

THE CampChuck REVIEWER

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



Streep Says, "No Oscar; No More Acting"

page 9

The 84th ANNUAL ACADEMY AWARDS Nominations

Oscar Night: Sunday, February 26

Best Picture

The Artist

The Descendants

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

The Help

Hugo

Midnight in Paris

Moneyball

The Tree of Life

War Horse

Best Director

Michel Hazanavicius

Alexander Payne

Martin Scorsese

Woody Allen

Terrence Malick

Best Actor

Damian Bichir

George Clooney

Jean Dujardin

Gary Oldman

Brad Pitt

A Better Life

The Descendants

The Artist

Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy

Moneyball

Best Actress

Glenn Close

Viola Davis

Rooney Mara *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

Meryl Streep

Michelle Williams

Albert Nobbs

The Help

The Iron Lady

My Week with Marilyn

Best Supporting Actor

Kenneth Branagh

Jonah Hill

Nick Nolte

Christopher Plummer

Max von Sydow *Extremely Loud & Incredibly*

My Week with Marilyn

Moneyball

Warrior

Beginners

Best Supporting Actress

Berenice Bejo

Jessica Chastain

Melissa McCarthy

Janet McTeer

Octavia Spencer

The Artist

The Help

Bridesmaids

Albert Nobbs

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And Then There Were Nine

Two years ago the Best Picture race was bumped to ten nominees instead of the traditional five. That marketing tactic felt thin then, and it feels thinner this year.

What does it say when five to six thousand Academy members could only come up with nine nominees? The rules say, "No picture shall be nominated that receives less than five percent of the total votes cast."

No more than five of the nominees show probable cause for winning. Often it's only two or three. This round feels sufficiently un-superlative that the surprise meter could register potential on any of this year's nine. See page five to find out which nominees to dismiss quickly and which contend well for Oscar's most coveted honor.

Rarely do foreign language films get nominated for Best Picture. It does have its own category, which evades an important question. The crossovers were "Grand Illusion" (1938); "Z" (1969); "The Emigrants" (1972); "Cries and Whispers" (1973); "Il Postino" (1995); "Life Is Beautiful" (1998); "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" (2000) and "Letters from Iwo Jima" (2006).

This year's likely Best Foreign Language film, "A Separation," deserves that vacant tenth slot. Actually, this deeply wrenching family drama from Iran rates a berth in the top five.

(Underlined nominees equal CampChuck predictions)

(continued from page 4)

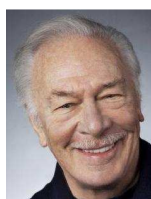
Best Supporting Actor

That statistic contributes to his chances. It also helps that he probably should have won for his only other Oscar nominated role, portraying Leo Tolstoy in “The Last Station.”

An 82 year old in the last phase of a much respected film career, in “Beginners,” Plummer plays a gay man who comes out of the closet. To its credit, the film does not cash in on a low-brow approach to this plot gimmick. The novelty and wholeness of the story is enough for the Oscar Plummer will get, but the film’s unimaginative qualities make for only a passing satisfaction. This Oscar speaks to Plummer’s familiar – but never star bright – career that touches seven decades.

Max von Sydow also benefits from the boost of more than 60 years of acting, and one previous nomination without winning. And he’s even six months older than Plummer. His film, “Extremely Loud & Intimately Close,” makes a bigger Oscar impression.

Von Sydow supports the constant and compelling presence of a preteen obsessed with unraveling a mystery tethered to his dead father. Von Sydow does this without speaking a word. Critical to this evocative film, he shunts aside the gimmick in his role and diffuses the manipulative levers that twist the storyline.



It feels like some off-camera factor that will tip the Gold needle to Christopher Plummer.

Manufactured Mailbag

Dear Editor,

I thought you retired? Now I hear you went back to work for Hewlett-Packard. Really?

Maxwell Nestaig, Omaha, NB

Dear Maxwell,

Really.

Ed.

Dear Editor,

You did it, man, but how come only 18 pages of Mailbag? I mean, cool you had, like, 4 pages of me, but just me, I’ve sent you more than 18 pages myself.

A friend, Los Angeles

Dear friend,

When I reprinted 32 years of Manufactured Mailbags last year, I was fully reminded of what all a tradition contains.

Ed.

Dear Editor,

I know you adore Meryl Streep. Is there an actor you would especially want to see her do a movie with?

