

THE CampChuck REVIEWER

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THIRTY-FIRST ANNUAL EDITION

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Editor, critic, layout, distribution, and general factotum ...



Meryl Streep Cooks at CampChuck Banquet

page 9

The 82nd ANNUAL ACADEMY AWARDS Nominations

Oscar Night: Sunday, March 7

Best Picture

Avatar
Blind Side, The
District 9
Education, An
Hurt Locker, The
Inglourious Basterds
Precious
Serious Man, A
Up
Up in the Air

Best Director

James Cameron

Kathryn Bigelow
Quentin Tarantino
Lee Daniels

Jason Reitman

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Best Actor

Jeff Bridges
George Clooney
Colin Firth
Morgan Freeman
Jeremy Renner

Crazy Heart
Up in the Air
A Single Man
Invictus
The Hurt Locker

Best Actress

Sandra Bullock
Helen Mirren
Carey Mulligan
Gabourey Sidibe
Meryl Streep

The Blind Side
The Last Station
An Education
Precious
Julie & Julia

Best Supporting Actor

Matt Damon
Woody Harrelson
Christopher Plummer
Stanley Tucci
Christoph Waltz

Invictus
The Messenger
The Last Station
The Lovely Bones
Inglourious Basterds

Best Supporting Actress

Penelope Cruz
Vera Farmiga
Maggie Gyllenhaal
Anna Kendrick
Mo'Nique

Nine
Up in the Air
Crazy Heart
Up in the Air
Precious

Predicting 1 of 10, Not 1 of 5

No change in the Academy Awards tradition compares with inflating the number of Oscar nominees for Best Picture from five to ten, starting this year. Five has been the standard for 65 years. (It was five for the first 4 years, then anywhere from 8 to 12 nominees from 1932 through 1943.)

No one suggests that any award honoring movies stacks up to the clout and prestige of the Oscars. Nominating ten films for Best Picture is an unabashed marketing tool that cheapens, maybe even embarrasses, the meaning of an Oscar nomination.

Granted, the Academy Awards is an unabashed marketing tool anyway.

It's not like any of the additional five nominees are going to threaten to win the Best Picture Oscar, although in some years, it is conceivable that one of these tacked-on contenders could tip the tally among the top two or three real contenders.

CampChuck guarantees that its ability to guess the winner incorrectly will not be diminished by the doubling of the number of nominees. (See page 5.)

(Underlined nominees equal CampChuck predictions)

Best Supporting Actor

background during a revolutionary time in Russia. He lived the contradiction of being more influential than he felt he deserved. Tolstoy felt knotted by a marriage that simultaneously sustained and constrained him. He was a loving, complicated man.

Besides what Plummer has done portraying the complexity of this man's character, he deserves an Oscar more if you figure in a long distinguished career as an actor.

Stanley Tucci, typically a boost to any film in which he appears, gets stuck with a caricature in *The Lovely Bones*. Unfortunately, the exaggerated personality he plays has no personality that compels watching.

He plays your average, compulsive loner, and creepy, neighborhood serial killer. There's no surprise about him, not even a story about him really. There's only the obvious menace of his murderous ways.

Also a mere tack-on to the more substantial nominees, Matt Damon plays the leader of a rugby team in South Africa. *Invictus* is a competent formula film with some historical punch. Damon's character rises to the challenge of helping Nelson Mandela lead his nation into something like post-apartheid harmony.

With Damon, the tension runs along formula lines. It doesn't help that the script does little to make rugby fans out of audiences that know little about this sport.

Manufactured Mailbag

Dear Editor,

I'm afraid to let my children use those 3-D movie glasses. Should I worry about this?

Cathryn Scairdy, Rapid City, SD

Dear Cathryn,

The only known side effect of using 3-D glasses is that it causes more 3-D movies to be made.

Ed.

Dear Editor,

These movies they make these days, you know what I mean, I like a lot of them. How do you know if a movie is funny?

Cleabold Dutz, Baton Rouge, LA

Dear Cleabold,

If you think a movie's funny, it's funny, even if you're wrong.

Ed.

Dear Editor,

My best friend Daisy said if I write to tell you we liked *Where the Wild Things Are* you would put us in your newsletter.

