

Foxx, Moreno, 'Million Dollar Baby,' Merit Oscars: Rick Warner

(Review. Rick Warner is the movie critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

By Rick Warner

Feb. 25 (Bloomberg) -- How do you compare a frightening movie about genocide in Rwanda to a fanciful film about the boyish creator of 'Peter Pan'?

Can a tragic story about boxing and euthanasia be fairly judged alongside an uplifting biopic about singer Ray Charles and an offbeat tale of two middle-aged buddies partying in California wine country?

Who's better: Annette Bening as an aging actress, Imelda Staunton as a kindly abortionist, Hilary Swank as a hillbilly boxer, Kate Winslet as a flighty girlfriend or Catalina Sandino Moreno as a pregnant drug smuggler? Should Jamie Foxx be honored as best actor for his electric portrayal of Charles or as best supporting actor for his low-key performance as a cabdriver who spends a terrifying night driving around a hired killer? Or both?

Short of fate itself, nothing seems more arbitrary than the Oscars (and at the same time, more predictable with its mind-numbing 'thank you's'). Still, millions of us will watch comedian Chris Rock host Sunday night's show from the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles. Here's my highly subjective view of who should win and why when the gold-plated statuettes are handed out.

Best Picture

'Sideways' is amusing, 'Finding Neverland' is charming, 'Ray' is joyous and 'The Aviator' is sumptuous. But the best picture among the nominated films is 'Million Dollar Baby,' Clint Eastwood's stirring story about a gritty female boxer whose Rocky-like climb to the championship takes an unexpectedly tragic turn.

Led by Swank, who won the 1999 best-actress award for 'Boys Don't Cry,' the cast is uniformly superb: Eastwood plays a craggy, poetry-reading trainer, and Morgan Freeman is a one-eyed former fighter who sweeps up at the seedy gym where they both work. The older Eastwood gets, the better he acts and directs: He's 74 now and should be peaking in another 10 years or so.

Footnote: My personal pick for best picture, 'Hotel Rwanda,' wasn't even nominated in that category. Based on the true story of a hotel manager who saved more than 1,000

lives during the 1994 Rwandan massacre, the movie is an African version of ``Schindler's List'' and just as deserving of an Oscar.

Best Actor

It's almost impossible not to pick Foxx as best actor for his uncanny portrayal of Charles in ``Ray.'' What we see is more like channeling than acting; there's not a false move or phony emotion in the whole film. He also gets bonus points for actually playing the piano while lip-synching to Charles's majestic voice.

Don Cheadle and Johnny Depp, in starkly contrasting roles, aren't far behind. Cheadle adeptly shows how a straight-arrow businessman turned his Rwandan hotel into a refugee camp for Tutsi tribe members trying to avoid being massacred by rival Hutus. Depp gives a subtle, nuanced performance as J.M. Barrie, the Scottish playwright whose relationship with a widowed mother and her four young boys inspired ``Peter Pan.''

The other nominated actors are Eastwood in ``Million Dollar Baby'' and Leonardo DiCaprio in ``The Aviator,''
Martin Scorsese's epic about Howard Hughes. While he captures the look of the eccentric billionaire, DiCaprio simply isn't convincing as a brilliant businessman who goes mad and pisses into milk bottles.

Best Actress

Odds-makers say it's a two-woman race for best actress between Swank in ``Million Dollar Baby'' and Bening in ``Being Julia.'' Swank, with a newly buffed physique, is impressive as a female fighter while Bening rises above mawkish material and flat directing by Istvan Szabo -- can this be the same genius who made ``Mephisto?''

Winslet is wonderfully wacky in ``Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind,''
and Staunton and Moreno deliver powerful performances as decent, working-class women who become entangled in illegal activities. Ultimately, I would choose Moreno, a 23-year-old Colombian, who is astoundingly mature in her first movie.

After failing to win in his first three tries, Freeman should capture his first Oscar -- as supporting actor -- for ``Million Dollar Baby.'' As he did in ``The Shawshank Redemption,''
Freeman performs double-duty as the dignified best friend and the movie's plain-spoken narrator. The strong field also includes Foxx (``Collateral''), Alan Alda

(``The Aviator''), Clive Owen (``Closer'') and Thomas Haden Church (``Sideways'').

Supporting Actress

Cate Blanchett will probably win the supporting-actress award for her arch Katharine Hepburn imitation in ``The Aviator,' ' but my vote goes to Virginia Madsen as the sweet oenophile waitress in ``Sideways.' ' Her flirtation with a fellow wine-lover played by Paul Giamatti is one of the highlights of the film. Also nominated are Laura Linney (``Kinsey''), Natalie Portman (``Closer'') and Sophie Okonedo (``Hotel Rwanda'').

There seems to be a sentimental push to give the best director award to Scorsese, who's still searching for his first Oscar after six previous nominations. If he wins for ``The Aviator,' ' it will be more for lifetime achievement than his work on the visually spectacular but emotionally thin Hughes film. My pick is Eastwood, who was truly the auteur of ``Million Dollar Baby' ' as director, producer, co-star and soundtrack composer.

--Editors: Hoelterhoff, Todd.

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