Edna Chirl, Bismarck, ND

Dear Edna,

I’d love to see someone write drama and fun for Meryl to evoke with Tom Hanks.

Ed.

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(that’s three “t’s” in startlets).

Dear Editor,

During my 9 day holiday, I saw a movie in a theater 7 of those days? Do you think it’s right that my wife is mad at me?

Ray Stybrow, Tupelo, MS.

Dear Ray,

What did you do the other 2 days?

Ed.

Dear Editor,

What is it about movies?

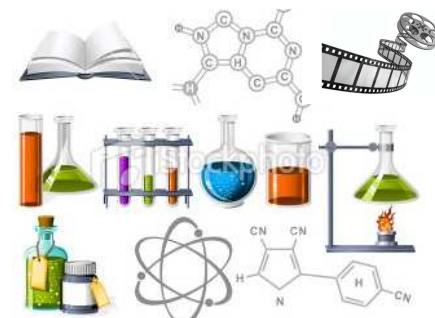
Judy Baumgardner, Osborn, KS

Dear Judy,

I’ve been waiting 33 years for someone to ask that. It is chemistry. I should say no more than that quintessential word.

With story as a critical underpinning, a film can animate a set of sympathetic bonds and interactions like no other art form can: between make believe and reality, between actors, in sets and scenes, with light, between a film and an audience and the human condition.

Magic and alchemy don’t give craft and collaboration enough credit. What is it about movies? It is chemistry.



Getting Personal

What could be more absurd on its face than declaring in the Constitution of the United States that certain people are only three-fifths of a person? To its credit, of 27 Constitutional amendments, more deal with realizing what a person is than anything else.

It took close to 100 years before civil rights, and particularly voting rights, were amended in the Constitution. It took almost 100 more years before an amendment addressed the lingering tactic of poll taxes that targeted the voting rights of certain citizens.

Such is the absurdity of America's constitutional struggle with personhood, the amendment enacting equal voting rights for women didn't happen until 1920. It took another amendment, perhaps less monumental, to set voting rights for those aged 18 to 21.

One might ask why all these amendments were necessary in a country that declared its independence on a premise of equality. Leaving aside an entire course of study on such matters, here's a closing question: Could anything be more absurdly necessary than a Constitutional Amendment clarifying and codifying that *corporations* are not *people*.

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"I'll believe corporations are people when Texas executes one" is but one of the crystallizing statements that occupy many many people's minds.

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

The stylistic brilliance of director Michel Hazanavicius and his film "The Artist" resonate more fully than the other nominees, including the compelling but easier buttons pushed by "The Help." Viola Davis, leading the superlative acting ensemble in "The Help," doesn't quite unseat Meryl Streep's prominent turn as the fated leader of Great Britain. Octavia Spencer assures "The Help" an Oscar win over Janet McTeer's less typical challenge. Christopher Plummer beats Max von Sydow by a nose. Jean Dujardin solidifies "The Artist" as the year's feel good winner, beating glamour boys George Clooney and Brad Pitt in solid middle aged roles.

Picture and Director:	<i>The Artist</i>	Michel Hazanavicius, <i>The Artist</i>
Actress and Actor:	Meryl Streep, <i>The Iron Lady</i>	Jean Dujardin, <i>The Artist</i>
Supporting Actress & Actor:	Octavia Spencer, <i>The Help</i>	Christopher Plummer, <i>Beginners</i>

Best Supporting Actress

Picking Best Supporting Actress this year seems easy, except for the distraction that Janet McTeer is better than Octavia Spencer. As a woman living as a man, McTeer exudes a self-assuredness that struts above the 19th century Irish setting. She is a deft supporting counterpoint to the title character “Albert Nobbs.” Also a woman living as a man, Nobbs, (Glenn Close) is reserved, repressed, and anxious, yet frankly rather simple.

Everyone’s life is a lie. McTeer acts the profound truth that the lie is not the point. However, it is also the truth that only 72 people bothered to see “Albert Nobbs.” What’s more, the flat dramatic effect of this stoked storyline is sure to make Close and McTeer Oscar also rans.

No other contenders grace this category. “Bridesmaids” succeeds for one reason. It throws a bunch of women together with a license to be raunchy. If this was a remaining bastion for asserting equality with men, fine. Whoever’s doing the raunch, a decent script helps. Melissa McCarthy gives the most natural-seeming performance of this ensemble, but an Oscar nomination? Please. In the interests of full disclosure, many critics and regular people think this is a hilarious film.