Rose Penstemon, Olympia, WA

Dear Rose,

Here you both are, and I'm with you on liking "Wild Things."

Ed.



Dear Editor,

You've been doing your movie newsletter for thirty years? Wow. What kinds of things have you learned?

Alma Tahmwitel, Mobile, AL

Dear Alma,

I've learned that the hook of *The CampChuck Reviewer* may be predicting the Oscars, but it's really about a glad involvement with the movies and a glad tradition in the writing. I've learned there's something fresh in the challenge of creating this newsletter every year. I've learned that, almost certainly, Meryl Streep is *not* going to call me.

Ed.

Dear Editor,

I saw your statistics thing, man – 58% guess rate before last year. You couldn't sneak up to 60%, even guessing them all right last time, could ya?

A friend, Los Angeles

Dear friend,

Yes, saying 60% resonates better than "almost 60%." Guessing 5 of 6 right this year would tip the arithmetic past that benchmark. I suggest you rag on me for only averaging about 3.6 of 6 right, rather than quibbling about a percentage point or two.

Ed.

Find *The CampChuck Reviewer* at <http://www.startlets.com>.
Email: jaffee@startlets.com
(that's three "t's" in startlets).

Recovery / Re-recovery

We are recovering from a huge hangover. Re-covering, which is to say, we are concealing, once again, the behaviors that caused the painful, debilitating circumstances. Actually, we hardly bother to conceal the booming behaviors that bust us.

Those rich-getting-richer types may symbolize our behavior, but we are all collectively consuming and enabling in a way that cannot be sustained. Booms are worth the busts ... or else why would we keep acting that way? They're worth it until they're not worth it anymore. They're worth it until what's busted can't be put back together again.

One reason CampChuck supports Rocky Mountain Institute so enthusiastically is their non-partisan quest for sustainable economic practice. Here's a quote from what RMI calls its politics: "...entering, in a friendly and open spirit, into the midst of even bitter controversy. Handling conflict with integrity, respect, and sincerity, we've found, can often turn it into an opportunity for mutual learning, trust-building, and resolution."

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asleep
with our
belts tightened

still
the rich
have us
dreaming

that
we might
get richer
as they are

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CampChuck Predictions (as also indicated by underlined nominees on page one)

No, *Avatar*, the biggest box office movie ever, won't steal the Gold. *The Hurt Locker* and director Kathryn Bigelow win best of the year. It's OK that sentimental favorite Bridges wins Best Actor, beating Colin Firth's more delicate portrayal in *A Single Man*. Hoorah for Meryl, tasting her just desserts after 11 also-ran nominations since her last Oscar. Mo'Nique let ugly pour onto the screen in the surest lock of the year. Hm, Christoph Waltz's fresh play at Nazi evil beats Christopher Plummer's more substantive role as Leo Tolstoy.

Picture and Director:	<i>The Hurt Locker</i>	Kathryn Bigelow, <i>The Hurt Locker</i>
Actress and Actor:	Meryl Streep, <i>Julie & Julia</i>	Jeff Bridges, <i>Crazy Heart</i>
Supporting Actress & Actor:	Mo'Nique, <i>Precious</i>	Christoph Waltz, <i>Inglourious Basterds</i>

Best Supporting Actress

There are special pinnacles of appreciation saved for ugly.

Mo'Nique (the stage name of Monique Imes) may be known as a comedian and talk show host. After March 7, 2010, she will be best known as an Oscar winning Best Supporting Actress, one who risked playing a vile, lashing-out creature of a mother.



Encased in that performance is a woman whose compensating image of herself swirls in a toilet of poverty and abuse, thrashed self-esteem, and you might say, a sorely lacking set of life skills.

Mo'Nique anchors the film *Precious*, a world where ugly is a powerful but misappropriating word.

Back to beautiful, Penelope Cruz was cast in the film *Nine* to play sexy and attractive. She is well cast.

Deservedly a dud at the box office, *Nine* does manage to give the Cruz character some interesting weakness and vulnerability to play. Still, the part's a letdown after Cruz's Oscar winning turn in *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. Her nomination in *Nine* does keep her star shining as long as she does roles like the one in *Broken Embraces* (also a 2009 film).

Also incidental to the Best Supporting Actress consideration, Maggie Gyllenhaal plays a reporter, a single mom, and the love interest of the Jeff Bridges character in *Crazy Heart*.

