

## Nominees and Wannabes: Eight 2006 DVDs That Received – or Just Missed – Oscar’s Attention

Written by Mike Schulz

Wednesday, 21 February 2007 02:38

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I consider myself an Academy Awards completist: Prior to the annual Oscar telecast, I want to see as many of the nominated films as I can. But I'm also a *lazy* completist - I want to see these movies so long as I don't have to

*drive*

really far. (This is why, to my disappointment and discredit, I'll be watching Sunday's telecast without having viewed

*Little Children, Venus,*

and

*The Good German*

.)

Thank goodness, then, for DVD.

For those of you who missed their local appearances at the cineplex, you can rent a whole slew of this year's nominated movies: *Babel, The Departed, Little Miss Sunshine, United 93, The Devil Wears Prada, An Inconvenient Truth, Cars, Monster House, The Black Dahlia, The Illusionist, The Prestige, Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest, Marie Antoinette, Flags of Our Fathers, Poseidon, Superman Returns,* and *Click*. (With apologies to fellow Oscar completists now in the position of having to rent

*Click*

.)

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And you can also find a trio of Oscar nominees on DVD that never made it to the area at *all*, along with a handful of others that likely received "For Your Consideration" consideration.

Chief among them would be ***Half Nelson***, which earned star Ryan Gosling a Best Actor nod, and which arrived on DVD last week. Director Ryan Fleck's independent drama concerns a crack-addicted junior-high teacher who forms a bond with an inquisitive student (Shareeka Epps). It's one of those intimate, small-scale character studies that the Academy all-too-frequently ignores. And I really wish I could tell you that it's great.

Yet for all of its lovely details and committed portrayals (Epps' being the strongest), *Half Nelson* follows a predictable narrative structure that isn't disguised by the scrappy indie filmmaking, and the arc of Gosling's and Epps' relationship, while emotionally honest, still reads as false; it's another teacher-heals-the-student-who-heals-the-teacher work in the vein of

*Good Will Hunting*

and

*Finding Forrester*

. As for Gosling, he's impressively introverted throughout, but there's no performance joy in his subtle vanishing act; deprived of showy, "actor-y" moments (which, here, is as much a curse as a blessing), and constrained to a role that delivers realism aplenty but not much in the way of insight, Gosling is forced to let his beautiful hangdog expression do most of his work for him.

Superb young actor though he is, I was surprised - *especially* after viewing the film - to see Gosling nominated for

*Nelson*

*Half*

; it's quite possible that he snuck in for this barely seen release just because there weren't a hell of a lot of Best Actor alternatives. For quite some time, the category was so devoid of legitimate contenders this year that it seemed entirely possible that - one year after Philip Seymour Hoffman's victory - another actor would receive an Oscar nod for playing Truman Capote.



When ***Infamous*** debuted last fall, many critics, *esteemed* critics, said that not only was writer/director Douglas McGrath's work a worthy companion piece to Bennett Miller's

*Capote*

- both films focus on the author's travails in writing

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### *In Cold Blood*

- but that McGrath's film was actually the *better*

one, and Toby Jones' Capote channeling even more impressive than Hoffman's. I am more than happy to debunk that myth.

### *Infamous*

is a spectacularly phony piece of work, like *Capote*

re-shot as a braying, desperately obvious sitcom, and I mean that literally: I was astonished that the incessant, maddeningly cutesy dialogue wasn't accompanied by a laugh track. (There are way too many scenes of the Nebraska townsfolk mistaking Capote for a woman.)

Things finally improve once Daniel Craig's Perry Smith is on the scene - the dramatic, occasionally startling re-enactments of the *In Cold Blood* killings seem helmed by a different director entirely - but for most of its length,

### *Infamous*

is too superficial to be believed. And while Jones is physically perfect for his role, the material doesn't let him reveal the depth to suggest Capote as anything but a mincing literary toad; Jones' lack of a Best Actor nod, I think, has less to do with

### *Infamous*

arriving the year after *Capote*

than with it being a fraudulent piece of crap.

This year's list of potential Best Actress candidates wasn't nearly so paltry, but you wouldn't know it by studying the recipients (or, rather, *recipient*) of 2006 film-critic awards; out of some 25 organizations nationwide, Helen Mirren won Best Actress at all but one of them. The one accolade she didn't receive? Best Actress from the Austin Film Critics, which instead went to Ellen Page for the reverse-exploitation flick

### ***Hard Candy***

.

