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## Alternative Oscars! What If The Academy Awards Got It Right When Picking "Best Picture?"

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What if the Academy Awards got it right? I mean, of course they get it wrong. (*Raging Bull* over *Ordinary People*, *Shakespeare in Love* over *Schindler's List* and *Crash* over *Brokeback Mountain*, to name three choices that sparked outrage among fans.) That's not Oscar's fault: the Grammys, the Emmys and the Tonys usually get it wrong too. So yeah, my favorite movie of the year has almost never been the Best Picture winner. I can live with that.

Yet the really infuriating thing is that the Oscars never even name the best film *out of the five or so movies they nominate!* I mean, a thousand movies were released in NYC last year so agreeing on the best one isn't easy. But if you make a list of five or eight or ten movies, how hard is it to pick the best one out of *them?* Sometimes you like two or three or even four nominees and damned if they don't choose the OTHER movie just to annoy you. Over the years, my sure fire method for picking the winner of the Best Picture award is simply naming the one that would piss me off the most. Frankly, they've been getting it wrong since the very first Academy Awards (sort of).

So let's imagine an Alternative Oscars, a history of the Best Picture winner if the Academy Awards actually got it right. We'll start with the present and work our way backwards to the very beginning. With the Alternative Oscars, you'll see Astaire & Rogers on top, Orson Welles and Martin Scorsese get their due (when they deserved it) and yes, maybe even gay cowboys win the gold statue because who loves an awards show more than gay cowboys?

Here's my showdown of every movie side by side followed by my reasons for voting the way I did. In short,

if I was the only voter, the Academy Awards would be amazing! Or at least different. And yes, they'll get it wrong this year too. I'd vote for *Manchester By The Sea* and be happy with *Moonlight* or *Hell Or High Water* or even *Hidden Figures* but the winner will certainly be *La La Land*.

**2015: Spotlight beat**

The Big Short

Bridge of Spies

Brooklyn

Mad Max: Fury Road

The Martian,

The Revenant

Room

**We say: MAD MAX: FURY ROAD**

*Spotlight* is a classic consensus choice. Everyone had different opinions about the best movie from this batch but everyone had *Spotlight* as their second or third choice and it became the inoffensive winner. Hey, I'm always glad to see journalists as the hero of a movie rather than the enemy of the people. But for sheer lunacy, for building on a great action franchise, for out and out "what the heck were they thinking?" envelope-pushing film-making, it's hard to beat the far more distinctive work of director George Miller in *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Oscar loves to taunt us with potential smarts, so *Mad Max* swept all the tech awards and I foolishly began to dream it would win Best Picture. Ha! *Spotlight* is what happens when a big group of people have to come to an agreement. But *Mad Max: Fury Road* is by far the better film and the latest triumph from an exceptionally bold artist.

**2014: Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance) beat**

American Sniper

Boyhood

The Grand Budapest Hotel

The Imitation Game

Selma

The Theory of Everything

Whiplash

We say: **THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL**

*Birdman* is a bore that looked stale the second it was crowned a winner. (Hollywood is too in love with movies about artists.) It's tempting to award the backstory of *Boyhood*, an admirable film that was made over a period of eleven years (without a script!) to capture the joys and perils of growing up without having different actors take over roles at different stages. We literally watched a kid grow up. But my heart belongs with that truffle of a movie, *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, a film that harkens back to Hollywood's golden days and the cream puffs of wit and intelligence crafted by Ernst Lubitsch and so many others. I've watched it again and again and every element remains a delight, especially the tremendously fun acting in every part, large and small. Besides, it's our only chance to recognize director Wes Anderson because Oscar was too dumb to nominate *Rushmore*.

**2013: 12 Years a Slave** beat

American Hustle

Captain Phillips

Dallas Buyers Club

Gravity

Her

Nebraska

Philomena

The Wolf of Wall Street

We say: **HER**

*Animal House* is a better film than *12 Years A Slave*. Are you offended? Why? I'm not saying that dumb frat parties are a worthier topic than the evils of slavery. My point is that you should reward the movie and NOT what the movie is about. Oscar gets that wrong time and time again. By far the most distinctive movie, the one that speaks to our specific time but is also timeless in its focus on love and intimacy and loneliness and what it means to be human is *Her*. Two great performances — by Joaquin Phoenix and Scarlett Johansson — ground this whimsical, bittersweet story about a guy who falls in love with his computer's

artificial intelligence. If you've spent any time trying to stump Siri ("Siri, where's Waldo?") then you can relate. And it's our only chance (so far) to reward director Spike Jonze and his body of work.

## **2012: Argo beat**

Amour

Beasts of the Southern Wild

Django Unchained

Les Misérables

Life of Pi

Lincoln

Silver Linings Playbook

Zero Dark Thirty

**We say: AMOUR**

Hollywood again falls hard for a movie about Hollywood with the pleasant *Argo*. It's fun; it's just not the best movie of the year. It's so rare that Hollywood nominates an international film for Best Picture that you can rarely go wrong picking that one as superior. This is certainly the case with the French drama *Amour*, a heartrending tale of two elderly people facing end of life decisions. It's a career capper for actors Jean-Louis Trintignant and Emmanuelle Riva. While you will weep, the movie doesn't *push* you to weep the way a Hollywood version might have.

## **2011: The Artist beat**

The Descendants

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

The Help

Hugo

Midnight in Paris

Moneyball

The Tree of Life

War Horse

We say: **THE TREE OF LIFE**

Hey, I'm not perfect either. AGAIN Hollywood falls for a movie about artists and in this case an ode to silent cinema. I dug *The Artist* at the time — Black and white! Silent movies! France! — and thought it was a fun choice. I might have plunked for George Clooney in *The Descendants* except the solution to the dilemma at the heart of the film seemed obvious from the start. And by the way, a genuine work of art is on this list. Terrence Malick's *The Tree Of Life* at its peak is sheer filmmaking, immersing you in the world of a child when running loose in your neighborhood on a summer's afternoon was an experience bursting with possibility. Sure it's flawed — you can't shoot for the moon without stumbling at times. But it's breathtaking too.

