

THE CampChuck REVIEWER

A nonprofit subsidiary of CampChuck

THIRTY FIFTH ANNUAL EDITION

<http://www.startlets.com>

February 13, 2014

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



Meryl Streep Agrees to “Sophie’s Choice” Sequel

page 9

The 86th ANNUAL ACADEMY AWARDS Nominations

Oscar Night: Sunday, March 2

Best Picture	Best Director
<i>12 Years a Slave</i>	Steve McQueen
<i>American Hustle</i>	David O. Russell
<i>Captain Phillips</i>	
<i>Dallas Buyers Club</i>	
<i>Gravity</i>	<u>Alfonso Cuarón</u>
<i>Her</i>	
<i>Nebraska</i>	Alexander Payne
<i>Philomena</i>	
<i>The Wolf of Wall Street</i>	Martin Scorsese

Best Actor	
Christian Bale	<i>American Hustle</i>
Bruce Dern	<i>Nebraska</i>
Leonardo DiCaprio	<i>The Wolf of Wall Street</i>
Chiwetel Ejiofor	<i>12 Years a Slave</i>
<u>Matthew McConaughey</u>	<i>Dallas Buyers Club</i>

Best Actress	
Amy Adams	<i>American Hustle</i>
<u>Cate Blanchett</u>	<i>Blue Jasmine</i>
Sandra Bullock	<i>Gravity</i>
Judi Dench	<i>Philomena</i>
Meryl Streep	<i>August: Osage County</i>

Best Supporting Actor	
Barkhad Abdi	<i>Captain Phillips</i>
Bradley Cooper	<i>American Hustle</i>
Michael Fassbender	<i>12 Years a Slave</i>
Jonah Hill	<i>The Wolf of Wall Street</i>
<u>Jared Leto</u>	<i>Dallas Buyers Club</i>

Best Supporting Actress	
Sally Hawkins	<i>Blue Jasmine</i>
Jennifer Lawrence	<i>American Hustle</i>
<u>Lupita Nyong'o</u>	<i>12 Years a Slave</i>
Julia Roberts	<i>August: Osage County</i>
June Squibb	<i>Nebraska</i>

(Underlined nominees equal CampChuck predictions)

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Wholly Subjective Slot Mongering

Many films and performances deserved the attention that an Oscar nomination affords, but didn't get it.

The episodic service of “The Butler” dogs the Scorsese pedigree of “The Wolf of Wall Street.” “Inside Llewyn Davis,” with more subtle storytelling soul, spirits the Coen Brothers movie making ahead of “The Butler.” Effecting a thunderstorm of forces, “August: Osage County” rumbles over “The Butler” too. And any of these covers more engaging ground than the flat state of “Nebraska.” The whole list could have roused more interesting Oscar choreography shifted to the better than entertaining documentary, “20 Feet from Stardom” and the humbly offbeat searching in “Frances Ha.”

Best Actor needed nine slots this time around. Robert Redford (age 77), impressive and the only cast member in “All Is Lost” deserves the slot occupied by Bruce Dern (76) in “Nebraska.” Granted, Redford is a mega-star, Oscar-winning director, and the man behind Sundance. Dern's yeoman career needs the boost more but so what? Tom Hanks in “Castaway” was deprived a third Oscar. His solid to intense arc in “Captain Phillips” deserved a berth. Joaquin Phoenix provided the sweet, nerdy, loving “his” relating to the voice in “Her.” It's fresher, trickier acting than Dern's role. Oscar Isaac in “Inside Llewyn Davis” is another less obvious choice with more of an exploration than a trip to sentimentality.

Best Supporting Actor

is the one nominee who has some chance of dislodging Jared Leto in “Dallas Buyers Club.”

Playing a plantation slave owner, Fassbender doesn’t merely reek with evil brutality. He oozes pathetic insufficiency. It may siphon votes to have to vote “for” the righteous disrespect and hateful drive to terrorize human beings who deserve better (even if you only consider them to be property).