Jessica Chastain, on the other hand, contributes to a wonderfully charged ensemble of actors in “The Help.” Her exaggerated character fits the writing but pales by comparison with the more substantive personal treatments in the film. It is more significant to hail Chastain’s year than her Oscar nomination. She acted well in six films in 2011, including “The Tree of Life” and “Take Shelter.”

The sweetest presence of the Supporting Actress nominees is Berenice Bejo. It isn’t as easy as it looks, delivering a light entertainment like “The Artist.” Everything needs to gel for a film like this to garner so much deserved attention. Her character rises to stardom without losing her genuineness or her affection for the man who made her career, while he was losing his. Nominating Bejo rides the appeal and fun commendably but has no special oomph to win a trophy.

No, the coveted Gold must go to something more substantial. America’s most defining issue continues to be race. In America -- the land of opportunity -- Octavia Spencer plays a maid, a “misbehaving” maid by 1960s standards in Jackson, Mississippi.

Even though “The Help” stands its drama and its comic relief on the groundwork laid by more impressive films, Octavia Spencer will thrill to winning an Oscar. The Screen Actors Guild expressed it more appropriately by awarding the entire ensemble cast.

Ripe in this role though, Spencer’s character carries unjust history and a humiliating present into an opportunity to bake a special pie and tell a special story. It’s an archetype that still deserves honoring, when it’s depicted as well as Spencer does. Janet McTeer’s less noticed challenge slides right through the limelight. The commercial success of “The Help” will boost Spencer to an Oscar win.



Best Supporting Actor

Jonah Hill knows he stands in the shadow of his elders in this Best Supporting Actor race. Playing a pudgy nerd with one of the best business screwballs in baseball history, his character balances Brad Pitt’s performance perfectly.

That said, his role in “Moneyball” by definition lacks any electricity. And Hill certainly lacks the veteran cache to seriously contend for Gold.

Doughy in his middle age, Kenneth Branagh also makes an insufficient impression compared with the nominations of three notably veteran actors. Playing Lawrence Olivier, Branagh taps the voice and manner of an iconic actor effectively, but there’s no escaping the obvious. Branagh just isn’t Olivier. Michelle Williams faces the same problem, playing the title character in “My Week with Marilyn [Monroe].”

This year, you have to be an actor swimming in your golden years to have a chance at winning this category. Nick Nolte grabs his third Oscar nomination in “Warrior.” He’s a crusty, recovering alcoholic. Doing well in the part doesn’t overcome the fact that this fight-film about a dad and two sons jabs across ordinary formula ground. It doesn’t transcend the notion that there’s zero stretch in this acting challenge.

The tough choice in this Best Supporting Actor race will tip the wrong way. Christopher Plummer will win his first Oscar, becoming the oldest person ever to do so.

(continued on page 2)

Best Picture / Best Director

Looking at the list of nominees, they all seem to be lacking something in the full light of Oscar. Feeling out all of them, one film does resonate best.

Steven Spielberg, arguably the Best Director alive, made the only nominated epic. Epic scope often boosts the buzz around such films. Though he realized the cinematic grandeur of a World War One setting, he fell short on one of his strong suits – storytelling. “War Horse” travels through the episodes of a horse and his man well enough, but the manipulations of plot and emotion don’t deal excellence. The tensions of epic-sized war and individual-sized humanity lack Oscar juices here.

Uttering the name Terrence Malick would cause most people to say “Who?” In the filmmaking realm, he’s somehow managed to acquire a god card. Somehow this includes the fact that he’s only made six films in forty years.

In “The Tree of Life,” you feel his brilliance, but that is not the same as feeling he made a brilliant film. When the story sticks with a family and the hopes and strains of its American cultural setting, Malick demonstrates mastery similar to the promise he established in “Days of Heaven” (1978).

When he counterbalances this story with way too much cosmic phantasmagobbedygook, you may consider it part of his brilliance, but you’re more likely to feel that he undercut the potential of his film.

“The Descendants” doesn’t trip on itself in any way, but trying to grab the resonance ring, it doesn’t set its sights especially high either. This family drama hangs its freshness on the less typical peg of the wife cheating on the husband, and not incidentally, the wife dying after a boating accident.