**2010: The King's Speech** beat

Black Swan

The Fighter

Inception

The Kids Are All Right

127 Hours

The Social Network

Toy Story 3

True Grit

Winter's Bone

We say: **TOY STORY 3**

If Hollywood isn't falling for movies about Hollywood, it's falling for movies with British accents, especially when brandished by royalty. Sure, in *The King's Speech* that British accent may include a stutter, but so what? It's a film for moms everywhere. But the real story here is *Toy Story 3*, the finale of a trilogy that is truly great. *Toy Story* was a stunner. Then they ruined it by making a sequel...and it was, if anything, better. Both deserved to be nominated for Best Picture and one of them should have already won. Then they

spoiled the pleasure of saying *Toy Story 2* was one of the great sequels of all time by making *another* sequel. And by God, *Toy Story 3* wrapped up the story of a kid growing up as seen through the eyes of his toys in triumphant fashion. And yes, they're making *Toy Story 4*. Why?? I can't imagine it will be as good as the first three, but they've proven me wrong before.

**2009: The Hurt Locker beat**

Avatar

The Blind Side

District 9

An Education

Inglourious Basterds

Precious

A Serious Man

Up

Up in the Air

**We say: INGLORIOUS BASTERDS**

*The Hurt Locker* won Best Picture? That's the sort of reaction a fine but unremarkable movie like *The Hurt Locker* evokes just a few years after its triumph. I might have given the gold statue to Pixar's *Up*, but we're rewarding them next year. George Clooney's *Up In The Air* is certainly an old school treat. And while we're tempted to keep our powder dry for 1994's *Pulp Fiction*, we've got other plans for that year. So this is where director Quentin Tarantino has his moment of glory. *Inglorious Basterds* is a great war movie and the opening sequence alone — set in a farmhouse — will be studied for generations to come by film buffs. It made an unlikely star of Christoph Waltz and is merely the latest terrific film to include Brad Pitt, who somehow manages to be in a lot of really good movies without ever getting any credit for good taste or good acting. Besides, the loopy finale rewriting history is so much fun that Tarantino's over-the-top violence for once feels justified.

**2008: Slumdog Millionaire beat**

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

Frost/Nixon

Milk

The Reader

**We say: NO AWARD!**

Sometimes, Hollywood gives you no reason to watch the Oscars at all. This was one of those years. They could have nominated *WALL-E*, *Let The Right One In*, the delightful French film *The Class*, Emma Thompson and Dustin Hoffman in *Last Chance Harvey* (check it out!), *Kung-Fu Panda*, the masterpiece *The Edge Of Heaven* by the German director Fatih Akin or the terrific debut *Shotgun Stories* by Jeff Nichols (who saw a nomination this year for his movie *Loving*). Yeah, most of those weren't going to happen and it wasn't a vintage year for movies. But did Oscar have to rub that in our face?

**2007: No Country for Old Men beat**

Atonement

Juno

Michael Clayton

There Will Be Blood

**We say: THERE WILL BE BLOOD**

I want to reward the sheer pleasure of *Michael Clayton*. But director Paul Thomas Anderson is a master (and his film *The Master* won't even be nominated in 2012) so the epic drama *There Will Be Blood* will triumph. Who can deny Daniel Day Lewis, though damned if Paul Dano isn't his match every step of the way.

**2006: The Departed beat**

Babel

Letters from Iwo Jima

Little Miss Sunshine

The Queen

**We say: NO AWARD!**

Hey, I don't like wimping out any more than you do, but director Martin Scorsese will triumph long before the so-so film *The Departed* proved a pretty good remake of a superior Hong Kong film. And absolutely none of the others deserve the top prize. What did Hollywood ignore? The brilliant *Pan's Labyrinth* (which didn't even win Best Foreign Film!) and *United 93* and Almodovar's *Volver* and Ryan Gosling in *Half Nelson* and the cult classic indie noir *Brick*, among others. Sorry, everyone go home. No winner.

**2005: Crash beat**

Brokeback Mountain

Capote

Good Night, and Good Luck

Munich

**We say: BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN**

Frankly, we're shocked Hollywood hasn't *already* honored George Clooney. How glamorous and cool does a movie star have to be to get some respect around here? Clooney deserved it for *Good Night, And Good Luck*, a pitch perfect drama about journalist Edward R. Murrow standing up to the fear and loathing of the McCarthy era witch hunts. The cast is flawless, led by a career peak from David Strathairn as Murrow. And Clooney's direction is impeccable from start to finish. Indeed, we picked his film and wrote an entire entry. But it just felt wrong. *Crash* absolutely shouldn't have won Best Picture and *Brokeback Mountain* absolutely should. True, in our Alternative Oscars universe, Ang Lee will have already won the big prize. (For *Sense & Sensibility*? *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*? Keep reading!) Still, the "gay cowboys" movie has the zeitgeist behind it, along with two great performances by Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger and it can't be denied.

**2004: Million Dollar Baby beat**

The Aviator

Finding Neverland

Ray

Sideways

**We say:NO AWARD!**

The best option here is Million Dollar Baby, but Clint Eastwood just triumphed with a much more fitting win



and two Best Pictures this close together feels a little much. It's a good movie (though I haven't watched it since it came out), but not that good. The rest aren't even close. And when we complain that Oscar doesn't even nominate the best movies of the year, 2004 is a great example. They ignored *The Incredibles*, *Spider-Man 2*, *Vera Drake*, *Friday Night Lights*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *The Bourne Supremacy*, *House Of Flying Daggers* and even *Harold & Kumar Go To White Castle!* Are you telling us Hollywood has never smoked and then had the munchies? But the game we're playing is not the easy one of naming our favorite film of the year (It was *The Incredibles*) but choosing the best of the nominees. And *Million Dollar Baby* it is.