Unlike the plantation owner portrayed by Benedict Cumberbatch, the Fassbender character possesses not one whit of repressed guilt. This missing element of acting complexity perhaps shaves a sliver of challenge out of the role compared with Jared Leto.

What a ripe, cinematic blend of contemporary characterization Jared Leto gives us in “Dallas Buyers Club.” He feels so palatable as a drug addicted, transgender woman suffering the AIDS epidemic in 1985 Texas.

Leto is so convincing, so sympathetic, all the while representing a sort of lightning rod for homophobia. Leto plays an outcast, seemingly better adjusted than most. He’s a friend, needy and giving, helpless, helped, and helpful.

Leto’s vulnerability turns the key to unlock this Oscar. This modern rendering does exactly what a supporting role should do for the Best Actor niche carved by Matthew McConaughey.



Manufactured Mailbag

Dear Editor,

Is there any movie that would be worse if they didn’t make an obvious point of showing people buckling their seat belts?

Archie Krupp, Yreka, CA

Dear Archie,

When people stop showing you how to buckle up on airplanes, filmmakers will stop wasting those half seconds of your movie going.

Ed.

Dear Editor,

Oprah is such a treasure. Wasn’t she marvelous in “The Butler”? Why wasn’t she nominated for an Oscar?

Daybelle Summs, Plano, TX

Dear Daybelle,

Her earthy performance doesn’t touch her Oscar nominated role in “The Color Purple” (‘85), but yes, she should have gotten June Squibb’s “Nebraska” nomination.

Ed.

Caro Redattore,

Hai visitato l'Italia per sei settimane e non hai visto un solo film, non anche qualche stupido importazione americana?

Federico Fettuccine, Rome, Italy

Caro Federico,

Siamo stati tentati. In definitiva, siamo soddisfatti noi stessi con quello che abbiamo fatto e abbiamo scelto di non preoccuparsi ciò che non abbiamo fatto.

Red.

Dear Editor,

What makes you tick?

Dick Dockery, Mainspring, IL

Dear Dick,

I no longer tick. I hum (and creak).
Ed.

Dear Editor,

Dude, this 9 Best Picture nominees thing is getting on my nerves. What kind of number is 9? Anyway, I’ll tell you how to get the list to a nice round 10: “Anchorman 2: The Legend Continues.” Am I right, man, or am I right.

A friend, Los Angeles

Dear friend,

Academy rules for determining Best Picture nominees changed a few years ago and again since then. It aims to assure more than 5 marketing campaigns around the most prestigious Oscar statuette. The complicated formula allows up to 10 but it essentially requires a film to get about 10% or more of voters declaring it their #1 picture. Other influences can seep in from toggled percentages and rankings. It actually may be more likely to have 9 nominees than 10. Anyway, the Academy may never have a formula that figures out a way to boost a Will Ferrell movie to a Best Picture nomination.

Ed.

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(that’s three “t’s” in startlets).

“Have a Yabba Dabba Doo Time, a Dabba Doo Time”

Remember the TV cartoon show “The Flintstones”? (1960-66 plus variations thereafter) Whether or not you do, we are the Flintstones. We live in the “modern Stone Age.” We conveniently consort with anachronisms. Most notably, we insist on living with the dinosaurs. The trumped up machinery of our lives cannot function without fossil fuels.

Modern cavemen yammer, “We can’t go back to the Stone Age.” Well, slapping “modern” on our technologically consumptive overreach ignores the coming scarcities, insufficiencies, and catastrophes. However we choose to play it (and there still are choices), the future is going to outstrip us. It’s going to frack our Bedrock complacency to some kind of post-modern Stone Age – and page us “right out of history.”

Righteous cavemen may chortle nostalgically and myopically about prosperity. They may “have a yabba dabba doo time; a dabba doo time,” but they may have big trouble applying the brakes in yabba dabba doo doo time. (And won’t that be “a gay old time”?)

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A Cartoon Theme Song

“Flintstones.
Meet the Flintstones.
They’re the
modern Stone Age
family.
From the
town of Bedrock,
They’re a page
right out of history.”