Although it does everything right in its formula choices, it does nothing special. Alexander Payne is another director who has garnered more respect than his reach deserves. He’s levels down from Spielberg, whose lesser accomplishments (like “War Horse”) tend to be better than most other directors’ films.

Woody Allen – there’s a director who fully deserves his aura as an eminence. In part, it’s because he’s

been pumping out a film pretty much every year for more than forty years. In part, it’s because he doesn’t particularly care about the perceived ups and downs of his movie making genius or the slew of Oscar nominations and wins that revolve around him.

Good for Woody, “Midnight in Paris” is the biggest box office hit of his career. Its stylishness carries marvelous small-picture effect. Its intellectual gimmick works. With his best shot to win an Oscar in a long time, there’s a certain nostalgia for the Woody who never really went away.

“Midnight in Paris” dials in romanticized layers of time and culture, though the film is more clever than deep. Woody parades preincarnations of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Stein, Picasso, Dali, and too many famous others. Winking artistic tugs make for a satisfying night at the movies but won’t, in the end, transform Oscar nominations into Oscar statues.

Martin Scorsese, another living legend, has done two things directing his film “Hugo.” One, he made his first children’s film. (Scorsese has made a range of films, but telling stories of violent life will always be his sweet spot.)

“Hugo” also tells a story soaked in reverence for movie history. Scorsese spotlights the creativity, theatricality, and magic of one of the first provocateurs of movie industry and movie art. Georges Méliès made hundreds of films when movies were first being made. In his own lifetime, however, Méliès was almost forgotten.

The mix of the homage to Méliès and making a children’s film charms well enough, and Scorsese could win the same way that the revered Woody could win. The problem is that the children’s film is a bit cluttered and the homage gets shortchanged, crimped into the last third of the film.

Taking the eminent director factor out of the equation, a deserving contender for Best Picture is “Moneyball.” But it ain’t gonna happen, because it’s a baseball movie, and one that turns on an unglamorous computer algorithm. It satisfies thoroughly in a low key and untypical way without quite resonating.

Best Picture / Best Director

This twist on the underdog story lifts its head above most of the other nominees. You might say that “Moneyball” knocks runs onto the Best Picture scoreboard. You might also say that small and modest filmmaking choices keep it from winning in the World Series of film.

It is not untenable to consider “Extremely Loud & Intimately Close” the Best Picture of the year. However, its resonance includes a provocation, too widely felt, that it shallowly exploits 9/11 grief. There are too many tragedies, bigger ones than 9/11, to filter them categorically from story telling.

“Extremely Loud & Intimately Close” is a movie, and 9/11 is merely a dramatic backdrop. This film spins an intense movie yarn about one family’s grief over a father and husband who died tragically.

Another bold choice that steers “Extremely Loud & Intimately Close” both up and aside is the preteen who drives the journey through almost every scene. First time actor Thomas Horn is a natural at being overly intelligent, obsessed, and hopeful. He does it in a way that’s too precious to digest, unless you feel he makes for a sumptuous movie meal, wrapped in implausibly tasty story elements.

The obvious choice to run the resonance gauntlet is “The Help.” It’s a big commercial success. It’s

about America’s most definitive issue – race. It is you-go-girl and right-on; it is touching. With superlative ensemble acting, it has Best Picture chops.

That said, it was too easy a film to make. It breaks no new ground in often-told stories of racial injustice and courage. It exaggerates its white characters more than it needs to. It lightens the long rough road of the subject with too much well placed humor and too much movie-time resolution. Always commercially sure-footed, it could have been a more ambitious film than the best-seller it’s based on. “The Help” is impressive enough, but . . .



Better the Oscars for Best Picture and for Best Director should go to “The Artist” and Michel Hazanavicius. This intentionally and palpably lightweight film resonates brilliantly. It fills a vacuum generated by more significant motion pictures. This black and white silent film about the transition from silent film to talkies has grand old Hollywood written all over it. Every retro touch entertains, from the arcs of a rising and a falling star to nostalgic send ups.



If Jean Dujardin and Berenice Bejo and the dog and the rest of the cast didn’t dress the style and fun just right, “The Artist” would have wisped in and out of sight instead of topping Oscar night as Best Picture and Best Director.