Gyllenhaal is incidental not because she isn't solid in the role. It's just that this movie is all about the Jeff Bridges character, and it's a fairly ordinary film anyway. While Bridges deserves to enjoy all the attention he is getting for his portrayal, there's little else to really talk about in *Crazy Heart*.

Canceling each other out of any chance of winning Best Supporting Actress, both Vera Farmiga and Anna Kendrick keep the chemistry with George Clooney popping in *Up in the Air*.

Attractive in an overachieving, get-on-your-nerve kind of way, the problem with Anna Kendrick's character is that she gets on your nerves. While this somewhat obvious quality speaks well of Kendrick's acting, she seems like more of a distraction from enjoying George Clooney in *Up in the Air* than an up and coming talent. To be fair, Kendrick helps keep the substance and fun in this film moving. It's just nothing special as Oscar fodder.

Vera Farmiga, on the other hand, infuses *Up in the Air* with the best texture that this well made but overrated film has to offer. Maybe it feels this way because her character equals George Clooney's in manipulative professionalism and charm. She enhances the flavor of Clooney.

For Oscar consideration, Farmiga is caught in the middle. Her role plays like a lead but gets stepped on by Kendrick's prominence in the plot dynamics. No matter, Mo'Nique is a lock to win the statue.

Best Supporting Actor

The humor, charm, and sophistication of an evil character assures the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor this time around. It overshadows the realism of a good soldier doing a tough job in a more serious film. It trumps the credentials of a veteran actor playing one of the most notable authors of all time.

Christoph Waltz, in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* found a new tone for the Nazi villain. It's one of those delicious roles. It's OK that it will win the Oscar. It's OK that Christoph Waltz and *Inglourious Basterds* are somewhat superficial choices.



Woody Harrelson, in *The Messenger*, plays a less well-rounded character than Christoph Waltz. Harrelson plays a career soldier, a dedicated employee, good at his job. He doesn't have much of a life outside his job.

His job: knock on people's doors. Dispassionately deliver a message that their loved one has died in service to his country. Then, another door, another message, another door, another message....

There's no ignoring the quality of Harrelson's laser-like intensity. If *The Messenger* had *The Hurt Locker*'s buzz, Harrelson would probably be grabbing Gold.

Christopher Plummer plays Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace*. Tolstoy commanded a huge following. He shouldered the burden of an aristocratic

(continued on page 2)

Best Picture / Best Director

Avatar is the most picture of the year, not the Best Picture. James Cameron, the mastermind and shepherd of the biggest selling movie of all time is the most director of the year, not the Best Director.

Only *The Hurt Locker* stands a chance of grabbing one or both of the two top Oscar statuettes away from *Avatar*. *The Hurt Locker* has critical momentum to do so. About 25% of the time, Best Director and Best Picture don't go for the same film. However, it's difficult to fathom Kathryn Bigelow or James Cameron winning for Best Director without pairing it with the Best Picture achievement.

What's impressive about *Avatar*? The way Cameron puts visual intensity and imagination on the screen, including the revitalized tool of 3-D. Developing breakthrough technology is laudable back story.

What's less than impressive about *Avatar*? Shortchanging an opportunity to write a story as inspired as the special effects. The film is at least 15 minutes longer than his storytelling choices deserve. It props an egocentricity that thinks more is better. With a sliver of his \$300 million budget, Cameron might have written a futuristic faceoff that doesn't essentially retread myriad movie faceoffs.

Whereas Cameron overworked a creatively dressed derivative idea, Bigelow delivered fresh energy throughout. She kept the focus intensely personal. Bigelow -- poised to become the first woman to win the Best Director Oscar -- has not simply added another war film to cinema's huge pile of war films.

The Hurt Locker sticks tightly with three soldiers in Iraq, a team of three soldiers: a death defier; a level-headed veteran; and a workaday guy who'd much rather be elsewhere. They diffuse bombs. It's about doing the job. It's about the personal strain of doing this very dangerous job. It is not about geopolitical commentary. It's not about a clash of cultures.



I can't do it. I can't let my gut convince me that the biggest box office movie ever has to steal the Gold. *The Hurt Locker* and director Kathryn Bigelow are the best of the year. I predict they will win the Oscars.