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

Cate Blanchett rides an edgier more vulnerable role to steal Oscar from Meryl Streep. Matthew McConaughey getting AIDS-simulating skinny bolsters voting inclinations toward the gamut of expression he puts into a unique characterization. Lupita Nyong’o tugs most touchingly amidst tough, varied competition. Jared Leto, disarmingly sympathetic and real as a transgender person with AIDS, is the surest Oscar bet. A rich mix firing on all cylinders, “American Hustle” will motor past the heavier “12 Years a Slave.” Being Sci Fi is a Best Picture nogo for “Gravity,” but effective techno-glam chemistry will somehow Oscar director Alfonso Cuarón.

Picture and Director:	<i>American Hustle</i>	Alfonso Cuarón,	<i>Gravity</i>	
Actress and Actor:	Cate Blanchett,	<i>Blue Jasmine</i>	Matthew McConaughey, <i>Dallas Buyers Club</i>	
Supporting Actress & Actor:	Lupita Nyong’o,	<i>12 Years a Slave</i>	Jared Leto,	<i>Dallas Buyers Club</i>

Best Supporting Actress

Who is June Squibb? It doesn't matter. She's the only throw away in a rich four-way head to head for Best Supporting Actress. "Nebraska," is a stylish attempt to find something compelling in a sub-ordinary set of rural folk. Squibb may be the closest thing to a character with an interesting personality. Her Oscar nomination seems to be based on some trash talk you mightn't expect from her plus a quaintly irreverent lifting of her dress to emphasize a point.

Now it gets tough.

Is it possible that Jennifer Lawrence is the first one to dismiss from four excellent Supporting Actress performances? For Jennifer Lawrence, her "Hunger Games" serial blockbusting just makes her famous. See her in "Winter's Bone." She plays a hard bitten affirmation of life amongst some scary rural folk and was nominated for an Oscar at age 20. In "Silver Linings Playbook" she won an Oscar at age 22, finding a refreshing niche between new stardom and surprisingly mature quirkiness. In "American Hustle" (directed by "Silver Linings" director David O. Russell), she nails it in another wholly different turn. She plays a small-time trophy housewife in an ensemble of scammers.

Will director Russell's magic work for Lawrence, as it did when Tarantino staged Christoph Waltz's 2 for 2 Gold? Voters will say not so soon, darling; 23 is too soon for your second Oscar, darling. For all her momentum, voters will say "American Hustle" is too much about the balanced ensemble of fine actors in a marvelously convoluted script.

Is it possible to dismiss Julia Roberts because her Supporting Actress role is too big and too toe to toe with the likes of Meryl Streep? In "August: Osage County," she plays the one daughter of three who can stand up to the meat-grinding force that is their mother. Roberts commands the heavy material including its heavy humor. It's a refreshing sidestep from what we're used to from Roberts without losing what is so dependable about her as a big star.

It seems possible to dismiss Sally Hawkins, except that she best represents what a Supporting Actress can do for a movie. Hawkins plays a lower middle class woman who struggles with choices and fate but is essentially well-grounded. Because of Sally Hawkins's performance and placement, Cate Blanchett has a launching pad to go Best Actress ballistic. Hawkins has credentials but somewhat under-the-radar British credentials.



As a whole, the impact of "12 Years a Slave" may be too discomfiting to grip the Oscar psyche. Whether it does or not, Lupita Nyong'o will brandish Oscar gold. As much as a movie performance can, she will stand emblematic of an understanding we must deepen and maintain. Brutality and injustice – institutional and individual -- describes American history as fundamentally as our Declaration of Independence and constitutional core. Nyong'o's portrayal exudes the extent of victimization by righteous exploitation at its worst and human resilience at its most tested.

Best Supporting Actor

I'm glad Jonah Hill is taking his career seriously. I'm glad Academy members feel his career is something to regard seriously. That said, Jonah Hill is but a third or fourth banana to Leonardo diCaprio in "The Wolf of Wall Street." Hill is but a shadow of the other four nominees for Best Supporting Actor.