Remind me never to visit Austin. Not only is this foul, scuzzy little thriller senseless in the extreme - in it, a 14-year-old girl tortures a possible pedophile in ways that would make *Saw's* Jigsaw weep with envy - but Page is so aggressively, precociously "naturalistic" and wise beyond her years that you don't believe a thing she says or does; she might prove to be a fine actress one day, but given

### *Hard Candy*

's pulpy material, Page seems plagued by a severe case of Alison Lohman-itis.

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Better to catch Annette Bening in ***Running with Scissors*** or Maggie Gyllenhaal in ***Sherrybaby***, two performances that - assuming that Kate Winslet is typically excellent in *Little Children* - rival those of any of this year's Best Actress nominees.



*Scissors*, adapted from Augusten Burroughs' wickedly funny and heartbreaking memoir, is mostly a mess. Aiming for black comedy tinged with pathos, writer/director Ryan Murphy instead achieves a tone of sickly whimsy, a sort of eccentricity-for-eccentricity's-sake that renders the material toothless, and most of the expert cast - including Brian Cox, Gwyneth Paltrow, Evan Rachel Wood, Joseph Fiennes, and Jill Clayburgh - look unsure of the effects they're meant to pull off. (Wes Anderson is one of *Scissors*' producers, and the whole film seems like a wildly forced take on *The Royal Tenenbaums* .)

But as Burroughs' struggling, bi-polar mother, Bening is absolutely riveting, delineating her character's gradual breakdown with awesome focus and understanding; it might be her finest screen performance to date. And in *Sherrybaby*, Gyllenhaal plays a recovering drug addict hoping to reconnect with her young daughter, and fills the role with such aching honesty, and so many conflicting revelations of character, that she turns a minor chamber piece into a full-fledged symphony. The actress has already been extraordinary in *Secretary*, *Happy Endings*, and *Stranger Than Fiction*; the Academy has to pay attention to her *soon*.

Two recent DVD releases, though, *have* caught the Academy's attention - ***Water***, nominated for Best Foreign-Language Film, and ***Jesus Camp***, up for Best Documentary Feature.

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Set in 1938 India, writer/director Deepa Mehta's *Water* (a Canadian production performed in Hindi) concerns an eight-year-old widow forced, under Hindu tradition, to live out the remainder of her life in an ashram; the film studies political and religious oppression while offering hope for India's future in the personage of Mahatma Gandhi. What could have been an unbearably heart-wrenching experience, though, is buoyed by the grace of Mehta's imagery and her exquisite handling of the cast, and while the work is a bit conventional - there's a rather formulaic subplot involving the love affair between a young widow and a free-thinking scholar - *Water* succeeds grandly as a moving tear-jerker, and better still, an *important* one.

The hardships experienced by *Water's* Indian widows may horrify you, and depending on your tolerance for religious extremism, you may find yourself similarly aghast during *Jesus Camp*. At the annual Kids on Fire Camp in North Dakota, Evangelical Christian pastor Becky Fisher and her assistants teach a group of kids - some as young as six - to be future "warriors" in the evangelical movement; during their week of intensive worship, the children pray (at one point, they do so while reaching out to a large cardboard cutout of President Bush), speak in tongues, decry the evils of abortion, and cry. A *lot*.

The on-screen images (for this viewer, at least) are disturbing, to say the least, yet directors Heidi Ewing and Rachel Grady remain remarkably nonjudgmental; they leave the films' participants their dignity. *Jesus Camp* doesn't have the grandeur of a *great* documentary - its field of focus is too (intentionally) specific to be any kind of last word on the current evangelical movement - but it's a shockingly intimate, eye-opening piece of work, and an endlessly debatable look at the passion behind, and potential perils of, unwavering belief.



Another new-to-DVD doc didn't receive the Oscar recognition awarded *Jesus Camp*, but despite his movie receiving mostly terrific reviews, director Kirby Dick probably wasn't surprised by that; his

### ***This Film Is Not Yet Rated***

is a biting, frequently hilarious exposé of the secrecy behind Hollywood's notorious film-ratings board, and the group's squeamishness over the types of films routinely branded with an NC-17

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rating.

Kirby's documentary, with its frequent discussion of how an NC-17 will affect a film's marketability and profitability, is clearly one-sided; though he interviews scores of Hollywood players who find the board's stance on sex and violence outrageously hypocritical, he doesn't bother to find one who argues for how the system could perhaps be *improved*. Yet what *This Film ...*

lacks in art is more than made up for in entertainment value (John Waters and *Boys Don't Cry*

director Kimberly Peirce tell fascinating, funny anecdotes; Dick sends out a private investigator to glean the true identities of the board's mysterious employees), and it's definitely worth a rental. Not at Blockbuster, though, as the unrated film - initially given an NC-17 rating itself - isn't available there. And Kirby's point is made.