Top Ten Nine

To parallel the Academy’s list of Best Picture nominees, I’ll only declare my top nine. Most years, a list needs to spill beyond nine or ten and mention several other movies. Not this year.

-
- 1. *A Dangerous Method*: Freud, Jung, and a female psychiatrist spark in an intellectually juicy way.
 - 2. *A Separation*: An Iranian story, but not political, this family drama wrenches deeply.
 - 3. *Moneyball*: Baseball, with a computer nerdy rhythm, shifts the underdog story well.
 - 4. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*: A movie yarn that leverages a great, precious kid and great, implausible turns.
 - 5. *The Artist*: Stylish brilliance fully resonates in a triumph of lightweight retro entertainment.
 - 6. *The Help*: Superlative ensemble acting delivers a compelling commercial success.
 - 7. *Win Win*: Paul Giamatti is always a good bet. Yes, to more human stories like this one.
 - 8. *Buck*: It’s a personal pleasure spending time with this person, this “Horse Whisperer.”
 - 9. *Midnight in Paris*: Woody Allen’s biggest commercial success, it’s stylish and clever.
 - Wild & Scenic Film Festival Selecting . . .* It was a documentary trip and a half watching 350 films (average length 40 minutes) to help program this issue-and-adventure-rich 10th annual festival.

Best Actor

Only one nominee for Best Actor this year can be dismissed automatically. Damian Bichir, essentially an unknown actor in a film almost nobody will see, plays a gardener in “A Better Life.” He’s a an illegal immigrant with a soul of workaday goodness and constrained hope for his son. It’s a touching, substantive role, in a timely little film. Enough said.

The wild card in the race is Gary Oldman. He’s a busy character actor, not the leading-man type. Oldman may be best and disproportionately known for playing over-the-top bad guys (“Air Force One”).

His first Oscar nomination registers high on the “less is more” meter. In “Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy,” he portrays a cold war agent doing the mundane secret work of the world amidst mundane organizational politics. The nuances of Oldman’s restrained performance mesh completely with the tone of the film. The respectful nod recedes. Less may be more, but at least in this case, less is not enough.

This Oscar race runs on pretty boy, star power: Brad Pitt or George Clooney or Jean Dujardin. Dujardin? Star Power? We’ll get to him in a minute.

George Clooney has successfully transcended the pretty boy label. He’s garnered several Oscar nominations, including one for directing “Good Night and Good Luck” and winning for Best Supporting Actor in “Syrianna.” Clooney does anything he wants and well. He does funny. He does serious. He does it on and off the screen, from playboy to political activist.

For the “The Descendants,” he could win just because he’s George Clooney, but his laudable accomplishment here is fairly ordinary. To say his role is just a rich family man with lots of heartache, that takes too much away. Still, this film and his role, however well done, don’t rise above formula.

Brad Pitt, much respected like Clooney, similar in many ways, has not quite tucked his pretty boy image into background. He’s tried harder in some ways, travelling offbeat in many of his film roles.

In “Moneyball” Pitt settles into middle-age. (He’ll be 50 next year.) This is the kind of “less is more”

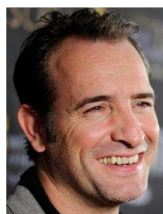
performance that deserves an Oscar, especially when it sets the sex appeal aside while retaining some of the boyish charm.

As the manager of baseball’s Oakland A’s, he’s got a team to run and a dream on a shoestring budget. Pitt’s character is the heart and head of this underdog story, and every even keeled choice in this film and in Pitt’s performance works at an Oscar caliber level.

Established French actor Jean Dujardin is not known in America as a pretty boy or anything else, but he plays one in a film that will surely boost his career. His smile and easy manner radiates as Clooney’s and Pitt’s does, but actually it harkens back to one of the biggest smiles in movie history – Gene Kelly’s.

This is the Oscar winning train Dujardin will ride. In “The Artist,” he fills a fresh yet familiar slot without any of the fame or contemporary baggage. Playing a silent film star who fails to transition into talking pictures, Dujardin carries the fame and baggage inside the story. It’s a retro triumph.

From glowing to forlorn, if Dujardin didn’t center this picture just right, “The Artist” couldn’t possibly have been the biggest treat of the 2011 film year. If this role is dinged for being too light or is dismissed inappropriately as derivative, he could lose. The fact is, there is no role in this category that is notably better than the others, but Jean Dujardin embodies this year’s tastiest Oscar flavor.