**2003: The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King beat**

Lost in Translation

Master and Commander: The Far Side Of The World

Mystic River

Seabiscuit

**We say: MASTER AND COMMANDER: THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD**

Don't worry, *LOTR* fans, that movie already has plenty of glory. And let's face it, the tickle-fest finale was not the strongest installment. So I'm choosing *Master and Commander: The Far Side Of The World*, a marvelous seafaring drama by director Peter Weir that stars Russell Crowe and Paul Bettany. This is Hollywood old school filmmaking at its best, taking a brilliant series of novels by Patrick O'Brian and launching what should have been the first of a franchise. If it had won Best Picture, maybe this would have made more money or at least someone would have been shamed into bankrolling another entry. (It cost \$150 million and made only \$212 million worldwide.) I mean, Ioan Gruffudd can't seem to make another Hornblower miniseries for love or money. But surely Russell Crowe should be able to make this happen.

**2002: Chicago beat**

Gangs of New York

The Hours

The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers

The Pianist

**We say: THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE TWO TOWERS**

The middle and best entry in *The Lord Of The Rings* is definitely the one to celebrate one of the most daring and successful film projects in history. Yes, making all three *LOTR* movies at once was a bold roll of the dice and Peter Jackson was hardly a slam dunk. (And seems to be struggling to prove this wasn't the one project he was born to make after the fiasco of the *Hobbit* trilogy.) *Chicago*? Musicals are great but not when they're edited to razzle dazzle you to death.

**2001: A Beautiful Mind** beat

Gosford Park

In the Bedroom

Moulin Rouge

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring

We say: **GOSFORD PARK**

Just like Oscar, we are tempted to honor careers rather than the film in front of us. Though if this were 2001 and we were voting, we'd probably have cast our ballot for *LOTR* since it was such a game-changer and we never imagined those novels would be turned into a satisfying live action movie. But since it's going to win the gold statue next year, we can give the great director Robert Altman a final bow with *Gosford Park*. It's easily the best work screenwriter Julian Fellowes will ever do, far outpacing his soapy writing for *Downton Abbey* (which isn't a patch on *Upstairs, Downstairs*). In this case, the melding of that classic series and its dynamic of toggling back and forth between the servants and the masters is combined with both a murder mystery and Altman's way with a large cast and overlapping dialogue to brilliant effect.

**2000: Gladiator** beat

Chocolat

Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon

Erin Brockovich

Traffic

We say: **CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON**

Never have I been more infuriated by the Oscars than the year they ignored the masterpiece *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. It was the highest grossing foreign language film in North American history. It was a

triumph of popular filmmaking for director Ang Lee, who was on an incredible artistic role. It elevated a genre of fantasy/martial arts movies with acting of the highest order. (An action film hadn't been this well acted since Harrison Ford first donned the fedora in *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*.) And it was high time the Best Picture Oscar went to a movie that wasn't in the English language. Besides, it's so much fun! Yeah, the dudes out there can quote lines from *Gladiator* and think it's awesome. But it's not.

**1999: American Beauty beat**

The Cider House Rules

The Green Mile

The Insider

The Sixth Sense

**We say: THE INSIDER**

*American Beauty* is another Oscar winner that felt like a mistake about two minutes after it won. Indeed, its stock has fallen among critics ever since. I rather admire the old-fashioned charm of *The Cider House Rules* but that would seem a safe, soft choice. Let's go with director Michael Mann and his scathing expose *The Insider*. This story of a whistle blower in the tobacco industry is a master class in polemics, exposing corruption and detailing how the sausages are made when it comes to lobbying and corporate greed. Russell Crowe should be in multiple Oscar winners — just not *Gladiator*.

**1998: Shakespeare in Love beat**

Elizabeth

Life is Beautiful

Saving Private Ryan

The Thin Red Line

**We say: THE THIN RED LINE**

What an upset! *Shakespeare in Love* beat out Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and our most popular director was denied his rightful award! Actually, no. The real shocker was that one of Hollywood's greatest directors made a completely unexpected comeback and triumphed to a phenomenal degree with his tone poem of a war movie *The Thin Red Line*. Director Terrence Malick is a legend and his first movie in 20 years couldn't possibly live up to the hype. But it did. True, he's gone a little batty lately, turning out

movies with increasing speed and a complete disregard for whether or not he has something worth saying. But there's no denying this movie's power, which already seems better than it did even back in 1998.

**1997: Titanic beat**

As Good as It Gets

Good Will Hunting

L.A. Confidential

The Full Monty

**We say: L.A. CONFIDENTIAL**

Give director James Cameron the Best Director award if you must. *Titanic* is a fine spectacle and it's fun to watch the ship sink and yes Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet have charm to spare. And that's it. A good movie this is not. (Cameron's *Aliens* or *T2* is better.) But by far the best film is *L.A. Confidential*, a now classic noir-ish story of corruption in the City Of Angels. Yet ANOTHER Russell Crowe movie that deserves to win Best Picture. (Just not *Gladiator*.) It's also a good lesson in never writing someone off. I would not have imagined director Curtis Hanson had a great film in him, not after *The Bedroom Window* or *The River Wild* or *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle*. I did think the little seen *Bad Influence* (starring James Spader and Rob Lowe) was pretty fun. But a great film? I wasn't holding my breath. Yet, the right director with the right material and the right cast can click in ways you'd never suspect. That was certainly the case here and Hanson proved he could do it again with *Wonder Boys*. I've always avoided insult criticism or baldly stating that someone had no talent; that's just not my style. And as Hanson proves, you never know....

**1996: The English Patient beat**

Fargo

Jerry Maguire

Secrets & Lies

Shine

**We say: FARGO**

Actually, I typed in *Jerry Maguire* first and then erased it for *Fargo*. Tom Cruise is a great star and that

romantic drama is a treat. You have to like a movie that salutes Billy Wilder. And I'd much rather salute three or four other Coen Brother movies. But since I've taken away their win for *No Country For Old Men*, I want to give them the spotlight here. Besides, the movie *Fargo* is a comic delight with a deadpan Frances McDormand rightly winning Best Actress. I've really gone back and forth between these two movies but *Fargo* gets bonus points for the unlikely accomplishment of spinning off a great TV series. *The English Patient* isn't a patch on the novel and only *feels* like a major film. Great score, though.