Barkhad Abdi wasn't even trying to be an actor before he answered a cattle call for people who looked like they could be Somali pirates in "Captain Phillips." Good as Abdi was, the perfect casting deserves too much of the credit. Others in this category stand out more searingly than the novelty of Abdi's contribution to a taut drama.

While novelty has some Oscar appeal, star momentum and a high profile motion picture has more Oscar caché. Bradley Cooper's star continues hitched to David O. Russell. Russell's direction helped shine an Oscar nomination on Cooper in "Silver Linings Playbook."

In "American Hustle," Russell drew something more edgy and effectively over-the-top from Cooper. The role will help further his efforts to be seen as more than a handsome actor, but it won't net him an Oscar. Good as Cooper was, he's more of an ensemble piece in Russell's cinematic puzzle than a supporting standout.

It's curious to think that the surest Oscar bet is Best Supporting Actor, since the caliber of the five performances is so high. Michael Fassbender in "12 Years a Slave"

(continued on page 2)

Best Picture / Best Director

Seven of the nine Best Picture nominees deserve it. Three, maybe four have any chance of winning.

Martin Scorsese may be one of the foremost living directors, but “The Wolf of Wall Street” doesn’t rate its Best Director or Best Picture nomination. Tagged well with Scorsese’s trademark intense examination of excessive human behavior, it glamorizes the life choices at least as much as it sells just desserts.

Whatever the resonant moral tone, Scorsese maintains humor and entertaining tension well throughout. Still, it’s fairly one dimensional, and at 3 hours, it’s at least a half hour longer than it deserves.

This predatory pied piper example of an All-American, self-made man is based on a true story. The real guy made and spent way more than courts ordered him to pay back to bilked investors. He also made “good” money writing about his behavior and daring to call himself a motivational speaker.

Alexander Payne is no Martin Scorsese. For some reason Payne is regarded more highly as a director than seems warranted. (“The Descendants,” is his best. “Sideways,” is more likeable than impressive.) His latest, “Nebraska,” seems the thinnest of Payne’s highly praised work.

Credit the film with a confident style. It establishes its rural, regular-folk tone in black and white. It carries a decent tune of devotion by a wife and son. It depends on the addled likability of the husband and father. It isn’t that the film is too long. It’s just that after 20 minutes, all you have to finish the ride is a fairly ho hum story about a fantasized million dollars and several uninteresting support characters.

It can’t win, but “Philomena” is the glad mention on the Best Picture list. The wonderful human package that is Judi Dench plays the title role. The film laces humor throughout. It would be heavy lifting otherwise. It lays into the Catholic Church for exploiting unwed mothers, including selling the kids, not to mention covering up the history. That said, it is more of a personal journey than a wagging indictment. Based on a true story, Philomena waited 50 years to pursue what became of her son. Cynicism holds its own, but the portrayal of faith and forgiveness makes this engaging story special.

“Captain Phillips” delivers standard elements of quality filmmaking well. Components include a story of substance pulled from the headlines and still an ongoing concern. We get a personable mega-star in the title role – Tom Hanks – serving up excellence once again. It introduces a contemporary and freshly cinematic bad guy. Barkhad Abdi, a first time actor, is perfectly cast as a Sudanese pirate. Pacing and tension mount without the overreach too often assigned to commercial movie fare. It’s OK seeing a film like “Captain Phillips” on a 9-slot Best Picture list. It’s fair category dressing without being a contender.

Best Original Screenplay claims bolster the solidity of Best Picture buzz for “Her.” Spike Jonze evokes a serviceably real science fiction and stages a sweet little relationship picture between a regular guy and his more-than-artificially-intelligent computer. This film could not have worked without the grounded playfulness and imagination that Jonze wrote into the script. He dissolves natural skepticism for software that is worthy of being a human being’s soul mate. Cleverly, he taps lightly on a world that must have successfully marketed hundreds of thousands, even millions of these relationships.

