaca*, *A.I.*, and now *Perdition*; a few more, and the Academy will have to overlook him for a Lifetime Achievement Award, too.

Best Supporting Actress
Patricia Clarkson (*Far from Heaven*)
Zooey Deschanel (*The Good Girl*)
Julianne Moore (*The Hours*) (A)
Meryl Streep (*Adaptation*) (A)
Catherine Zeta-Jones (*Chicago*) (A)

Finally, a nomination that *Chicago* deserves! Catherine Zeta-Jones is easily the musical's trump card; she attacks her Velma Kelly role with powerhouse gusto and is the one performer in the movie who sticks in your mind long after memories of the movie have faded. (I'd be happier about the nomination for her co-star, Queen Latifah, if she gave her acting the same oomph she gives her "When You're Good to Mama" number.) On the flip side, Moore is equally memorable in *The Hours* by saying barely a word; a lifetime's worth of sadness and neglect seeps through her devastatingly quiet performance. And the best of the lot? Ms. Meryl Streep, who has often been brilliant in screen comedy – *Death Becomes Her*, *Defending Your Life*, *Postcards from the Edge* – but who has never been as relaxed and instinctual as she is in her scenes with Chris Cooper; they create the year's most hysterical, and most oddly affecting, lovers. I agree with the Academy's commendation of all three actresses, and would have also included Clarkson's sweetly malevolent neighbor (her venomously teary-eyed reading of "I'm your best friend!" couldn't be bettered) and Deschanel's mordantly dry convenience-store employee, the fall-down funniest performance of 2002. And who, besides Queen Latifah, took their place? Kathy Bates in *About Schmidt*. She's a terrific actress and all, but honestly, if not for the hot-tub scene (which is all *anyone* seems to talk about in regards to her portrayal), would this performance otherwise merit a moment of serious Oscar consideration?

Of course, I'm asking for a lot; the words "serious" and "Oscar consideration" rarely fit in the same sentence, and I'm grateful that, this year at least, the voters didn't find new ways to embarrass themselves. We'll leave that to the Oscar telecast itself.