**1995: Braveheart beat**

Apollo 13

Babe

The Postman

Sense and Sensibility

We say: **BABE**

This is tough. *The Postman* is dreck and I really didn't like *Braveheart* at all, which does show Mel Gibson improving as a director but that's a low bar given his debut *The Man Without A Face*. (That film perversely turned a young adult novel about a kid learning to accept his sexual orientation — thanks to an inspiring adult gay man in his life — into a movie about an adult man who reacts angrily with disdain when it's suggested he might be gay. Nice.) I actually quite like *Apollo 13*, which is by far Ron Howard's best movie and the perfect time for Hollywood to salute one of their own. I adore Emma Thompson and believe *Sense And Sensibility* is a masterpiece. But I also think *Babe* is a masterpiece and it's a more *distinctive* masterpiece, as well as an envelope-pusher in terms of what can be done on screen. Hollywood so rarely honors family films like this one that I feel *Babe* deserves it, but it pulls ahead of *Sense And Sensibility* only by a snout. And the dudes who couldn't believe I rejected *Gladiator* have now officially stopped reading.)

**1994: Forrest Gump beat**

Four Weddings and a Funeral

Pulp Fiction

Quiz Show

The Shawshank Redemption

We say **QUIZ SHOW**

I appreciate the stunt that is *Forrest Gump* and Tom Hanks in it. And I won't argue with the many, many people who feel *The Shawshank Redemption* is not merely the best film of 1994 but one of the best films of all time. They're wrong, but I won't argue with them. (However, I do believe the short story collection *Different Seasons* by Stephen King that includes it is his best collection. It also led to the movies *Apt Pupil* and *Stand By Me*, which is pretty great.) *Four Weddings And A Funeral* has charm to spare and *Pulp Fiction* is a landmark movie. A flawed landmark but a landmark. (I'd honor *Reservoir Dogs* and *Inglorious Basterds* and *Django Unchained* ahead of it.) Most people would probably pick *Pulp Fiction* as the most important film here. But in Alternative Oscars, Robert Redford did NOT triumph with *Ordinary People*. So this is his moment and a very worthy one. *Quiz Show* has fallen off the radar a bit. It's the story of the quiz show scandal that rocked the TV industry in its infancy. And really it's about America and the price of fame and valuing celebrity over integrity and flash over genuine worth. It's a great, great film that 's beautifully made and — unlike *Pulp Fiction* — flawless.

**1993: Schindler's List beat**

In the Name of the Father

The Fugitive

The Piano

The Remains of the Day

We say: **THE PIANO**

Steven Spielberg finally won the big one with his Holocaust movie. But he's already won in our Alternative Oscars. It's an Important Film but the *better* film is director Jane Campion's masterpiece *The Piano*. It's long, long past due for a woman to win Best Picture and Campion's remarkable film is the one to do it.

**1992: Unforgiven beat**

The Crying Game

A Few Good Men

Howards End

Scent of a Woman

We say: **UNFORGIVEN**

I really wanted to honor *Howards End*, arguably the peak of the Merchant-Ivory body of old-fashioned and

satisfying cinema. But Clint Eastwood's triumph with a Western is too good to pass up. Besides, it's a much better winner than *Million Dollar Baby*, so if Clint is going to win it better be right here.

**1991: The Silence of the Lambs beat**

Beauty and the Beast

Bugsy

JFK

The Prince of Tides

**We say: BEAUTY AND THE BEAST**

This is actually a pretty good batch. And it's cool that *The Silence Of The Lambs* became the first nominally horror film (or perhaps thriller) to win Best Picture. *JFK* or *Bugsy* would have been fine too though both have flaws. Only *The Prince Of Tides* would have proven a bad choice. But come on, the first animated film to be nominated for Best Picture also fully deserved to become the first animated film to WIN Best Picture. It's also the best movie musical in a generation and remains a treat.

**1990: Dances With Wolves beat**

Awakenings,

Ghost

Goodfellas

The Godfather, Part III

**We say: GOODFELLAS**

This is one of those years in which the winner is roundly mocked as absurd. Actually, it's not. *Dances With Wolves* has sweep and power and is a good film. And it's FAR preferable to three other options. Thank God Kevin Costner won instead of *Awakening* or *Ghost* or — heaven forfend — *The Godfather Part III*. Still, there's no doubt that Martin Scorsese should have won (again) for his tremendously entertaining gangster flick *GoodFellas*. Scorsese pulled out all the stops on this one and it's a masterpiece.

**1989: Driving Miss Daisy beat**

Born on the Fourth of July

Dead Poets Society

Field of Dreams

My Left Foot

We say: **FIELD OF DREAMS**

It's easy to think of a Best Picture type movie as serious and important. By those standards, the corrosive and angry and often brilliant *Born On The Fourth Of July* deserves to triumph. *My Left Foot* is pure Oscar bait as well, an inspiring bio-pic with Daniel Day Lewis winning Best Actor for his brilliant but unsentimental turn as Christy Brown. Both are good. But I've actually watched *Field Of Dreams* a dozen times over the years and seen clips from it again and again and yes it's middle brow and sentimental and heart-tugging and has one lame scene at the school board meeting. So sue me! Sometimes I want to tear up at the thought of playing catch with the old man. James Earl Jones' speech about baseball sends chills up my spine every single time and the movie is bursting with great actors in great roles, including a swan song from Burt Lancaster and a young Ray Liotta wild-eyed with dangerous charm that would catch fire in *GoodFellas*. It's goofy and heartfelt and maybe the dudes furious at me for taking away the Oscar from *Gladiator* and *Braveheart* will take comfort in the fact that I got it right this time. Oh and *Driving Miss Daisy*? Pious claptrap delivered by two good actors.

**1988: Rain Man beat**

Dangerous Liaisons

Mississippi Burning

The Accidental Tourist

Working Girl

We say: **DANGEROUS LIAISONS**

This is an easy pick since *Dangerous Liaisons* is the only movie worthy of snagging the Best Picture. Happily, it's very worthy, delivering the play (based on the novel) with malicious glee. Keanu Reeves is used well, with his dumb lug persona making him easy prey. Glenn Close is brilliant and matched every step of the way by John Malcovich in two legendary performances that savor every poisonous line of dialogue. Oh and *Rain Man*? Pious claptrap delivered by two good actors.