Serious Academy Award contention starts with “Dallas Buyers Club.” There’s no clear reason why it stands marginal chance of winning Best Picture. (No nomination for director Jean-Marc Vallée is indicative but not explanatory.) With McConaughey and Leto on a fast track to Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor Golds, you might think that Best Picture would be a ripe parlay.

Maybe there’s an all-around icky factor that works against the film. McConaughey plays a low-life hustler. The homophobia displayed is so distasteful yet not so far from mainstream psyche as comfort would have it. Leto plays, not just a homo, but one of those especially threatening transgender types. And there are so many homos in need of sympathetic consideration, including Mexican homos. Don’t even mention tainted bureaucrats. All of which is exactly the point of why the challenge of pulling off this movie was so well met. The tolerance, self-discovery, and path forward, the mess of it -- what’s threatening isn’t the people; it’s the AIDS epidemic.

Best Picture / Best Director

“12 Years a Slave” makes sense to win the Academy Award for Best Picture. It is a deeply All-American film, dealing the way it does with America’s most iconic issue – race. Based on a true story, it faces the brutality of the individuals and the institution of slavery more forthrightly than any film before it.

To help assure its Oscar winning flavor, the story is a life affirming one. This memoir of a rare escape from bondage follows a kidnapped free man through a dozen hellish years. How he chose to live this hell seems to have helped him toward the luck that channeled him back to freedom.

As history lesson in movie form “12 Years a Slave” is Best Picture,” but Academy members pretty much avoid lavishing Best Picture wins on such harsh, core reflections. Though the courage to tackle such a painful telling is far from easy, implementing such a cinematic impression is easier, say, than humanizing and finding nuance in the shady characters of “American Hustle.”

Substantively, “American Hustle” holds its own. Only loosely based on the ABSCAM political corruption around 1980, it reflects effectively on American ingenuity and ambition living off the wrong list of moral directives. It had a fresh flavor of people in over their heads, including small-time scammers bumping up with big-time scammers.



What wins “American Hustle” Best Picture is is how many ways the filmmakers could have screwed it up and didn’t. The film was cluttered but stayed sorted and moved well. The acting was too much fun but never sillied itself or lost its dramatic pitch. The balance in a great ensemble of performances wobbled just the right amount.

A science fiction film has never won the Best Picture Oscar, and “Gravity” ain’t no “E.T.: The Extra Terrestrial.” Indeed, it ain’t no “2001: A Space Odyssey,” to which it is more akin, and that film wasn’t even nominated for Best Picture. (Stanley Kubrick was nominated for Best Director.)

Two things keep “Gravity” from being dismissed as an Oscar contender. First, the Directors Guild awarded Alfonso Cuarón its feature film honor. This not only bodes well for him winning the Best Director Oscar, it boosts Best Picture chances.

Second, it is ambitious film making in an easy-to-glom-onto sort of way. Sweetened by the inherent likability of Sandra Bullock and George Clooney, the techno wizardry feels enough like a realistic thriller and cinematic innovation to suggest a winning trajectory. Figure the Best Picture bid to crash into the ocean. Alfonso Cuarón will escape to wave the Best Director statuette.



Top Ten

Lots of ways to respect films this year:

1. *12 Years a Slave*: Best of the year for impact and history lesson, for acting and film making courage
 2. *American Hustle*: Best of the year for rich mix of drama, fun, cultural commentary, ensemble acting
 3. *Dallas Buyers Club*: Difficult character and story tone to capture; challenge excellently met
 4. *Her*: A “pre-traditional” man← →computer love story; brilliant, clever script and tone
 5. *Inside Llewyn Davis*: Coen Bros. know how to make up a fresh, odd story and put in on screen yet again
 6. *20 Feet from Stardom*: Documentary on backup singers’ careers; shines entertaining and revealing light
 7. *Philomena*: Funny yet heavily critical, a non-wagging film of Christian faith and forgiveness
 8. *August: Osage County*: Theater on film, rousing if you’re up for draining dysfunctional family extremes
 9. *Frances Ha*: Twenty-somethings finding and living life; relationship flick that’s not sex driven
 10. *Gravity*: Techno-glam chemistry; quasi-real space disaster makes standout entertainment
- also notable from 2013: (alphabetically): *All Is Lost*, *Before Midnight*, *Captain Phillips*, *Cutie and the Boxer*, *Deceptive Practices: The Mysteries and Mentors of Ricky Jay*, *Lee Daniels’ The Butler*, *The Spectacular Now*, *Short Term 12*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*