Three other nominated films are also better than *Avatar*: *Precious*, *A Serious Man*, and *An Education*.

Precious (formally entitled *Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire*), is almost too rough and raw to recommend. Courageously, it strips virtually all attractiveness and promise out of a young, violated woman. Somehow, Sapphire's worst-of-the-ghetto story offers a surprisingly life affirming film.

A Serious Man, is almost too hilariously depressing to recommend. In the incomparable hands of the Coen Brothers, it's an ingenious commitment to a storytelling sufferfest. Starting with a peculiar mini-tale of traditional Jewish character, *A Serious Man* becomes a modern day Biblical tale where bad things keep happening to a nice Jewish man.

An Education pulls off a tricky storytelling challenge. Carey Mulligan gives the film a coming-of-age elegance. Peter Sarsgaard balances the creepiness of the sexual predator he plays with a charm, humor, and sophistication that won't be dismissed. A film like this can't work without an excellent screenplay, and this script is Oscar worthy.

Precious, *A Serious Man*, and *An Education* have no chance to win Best Picture. The first two films are too downbeat and too offbeat to poke their excellence beyond the shadow of *Avatar*. The third lags substantially behind the ambitiousness of the other top mentions in the Best Picture category.

In a bald marketing gambit, the 82nd Academy Awards now allows ten nominees for Best Picture, rather than the traditional five. It's almost embarrassing to speak of the second five in the context of the Best Picture award. As ever, five slots would have left room for wondering what would have gotten nominated.

A film like *Inglourious Basterds*, with the brash reputation and ultra violent antics of director Quentin Tarantino, likely would have kept *An Education* or perhaps *A Serious Man* off of a list that only permitted five nominees.

Inglourious Basterds rewrites history with a band of warriors dispensing with Nazis right and left.

Best Picture / Best Director

There's one particularly talented and problematic Nazi they must deal with. This film is not as clever as Tarantino must always think he is, although everyone seems to have had fun making it. It's way less brilliant than his *Pulp Fiction* of so long ago.

A film like *Up in the Air* hits all its filmmaking (and box office satisfying) notes. It's considerably more digestible than *Inglourious Basterds*. *Up in the Air* also could have bumped either *An Education* or *A Serious Man* from a best five competition. Again, we'll never know.

Despite a fresh chemistry between George Clooney and Vera Farmiga and Clooney and Anna Kendrick (both Supporting Actress nominees), this film should not rate the lavish fanfare it's received. It's our trying economic times that boosts this story about a hired gun who fires corporate employees.

Would *Up* have truly transcended the "second class category" of Animated Feature to share one of five slots? Its story of a widowed old man began in a marvelously innovative and sweet way. Alas, it devolved into familiar chase mentality, including a ho hum adversary. Because of its visual excellence, popularity, and half a great story, *Up* still manages to nestle pretty readily into a ten slot field.

It's fun, if not deserving, to see a ballsy sci fi concept like *District 9* on the list. Set in South

Africa, this film about violent prejudice toward aliens wags a finger at apartheid. It's relatively hip on a modest budget, but the hyperactive story of a government worker tainted with alien genes grows tiresome and is quite mean spirited.

Then, there's *The Blind Side*. In a way, it's better than *Avatar*, if you ignore the glaring notion that perfectly executing an ordinary film misses the Oscar point. *The Blind Side* gels humor and solid characterizations, including a career revving lead for Sandra Bullock. It beats with heart-filling substance based on a true story.

But please, it's the white bread, formula analog to *Precious*. White folks help a hopelessly down-trodden Black teen reach his potential by replanting him into a wholesome upper class life. *Precious* doubles the disadvantaged aspect and redoubles the trap of a worst case environment. It's a story of hope and potential, of untypical scrutiny, however rough. That's a film worth special attention.

Too bad that this ten slot business didn't shine limelight on a courageous documentary exposé like *The Cove* or a brilliant and sensitive but clearly peculiar film like *Where the Wild Things Are*.

The more I churn about this business of ten nominations for Best Picture, the more comfortable I feel about disliking it.