**1987: The Last Emperor beat**

Broadcast News



Fatal Attraction

Hope and Glory

Moonstruck

We say: **BROADCAST NEWS**

Another very good year for Oscar, with only *Fatal Attraction* as a nominee that would have proved embarrassing to win. *The Last Emperor* is very good indeed and in fact all four of the nominees made my list for the best films of 1987. (Which incidentally, I consider to be in the running for “best year of all time” for movies, alongside 1939 and a few others.) It kind of pains me NOT to pick *Hope & Glory*, the delightful British film by John Boorman. But I’m going to go for the Hollywood crowd pleaser *Broadcast News*, a triumph for James L. Brooks (who also did great work in TV) and a signal achievement for Holly Hunter, William Hurt and Albert Brooks. Plus, it has so much to say about the dumbing down of the news that the film remains as timeless as ever.

**1986: Platoon** beat

Children of a Lesser God

Hannah and Her Sisters

The Mission

A Room with a View

We say: **HANNAH AND HER SISTERS** and **A ROOM WITH A VIEW** (a tie!)

Why not a tie? The Oscars famously once had a tie for Best Actress with Barbra Streisand and Katharine Hepburn. Hepburn didn’t show up (she never did when competing) but Streisand probably would have won Best Acceptance Speech by hungrily eyeing that gold statue and saying, “Hello, gorgeous!” On my list for the best films of each year, 1986 is one of only three years in which I announced a tie: *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *A Room With A View*. (The other ties on my list are 1944, in which I honored TWO Preston Sturges films (*Miracle At Morgan’s Creek* and *Hail The Conquering Hero*) and 1940 (when I couldn’t make the Sophie’s Choice-like decision between my two favorite romantic comedies of all time, *The Philadelphia Story* and *The Shop Around The Corner*). Merchant-Ivory had been quietly making tasteful literary adaptations for years. But *A Room With A View* has a buoyancy, a charm and lightness about it that is nigh on irresistible. (The score and music cues help tremendously.) And it has brilliant casting for the ages, courtesy of Celestia Fox. Very early or key roles for a clutch of terrific actors including Rupert Graves, Julian Sands, Simon Callow, Daniel Day Lewis (who literally shot to fame when both this movie and *My Beautiful Laundrette* opened on the same day in New York City) and of course Helena Bonham Carter

and her gorgeous hair. (But seriously, what a tremendous lead performance, often overlooked because it's a romance and a comedy and she's a woman, so of course how could critics take it seriously?) But let's also honor Woody Allen and his warm masterpiece *Hannah And Her Sisters*. It came right at the peak of his powers, that great run of movies from *Annie Hall* to *Husbands And Wives*. (Though frankly, I don't want to downplay the fun of his earlier comedies either.) I value *The Purple Rose Of Cairo* even more as a perfectly crafted jewel. Shockingly, Hollywood didn't nominate that one, even though it's a celebration of movies. Go figure. But *Hannah And Her Sisters* is a supreme achievement and embodies everything Allen was about — it's erudite, urban, Jewish, funny and serious. It's all here, plus a clip of the Marx Brothers. Who could ask for anything more?

**1985: Out of Africa** beat

The Color Purple

Kiss of the Spider Woman

Prizzi's Honor

Witness

We say: **WITNESS**

I sure wish I could keep my powder dry for director John Huston and honor his final film, *The Dead*. Needless to say, it wasn't nominated for Best Picture. And I'm ashamed to say that when I was young and foolish I included both *The Color Purple* and *Out Of Africa* on my best of the year list, even though both are very flawed movies and haven't held up over the years. *Kiss Of The Spider Woman* is a little too self-important so that leaves Huston's black comedy *Prizzi's Honor* and Peter Weir's *Witness*. I couldn't decide and put it up for a vote among two friend: one chose *Prizzi's Honor* and the other chose *Witness*! So that helped. I'm going to lean towards the movie I've watched more often since it came out and that means the old-fashioned treat that is *Witness*.

**1984: Amadeus** beat

The Killing Fields

A Passage to India

Places in the Heart

A Soldier's Story

We say: **AMADEUS**

They got it right this time. It happens.

**1983: Terms of Endearment** beat

The Big Chill

The Dresser

The Right Stuff

Tender Mercies

We say: **THE RIGHT STUFF**

You really couldn't go wrong this year, thanks to five solid nominees. I suppose most critics look down on *The Big Chill* and maybe it doesn't hold up quite as well as I'd hope, but I do love it. I haven't seen *Terms Of Endearment* in many, many years but I'm going to let James L. Brooks win with the superior *Broadcast News* so that's out. *The Dresser* is a lovely two-hander and *Tender Mercies* is really a great film. But I have to give it up for the ambition and sweep and tremendous cast and brilliant editing (!) and indeed every single element of Philip Kaufman's *The Right Stuff*. A great work of (new) journalism turned into a great film. Too bad it didn't propel John Glenn into the White House the way some imagined, but that wasn't about to happen, was it?

**1982: Gandhi** beat

E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial

Missing

Tootsie

The Verdict

We say: **TOOTSIE**

Really, anything but *Gandhi*. That turgid, tiresome movie has a great performance by Ben Kingsley and absolutely nothing else to recommend it, thanks to the poor direction of Richard Attenborough, who made a fine Santa Claus but is not a natural filmmaker by any means. If Steven Spielberg hadn't won it all just the previous year, this should have been his moment. But he *just* got the Oscar so that leaves the door open for the two Sidneys/Sydneys. Sidney Lumet's *The Verdict* is a solid bit of workmanship and frankly I'd vote for Paul Newman over Kingsley. But Sydney Pollack's *Tootsie* is one of the greatest comedies of all time and I'd vote for Dustin Hoffman over all of them. It's brilliantly constructed and reaches a climax so

breathlessly funny I had to see it twice in the theater just so I could hear the dialogue over the audience's laughter. And it's grounded in character from start to finish. Hollywood always treats comedy like a second class citizen and it shouldn't.