Best Actor

Bruce Dern in “Nebraska” doesn’t do much on screen. He plays an everyman, if the point to be made is that most people aren’t much, but at least we all share in the struggle. Dern is being honored for a career that served movies well, with the nod being more like a 50 year whole being greater than the sum of its parts. Grand appreciation seems overstated for this one part about a small, unappreciated life fading into senior dementia.

Leonardo DiCaprio in “The Wolf of Wall Street” does way too much on screen although he is electrifying. He plays a guy that too many viewers wish they had a piece of, if the point to be made is that over-the-top behavior is the juice of self-realization (and sluff-able morality tales). DiCaprio waves his 4th Oscar nomination because he’s always better than you might expect. He always seems a bigger, more commanding presence than his physical look and sound might suggest. That said, these three hours of DiCaprio misbehaving uproariously doesn’t pass Oscar muster.

It isn’t fair to brand Chiwetel Ejiofor in “12 Years a Slave” as standard movie excellence. He portrays a character compellingly worth the screen time. Based on the memoir of a true story, he plays a perfect man, a perfect Black man. He’s a free Northerner before the Civil War with seemingly idyllic career and family life. His evident intelligence and capability rise to the occasion of being sunken to the depths when he is kidnapped into slavery. For 12 years, he sustains what he must. To live, he must do more than survive.

The impact and significance of “12 Years a Slave” could stir any combination of Oscars: for Picture, Director, Supporting Actor, and Supporting Actress. Ejiofor’s Best Actor chance is almost too obvious. A fresher, more creative role is more likely for Oscar.

In “The Fighter,” Christian Bale flavored his performance with caricature without undercutting the acting. It won him a Best Supporting Oscar. He’s done it again in “American Hustle.” Though done differently, he won’t win again here. Not incidentally, “American Hustle” spreads its acting excellence too well across an ensemble to single out Bale in such a competitive Best Actor pool.

Bale’s comb-over rivals Javier Bardem in “No Country for Old Men” for Best Supporting Actor in a movie. It’s bits of business like the hair that shows how successfully Bale and his co-stars kept this film on a tight wire course that balanced fun and drama and substantive commentary.

Bale’s lead carried one of the best aspects of the film. The character knew he was a capable con man, but he also knew that he was a small-time crook. He knew that being thrust into the big time was trouble.

On and off screen, it seems difficult to deny that this is Matthew McConaughey’s turn for an Oscar. His brief appearance in “The Wolf of Wall Street,” per minute, outclasses Leonardo DiCaprio’s performance. McConaughey’s title role in “Mud” contributes to a 2013 to reckon with.

He’s shed the weight of being shallow, People’s Magazine fodder and starring in increasingly disposable movies. More startlingly he shed more than 40 pounds to play the AIDS infected, low life turned do gooder in “Dallas Buyer Club.” Add to all this that his commitment to this film project included a long struggle to find financial backing to get the movie made.



Back story aside, McConaughey’s role was more complicated than bad boy hustle and charm flipped to good guy hustle and charm. He has to carry forward what isn’t likable into a reborn advocate of guerilla tactics in the early days of AIDS treatment. The Oscars is 86 years old, and this fine performance is unique.



January 2014: documentaries given awards at Nevada City’s 12th Wild & Scenic Film Festival:

<i>Backyard</i>	Frackers, we all share the same backyard
<i>Bringing It Home</i>	The potential of industrial (non-THC) hemp
<i>Gasland II</i>	Frack us & the democracy we rode in on
<i>The Last Ocean</i>	Global risks reach Antarctica’s Ross Sea
<i>MaidenTrip</i>	Youngest female to sail the globe solo
<i>North of the Sun</i>	Surfing through the Arctic winter
<i>Plastic Paradise</i>	<i>The Great Pacific Garbage Patch</i>
<i>The Story of Solutions</i>	The latest guide thru “The Story of Stuff”
<i>Uranium Drive-In</i>	Town saving jobs worth rekindled mining?
<i>Xmas without China</i>	A home with nothing made in China?