Top Ten

It feels relatively skimpy talking top ten list, not that all the films listed don't have special satisfactions to offer.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| 1. <i>The Hurt Locker:</i> | Masterfully sidesteps politics yet provides fodder for pro- & anti-war sensibilities |
| 2. <i>Where the Wild Things Are:</i> | Does something truly different with a film, ambitiously tackling a difficult to translate children's classic; Masterfully roots inside the sensibility of a child |
| 3. <i>Precious:</i> | Rough and raw, the opposite of attractive; a precious film experience |
| 4. <i>An Education:</i> | Merges charm into the creepiness of a sexually predatory man; deftly realized |
| 5. <i>A Serious Man:</i> | It's Coen Brothers brilliant; an under-your-skin-hilarious cinematic drenching |
| 6. <i>The Cove:</i> | Striking documentary with caper-film flare; a courageous exposé about dolphins |
| 7. <i>Avatar:</i> | Incomparable marketing triumph; impressive science fiction fantasy |
| 8. <i>Goodbye Solo:</i> | An unlikely friendship; a small gem worth big league consideration |
| 9. <i>The Last Station:</i> | The confounding depth of love coloring the final months of Leo Tolstoy's life |
| 10. <i>Sunshine Cleaning:</i> | A filmmaking gamble; yucky, mired, yet low-key and a life-affirming comedy |

Best Actor

If there is a sentimental favorite to win an Oscar this year, it is Jeff Bridges. He is what you call an actor's actor. Other actors especially like and respect what he's done over the years. When he receives the Academy Award for his fifth nominated role, this will (as Bridges has said) "blow his cover as an underappreciated actor."



In *Crazy Heart*, Bridges plays someone riding into the sunset of a long career, someone who used to be a country western star. Booze and who knows what else relegated him to scratching out a living in small towns. He swallows embarrassingly small perks for having once been a famous.

See *Crazy Heart*. It's a good little film. But see *Tender Mercies* (1983). That's an excellent film. It covers parallel territory in more memorable fashion. That said, watch Jeff Bridges inhabit his character in *Crazy Heart*. Watch him put well worn humanity into a character who engages our sympathies despite and because of his marginal ways.

Despite having an identifiable frontrunner, the Best Actor category provides the most depth in the major categories. The least likely actors to mine Gold in this category happen to be the biggest stars.

Morgan Freeman -- that face, that voice. He embodies something distinctive, time and again, that we long for on the silver screen. In *Invictus*, he plays Nelson Mandela, and you feel some of the distance melted off the reverence the world has for a most important man.

Since *Invictus* travels a rather stock path as films go, it's not a ready platform for winning Academy Awards. In part because Freeman plays such a remarkably composed individual, it seems to shrug off the need to win an Oscar.

George Clooney is well established as a serious actor and a serious person, although he does seem to have a smirk branded on his soul. With this foundation, *Up in the Air* showcases the George Clooney brand to good effect. Because of our tough economic times, his character's profession -- firing people -- has the film scoring more popular and critical points

than it deserves. Textured Clooney vehicle though *Up in the Air* is, he'll push our buttons better in some future film and win a second Oscar for that.

Jeremy Renner's central role in *The Hurt Locker* helps assure the tension and realism in depicting dedicated soldiers getting dangerous jobs done in Iraq. Renner's character encompasses over-the-top excellence and telling side effects.

It's often difficult to single out components in the highly collaborative art of movies. If *The Hurt Locker* surfaces as the Oscar coup of the year, an Oscar for Renner could be part of the upswell. Likely, he will be regarded as part of a film that feels more like a well orchestrated ensemble of actors.

Perhaps the most deserving competition against the sentimental advantage that Jeff Bridges enjoys is Colin Firth in *A Single Man*. Bridges playing a hard living, good ol' boy seems easier than Firth playing a closeted homosexual professor in 1962. Firth's character also must abide the strain of having lost the love of his life in a car accident.

A Single Man stands out more as a film compared with the more common theme in *Crazy Heart*. In part, it's because Firth succeeds in the nuance that he is playing a man who happens to be homosexual more than stoking still entrenched notions about the homosexual man.

Figure on the sentimental vote swaying a difficult decision to Jeff Bridges this year.