**1981: Chariots of Fire beat**

Atlantic City

On Golden Pond

Raiders of the Lost Ark

Reds

**We say: RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK**

Another strong batch from Hollywood. I really like *Chariots of Fire* and cheered when the little movie that could won it all. *On Golden Pond* has two performances for the ages but the script is awfully weak. *Atlantic City* is pretty great and *Reds* is the best pro-communist movie Hollywood ever made. But for sheer entertainment, for both celebrating the glory days of the movie serials and raising them to high art thanks to state of the art technical elements and Harrison Ford bringing new depth and humor to action films, you can't deny *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. It's nigh on perfect.

**1980: Ordinary People beat**

Coal Miner's Daughter

Raging Bull

Tess

The Elephant Man

**We say: RAGING BULL**

Oh the injustice! 1980 is Ground Zero for anyone who wants to complain that Oscar is stupid and gets it wrong, wrong, wrong. If you start to type a sentence that claims the Academy Awards honors the wrong movie, I swear to you auto-correct will immediately fill in "and Exhibit Number One is the year *Ordinary People* beat out *Raging Bull*." Well, they're wrong. The real injustice is when a *bad* movie beats out a good movie, not when a very good movie beats out another very good movie or even when a very good movie beats out a stone cold masterpiece. Every single film nominated in 1980 is a very good film and has stood the test of time, *Ordinary People* very much included. Nonetheless, *Raging Bull* isn't just the best film of

1980, it's one of the best films of all time and indeed a stone cold masterpiece. Martin Scorsese, here's your first Oscar.

**1979: Kramer vs. Kramer beat**

All That Jazz

Apocalypse Now

Breaking Away

Norma Rae

**We say: APOCALYPSE NOW**

No obvious groaners but I prefer to make Dustin Hoffman wait for *Tootsie* before being in another Best Picture winner. My heart belongs to *Breaking Away* but there's no denying Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* looms large in cinematic history. It's definitely the most important and influential film of the year. Besides, winning here will make up for the storm of outrage when *The Godfather Part II* lost out a few years earlier, even though we all know it's the greatest sequel of all time.

**1978: The Deer Hunter beat**

An Unmarried Woman

Coming Home

Heaven Can Wait

Midnight Express

**We say: COMING HOME**

No, Oscar didn't get it right. All five of these movies are flawed and unsatisfying in some way, though all have worthy elements too. And look at the movies they ignored! Where's *Superman: The Movie* or Terrence Malick's *Days Of Heaven* or Scorsese's brilliant concert film *The Last Waltz* or *Grease* or *National Lampoon's Animal House* or the horror flicks *Dawn Of The Dead* and *Halloween* or foreign hits like *Autumn Sonata* or — why not — Jackie Chan's *Drunken Master*? Instead we've got self-importance everywhere you turn. But I'm swayed towards *Coming Home* for one simple, completely extraneous reason: John Wayne handed out the Best Picture Oscar. While I'm sure Wayne was wary of *The Deer Hunter*, I'll bet it would have bothered him even more to see Jane Fonda bounding up onstage in glory. Plus, maybe director Michael Cimino wouldn't have self-imploded in glory and made more good movies

beyond *Heaven's Gate*.

**1977: Annie Hall** beat

The Goodbye Girl,

Julia

Star Wars

The Turning Point

We say: **STAR WARS**

Sorry, Woody. It was a deserving win but you'll get one soon enough. And movies don't come more game-changing than *Star Wars*. It doubled down on the success of *Jaws* to turn summer into a hot season for movies. It pushed technology to its limits. It foresaw the era we live in dominated by franchises and B movies being made on A movie budgets (as John Waters once pointed out). And it's a great film filled with stars in the making. The fact that all three leads went on to substantial careers in Hollywood is no fluke. It would have been wrong to see Hollywood being out of touch because it gave its top prize to a big hit comedy by one of the most famous directors in the world. But *Star Wars* is the smarter choice when you've got one eye on history.

**1976: Rocky** beat

All the President's Men

Bound for Glory

Network

Taxi Driver

We say: **ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN**

Another solid year with no bad choices. And who doesn't love the underdog story of *Rocky*? I'd argue that the 1970s practically belonged to director Hal Ashby, who made *Bound For Glory* (a fact first made clear to me by critic Peter Biskind). *Network* and *Taxi Driver* are important and yet stumble a little in their desire to BE important. The simple fact is that *All The President's Men* is a tremendous film that turned a very unlikely subject (guys typing furiously and talking on the phone) into a gripping story. And its mantra is just as important today as it was back in the Watergate era: follow the rubles.

**1975: One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest** beat

Barry Lyndon

Dog Day Afternoon

Jaws

Nashville

**We say: DOG DAY AFTERNOON**

Nothing wrong with *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, especially since it improved on a novel that's a dated relic of the period. Spielberg will win it all with *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* so we can pass over *Jaws* (and bemoan the fact that some of his best films weren't even nominated, such as *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* and *Empire Of The Sun* — actually, full credit to Oscar for just nominating *Jaws*). And boy do I love *Nashville*. But I also love the reckless, anything goes pure Seventies vibe of *Dog Day Afternoon*. Al Pacino is so mesmerizing and compelling you'd swear he was reinventing film acting right in front of you. Plus, it's a bank heist movie with gender reassignment surgery as the driving plot point! Attica! Attica!

**1974: The Godfather, Part II beat**

Chinatown

The Conversation

Lenny

The Towering Inferno

**We say: CHINATOWN**

It's an outrage! How could our Alternative Oscars have the time to make sober judgements and then overrule Oscar when it actually got it right? Yes, *The Godfather, Part II* is one of the greatest sequels of all time. It actually makes the already great *The Godfather* better in retrospect. (Though not in the awful TV miniseries version Coppola dished out that ruined the brilliant structure of *Part II*.) But in this universe the Coppola vote is split by *Part II* and his *other* brilliant movie that year, *The Conversation*. And that's how we end up with Roman Polanski's terrific noir *Chinatown*. Hey, just be glad it wasn't *The Towering Inferno*.