Best Actress

Even when you're clearly the best actor ever, the diva is in the details. Although Meryl Streep carries her 18 Oscar nominations with grace and humor, here's the rub: Katharine Hepburn is the only actor sporting four Academy Awards for acting. Five others besides Streep possess three acting statuettes.

Although Hepburn's 2nd place with 12 nominations sits at the foot of Streep's pedestal, Meryl needs at least one more Oscar win to quash the quibbling. (Tidbit: Jack Nicholson also has 12 nominations.)

Playing a mom in "August: Osage County" who is, shall we say, a bit chafing, Streep deserves the Oscar. Mom too often pops too many pills. Pills or not, she is way too often sharply unkind. Her three daughters and other family gather around her after her husband goes away and gets dead.

Streep challenges herself with yet another accent of human being. She dominates the Oklahoma home ground without diminishing the rubbery knockabout of ensemble acting that bounces off the floor, walls, and ceiling. Ever measured against her acting excellence in other triumphs, this one rates high. Streep is fresh, bold, and effective, a rich, exhausting characterization. Alas, measured against one of the other four nominees this time around, Streep will have to find yet another juicy role to claim that fourth Oscar.

Curiously, her nemesis won an Academy Award playing Kate Hepburn in "The Aviator." In "Blue Jasmine" Cate Blanchett plays a spoiled, self-centered woman who is ill-equipped to walk on hard wood floors after the cushy rug of marriage to sophisticated wealth is yanked out from under her. The edge on her character makes Streep's character seem well adjusted.



Both cast aside for Best Picture nominations, "Blue Jasmine" is too irritating and "August: Osage County" too draining. Draining seems like better sauce for Oscar. However, Blanchett's advantage in Oscar cooking is that her portrayal sizzles with such electric vulnerability. This seems a bit unfair to Streep, who must dress her character's vulnerability with a sort of lashing strength.



Although shrill by comparison, Blanchett's brilliant evocation will wrestle Oscar #4 from Meryl's at least as deserving hands.

One more Best Actress nominee deserves mention as a contender. The struggle expressed by Judi Dench in the title role of "Philomena" frames excellence more reservedly than her fellow nominees. As a woman whose out-of-wedlock child was taken from her, Dench carries the weight of carrying on for 50 years.

Judi Dench nourishes the camera. Seeing all that life amounts to on her face subtly reigns every minute of screen time focused on her. Feeling the way she represents abiding faith assures the humor and seriousness in this substantive little movie. In a way, Dench's style purposely allows more clambering competitors to seize the glory.

That leaves Sandra Bullock and Amy Adams, both very likeable and talented actresses. Both grease their films well, but neither of their roles suggests the level of challenges met by Dench, Streep, and Blanchett.

In "Gravity," Sandra Bullock plays an astronaut having a deadly bad day in space. Techno wizardry and imagination leads the way through this quasi-realistic plot. Bullock spends enough time out of her space suit to parade an appealing range of emotions. On the brink of reaching her 50th birthday, her performance may be communicating that this is the last screening of the youngish version of herself.

In "American Hustle," Amy Adams sets aside the sweet core that she has exuded with such variety in her still flowering career. She seems miscast as sexy and conniving, but maybe not. This is a convoluted story about capable small-time scammers in over their heads. Even if the awkward match up rates as inspired casting, it seems insufficient that Adams holds any claim to an award here.

By the way, a background quibble lurks behind the boost Meryl Streep would get from winning a Hepburn-tying 4th Oscar this year. All four of Kate's Academy Awards were Best Actress nods. Meryl's 4th would still need one more Best Actress Gold to brandish an incomparable Four Best Actress Oscars alongside her Best Supporting Actress kicker.