Documentaries given awards at Nevada City's Wild & Scenic Environmental Film Festival, Jan. 2010:

<i>The Cove</i>	Exposing the brutal dolphin industry
<i>Finding Farley</i>	Family wilderness adventure
<i>First Ascent</i>	Climbing Half Dome, no equipment
<i>Fresh</i>	How the food biz is; how it could be
<i>Green</i>	Destroying orangutan habitat
<i>The Legend of Pale Male</i>	For 18 years, a red-tailed hawk in the big city inspires a community of fans
<i>Lords of Nature</i>	Large predators; healthy ecosystems
<i>No Impact Man</i>	A radically green Manhattanite
<i>Simple Question</i>	Practical education & environment
<i>Taking Root</i>	Nobel Peace Prize Environmentalist

Best Actress

Often, Academy Awards stories go beyond a single performance. Best Actress this year has two.

Sandra Bullock, a gifted, appealing and well-liked actress, often makes less than impressive film choices. She carved a career out of chasing box office success and has fared well commercially.

With *The Blind Side*, Bullock once again puts fun on the screen but in a way that helps her peers take her seriously. This role also confirms that she's primed for bankable middle aged characters – not an automatic Hollywood transition, sad enough to say.

Bullock plays an upper class, well-connected, bundle of constructive energy. She knows her own loving mind and makes things happen. This includes taking in a talented but otherwise wholly disadvantaged Black teen. She nurtures him into forging academic growth, sports prowess, and a deep sense of family.

Good as Bullock is, it's a strange dynamic that makes a favorite to win Best Actress from a standard challenge in a fairly straightforward formula film.

Meryl Streep, often mentioned as the best actor ever, seems to be evaluated on a separate chart. She is so routinely excellent that, when a role seems not to measure against her own best work, she receives an Oscar nomination but is denied her third Oscar win.



The most Oscar-nominated actor ever (16) is the all time Oscar also-ran (14). Look for the hail of the season when an actor averaging an Oscar nomination every other year makes a “comeback” to Oscar Gold after 26 years.

Playing the quintessential television chef, Julia Child, in *Julie & Julia*, Streep takes another marvelous turn, and once again extends her variety of acting challenges. She and her story about Julia are so good, the Julie half of the movie drags the total down some (still satisfying though).

It's fair to suggest this Julia Child part is merely a jaunty impersonation, but Streep puts wonderful humanity into a beloved figure. Whether it rates an Oscar for this particular role or not, it's time to say to Meryl Streep, “Bon Appetit,” for her just desserts. 8

Perhaps the excitement is a bit less charged, but the battle for Best Actress swirls wider than the *Avatar* / *Hurt Locker* showdown.

Helen Mirren stars in *The Last Station*, perhaps the most curious film on the awards landscape. She and Christopher Plummer inject a theatrical tone into a historical drama about author Leo Tolstoy (*War and Peace*) and his wife in the last months of his life.

Does the film *The Last Station* work well? Yes, although it may not click with the clear momentum people prefer. It's about a strained, loving marriage, an enduring love, an end of life love. Does Helen Mirren work well in the film? Yes, she is perfect for this woman, whose husband's changed definition of life repeatedly knocks their love into a corner.

In contrast to Mirren or Streep or Bullock, Carey Mulligan is a new face. In *An Education*, about a high school girl coming of age, she balances the tricky overtones with poise, elegance, and intelligence. Though she is the focal point of the film, it's probably fair to say that this fine showcase makes you want to project your eye to her future. An Oscar nomination is enough here.

The toughest nomination to talk about this year is Gabourey Sidibe, playing the title role in *Precious*. It would be tough in any year. It's not just how raw the movie is. It's about a disadvantaged teen, made a mother by her father and pregnant again by him. She's a daughter under the thumb of her vile mother.

Should it not be said? Sidibe, as *Precious*, is an ugly looking person. Not gorgeous Charlize Theron playing *Monster* ugly. Not even Mo'Nique (the mother in *Precious*) who doesn't start from gorgeous but who definitely risks it all acting such an ugly part. Sidibe, mostly from being grossly overweight and looking like she's ghetto trash, is at least as much a casting coup as an acting triumph.

The indelicate point made, Sidibe makes the camera comfortable with her. Constantly on screen, Sidibe makes it possible to experience a life circumstance most of us have no clue about and don't want to know about. She makes it possible to feel her hopes and dreams, to feel her life can be better. It sounds like Oscar talk, but it doesn't work that way.