**1973: The Sting beat**

American Graffiti

Cries and Whispers

The Exorcist

A Touch of Class

We say: **CRIES AND WHISPERS**

Hey, it's the Alternative Oscars so whenever we can, we'll choose something else. It's not fun overturning a grand entertainment like *The Sting*, but we've gone heavy on crowd pleasers like *Star Wars* and *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* and *Tootsie* and *Field Of Dreams*; so snobs we're not. We'd love to honor a horror movie but have an animus against *The Exorcist* for some reason. (William Friedkin is his own worst enemy.) *Cries and Whispers* is not the Ingmar Bergman film we want to immortalize but it's the only one we've got (he did win three Foreign Film Oscars) so there you are.

**1972: The Godfather beat**

Cabaret

Deliverance

Souder

The Emigrants

We say: **THE GODFATHER**

They got it right. We could blow your mind by arguing for *Cabaret* or even *The Emigrants* but we're not crazy. *The Godfather* really is a masterpiece, even though the idea of honor among thieves is a poisonous one that watching the movie carefully should disabuse you of...and yet somehow doesn't.

**1971: The French Connection beat**

A Clockwork Orange

Fiddler on the Roof

Nicholas and Alexandra

The Last Picture Show

We say: **THE LAST PICTURE SHOW**

Three of the five movies are very worthy so that's a relief. Stanley Kubrick has already been honored by



Oscar (you'll get there soon enough) so that doesn't make *A Clockwork Orange* a must-pick. (Sadly, his greatest film — *2001: A Space Odyssey* — was typically ignored by the Academy Awards.) So I'll happily honor one of my favorite films of all time, *The Last Picture Show*. Another sterling cast that enjoyed tremendous success is on display here. And while it's not the debut film of director Peter Bogdanovich, it *feels* like his debut film and boy did he make three great movies in a row with this, *Paper Moon* and *What's Up, Doc?* (Thanks, Polly Platt!) Author Larry McMurtry has surely been blessed by the gods when it comes to Hollywood adapting his novels. Here's proof positive.

**1970: Patton beat**

Airport

Five Easy Pieces

Love Story

MASH

We say: **MASH**

A very flawed list with no good pick. *Patton* is the sort of ponderous bio-pic Hollywood was running away from, which makes it a particularly bad choice for kicking off the 1970s. *Airport* and *Love Story* aren't worth mentioning and *Five Easy Pieces* has that great scene in the diner and a lot to recommend it and a lot of flaws, too. That leaves Robert Altman's *MASH*, which is a little more poisonous than you remember because you're confusing it with the TV series. That was styled *M\*A\*S\*H*, by the way, and for three years the show dramatically improved on the film and then it spent another eight years slowly going warm and fuzzy. But the movie does capture Altman in fine scattershot, rule-breaking form and it typifies the era in some unclassifiable way. I prefer *McCabe And Mrs. Miller* and *Nashville*, but this and *Gosford Park* is plenty for honoring Altman.

**1969: Midnight Cowboy beat**

Anne of the Thousand Days

Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid

Hello Dolly!

Z

We say: **BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID**

I'm not going to wait until 1969 to start recognizing the young turks taking over Hollywood. So I don't need to give acclaim to the always rather sordid *Midnight Cowboy*, which was bold for being X-rated (since changed to an R) and tackling prostitution and gays and the lowlife people on the streets of New York City. I just wish I didn't feel like the *movie* sort of disapproved of all those low-life people and the sad pathetic gay characters right along with society. (Maybe that's why Hollywood embraced it; you think they're super liberal but Hollywood is actually very conventional and stolid.) So instead I'm picking another crowd-pleaser, the terrific *Butch Cassidy And The Sundance Kid*. It's a great showcase for Robert Redford and Paul Newman, two terrific actors with so much chemistry you'd swear their next movie was going to be *Brokeback Mountain*. Plus, it's a lot quirkier than you remember, George Roy Hill is a fun maverick and it'll give screenwriter William Goldman even more bragging rights. At the time, Hollywood would have been seen as too timid to embrace *Midnight Cowboy* but history would have proven them right.

**1968: Oliver!** beat

Funny Girl

Rachel Rachel

Romeo and Juliet

The Lion in Winter

**We say: ROMEO & JULIET**

Forget Baz Luhrmann. If you want to see a *Romeo & Juliet* positively burning with pent-up desire, this is the one. The two young leads are simply beautiful and they really, really want to have sex with each other — it makes the entire point of this doomed romance crystal clear. The lines are delivered crisply and with clarity, the production is sumptuous and the supporting cast excellent. You don't need gimmicks to get across Shakespeare and this proves it. The rest are fine if flawed movies in one way or another. Ignored in 1968: *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Once Upon A Time In The West*, *The Producers*, *Planet Of The Apes*, *Rosemary's Baby* and *Night Of The Living Dead*.

**1967: In the Heat of the Night** beat

Bonnie and Clyde

Doctor Dolittle

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

The Graduate

We say: **BONNIE AND CLYDE**

It might have been *The Graduate*, but since director Mike Nichols just won it big the year before, that would be overkill. Is there any question that it and *Bonnie and Clyde* are landmark films and hugely influential? Of course not. They dwarf the stillborn *Doctor Dolittle* and the good intentions of *In The Heat Of The Night* and *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner*. (I do still enjoy Spencer Tracy's final speech but the film is otherwise a bore.) Besides, Pauline Kale was wrong and then she was right when finally appreciating this film on a second viewing. It's only improved with age.

**1966: A Man for All Seasons** beat

Alfie

The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming

The Sand Pebbles

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

We say: **WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?**

This is an easy one with director Mike Nichols moving from sketch comedy to acclaimed stage director to terrific filmmaker without skipping a beat. It's an extraordinary play turned into an extraordinary film with lead performances by Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor that remain the standard by which every stage actor has been judged ever since. The rest on this list simply pale in comparison.