Jan. 2012: documentaries given awards at Nevada City’s 10th Wild & Scenic Film Festival:

<i>Into Eternity</i>	Stylishly ponders nuclear waste
<i>The Naked Option</i>	African women’s last straw
<i>Kadoma</i>	Kayaking the Congo River
<i>Windfall</i>	Green (wind) is not an easy road
<i>You’ve Been Trumped</i>	If you need more bad Donald
<i>We Still Live Here</i>	Native culture needs a language
<i>The Story of Broke</i>	It’s all about how you spend it
<i>Food Stamped</i>	Healthy on a food stamp budget
<i>Liter of Light</i>	Simple, tactical, enlightening
<i>Chasing Water</i>	Colorado River, source to sea

Best Actress

Even though she's the Best Actor in movie history, and she has 17 Oscar nominations to support that declaration, it wracks the nerves to know that her two Oscar wins were 29 and 32 years ago. Hey, Katharine Hepburn acted 34 super-heralded years between her first and second Oscars, and Hepburn earned the next most Oscar nominations with 12.

Meryl Streep, she's so widely embraced as the best of the best that she suffers at least two ways. She's almost too good, too highly respected to use up Oscars that can better bulwark other careers. Then there's that recurrent dilemma. She's Meryl Streep, fghadsakes. Was this performance a good enough Meryl Streep performance?



As Margaret Thatcher in "The Iron Lady," yes, Streep nails the conviction and authority of the longest serving British Prime Minister in the twentieth century. More than doubling the effect, she lends incredible nuance, through tons of makeup, as the same woman plagued in later years by dementia.

A strike against Streep's worthiness is some dry annoyance that anybody troubled to make a film about Margaret Thatcher. Or at the same time, that a film about this preeminent and controversial leader would focus on her mental incapacity, long after she served in office. Another strike against the incomparable Meryl ... comparing her with Viola Davis in "The Help."

Viola Davis is every woman who ever endured the weight of life. In "The Help," she is every Black woman who's carried the load of being Black. In "Doubt" (2008), she laid out her acting gift in one of the finest performances per minute that's ever been fit into a brief appearance (10 minutes on screen).

It is both fair and likely that Streep will win Best Actress because of the size of her performance and because Davis seems more the leader of a richly realized ensemble of performances. Except ... Except Voters may not know it, but they may give an Oscar to the somewhat over-familiar role of a maid, because of the astounding few minutes she infused into a mother's circumstance in "Doubt."

Here's the thing about Davis. The maid role in "The Help" is surely a Black role. The mother role in "Doubt" is identifiably a Black role. Also last year, she peaks another every woman role in "Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close." It is a Black-irrelevant role. It's a brief showing. Once again, she's fantastic.

Frustrating as it is to think that Streep might not win a deserved third Oscar playing Margaret Thatcher, a win for Viola Davis does feel like a more earthbound reason for handing out acting's most coveted prize. Curiously, the Davis appearance in "Doubt" was side by side with Streep. Curious as well, Davis and Streep are friends in real life.

OK, there are three other nominees for Best Actress.

You might think that Michelle Williams had a chance at an Oscar, the way she tackled Marilyn Monroe in "My Week with Marilyn." What a challenge it is to play the most iconic sexy lady in Hollywood history. As an exercise, Williams was marvelous. The built in problem: Williams is no Marilyn Monroe.

You might think that Glenn Close had a chance at an Oscar, the way she crystallized the tension of a woman living her life as a man -- "Albert Nobbs" -- in Victorian Ireland. The built in problem: her role, for drama's sake, is rather a simple and repressed person. That makes the acting triumph somewhat less than interesting beyond the fact of it.

Compared with the other four, Rooney Mara gets short shrift as an Oscar nominee. This is a shame, since she plays such a unique character. Well, it's a unique character if you set aside that Noomi Rapace played the same part, at least as well, just two years earlier, in the Swedish made version of the same film, "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo."

Both films score well in the contemporary suspense department. Rapace seems to have the look and spirit of the character a bit more resident inside her. Mara, however, affords a most creditable example of acting this off-the-map kind of part. Either way, this sort of punk, genius, brilliant loner doesn't strike award-winning chords in the same way that Meryl Streep does as a world leader and Viola Davis does as all-American servant.