**1965: The Sound of Music** beat

A Thousand Clowns

Darling

Doctor Zhivago

Ship of Fools

We say: **THE SOUND OF MUSIC**

They got it right and phooey to anyone who thinks this is sentimental claptrap. It's sentimental claptrap that's impeccably made and beautifully acted, thank you very much. Plus, it's a musical, folks and this is a musical bursting with great numbers. It notably improves on the stage version, cutting out a number that doesn't work and adding in another ("I Have Confidence") that works brilliantly. And it's Julie Andrews, one of the great stage actors instantly cementing her place after *Mary Poppins* as one of the most loved film

actors of all time. (To think Oscar didn't even nominate *Victor/Victoria!*)

**1964: My Fair Lady** beat

Becket

Dr. Strangelove

Mary Poppins

Zorba The Greek

We say: **DR. STRANGELOVE**

*My Fair Lady* is one of the greatest musicals of all time, maybe THE greatest musical of all time. And Audrey Hepburn is a charming presence on screen. But the film version is fatally flawed for NOT casting Julie Andrews. Plus the once great director George Cukor turned a witty delight into a wax museum of a film that seems to take *forever*. Andrews got sweet revenge by winning the Best Actress Oscar for her turn in the much better movie musical *Mary Poppins*. But we've got to give the Oscar for Best Picture to *Dr. Strangelove*. Stanley Kubrick's blackly hilarious comedy about nuclear war is anarchy on screen of the likes not seen since the Marx Brothers broke up. My dad laughed so hard when he saw it in Bermuda for the first time that other theater goers commented on how much he liked it. (They were otherwise thrown for a loop by the film, I gather.) Hollywood wouldn't really let the kids take over for a few years but this is the first crack in its stodgy old ways of doing things.

**1963: Tom Jones** beat

America America

Cleopatra

How the West Was Won

Lilies of the Field

We say: **AMERICA AMERICA**

*Tom Jones* is a nice nod to the Brits and the only other worthy film on the list. But this is the Alternative Oscars so let's tip our hat to director Elia Kazan's all but forgotten ode to immigrants. Maybe if it had won Best Picture more people would see it and be reminded that the immigrant story IS the story of America.

**1962: Lawrence of Arabia** beat

To Kill a Mockingbird

The Longest Day

The Music Man

Mutiny on the Bounty

We say: **LAWRENCE OF ARABIA**

They got it right.

**1961: West Side Story** beat

Fanny

Judgment at Nuremberg

The Guns of Navarone

The Hustler

We say: **THE HUSTLER**

I actually like *West Side Story* though many of my cineaste friends have issues with it. It's a lot odder than one would think and that's part of its strength. Again, we've got a lead in a musical who can't sing and that's never a good thing, Marni Nixon or no Marni Nixon. I do enjoy *The Guns Of Navarone* but there's nothing special about it. So the Oscar goes to *The Hustler*, a great film about pool sharks that features a magnetic Paul Newman, a terrific George C. Scott and Jackie Gleason having a blast as Minnesota Fats. He had a remarkable career but it's a pity he didn't do more work like this in the movies.

**1960: The Apartment** beat

The Alamo

Elmer Gantry

Sons and Lovers

The Sundowners

We say: **THE APARTMENT**

Boy did they get it right. *The Apartment* is a masterpiece and a peak for all involved, including director Billy Wilder and actors Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine. Besides any of the other movies would have been dreadful picks, with the possible exception of *Elmer Gantry*, which would merely have been foolish. Oscar had only once chance to get it right and they might have easily overlooked one of the best movies ever made. Remarkably, they didn't.

**1959: Ben-Hur beat**

Anatomy of a Murder

The Diary of Anne Frank

The Nun's Story

Room at the Top

**We say: ANATOMY OF A MURDER**

I like the stolid *Ben-Hur* and three others are a snooze so it's not a bad pick. Happily, that leaves *Anatomy Of A Murder*. Director Otto Preminger gets his due alongside an all-star cast led by Jimmy Stewart in a story of rape that fascinates because it gets the details right. Lawyers admire the hell out of this one and no wonder. Plus, it's got a great jazzy score by the great Duke Ellington. First class all the way.

**1958: Gigi beat**

Auntie Mame

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

The Defiant Ones

Separate Tables

**We say: SEPARATE TABLES**

I'm tempted to say NO WINNER for this year's batch but I'll settle for the very polite *Separate Tables*, which merged two Terrence Rattigan plays into one film with fine results all around. It's certainly superior to *Gigi*, one of the worst movie musicals created by a team of the renown of Lerner & Lowe. (I mean, they did *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot*, for pete's sake!) *Gigi* is creepy and why anyone was beguiled by it escapes me entirely.

**1957: The Bridge on the River Kwai beat**

12 Angry Men

Peyton Place

Sayonara

Witness for the Prosecution

**We say: 12 ANGRY MEN**

I really like *The Bridge On The River Kwai* but David Lean has already won Oscar's biggest prize and will again, both times for better films. So let's honor *12 Angry Men*. It's a corker of a movie with Henry Fonda pretty unbeatable as a juror trying to convince everyone else that justice must be done, even if they're hot and tired and would rather be anywhere else except serving on a trial. Further, it shows Oscar acknowledging the great work being done in live TV and how the talent cutting their teeth there (like Sidney Lumet) are welcome in Hollywood.

**1956: Around the World in Eighty Days beat**

Friendly Persuasion

Giant

The King and I

The Ten Commandments

**We say: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS**

What a dreadful bore of five nominees. (What did they ignore? Just *The Searchers*.) But if Hollywood is going to honor the last gasp of the studio system, at least let it honor the legendary Cecil B. De Mille and *The Ten Commandments*, which has a wink in its eye while delivering the story of Moses with all the sex and violence and spectacle that decency will allow. Even the people who made *Around The World In Eighty Days* didn't like it. It's the worst of the five by a country mile.

**1955: Marty beat**

Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing

Mister Roberts

Picnic

The Rose Tattoo

We say: **MISTER ROBERTS**

Yeah, yeah, *Marty* is the adorable underdog. Tough. I'm gonna save my salute to TV for *12 Angry Men* and that means honoring *Mister Roberts*. This is old school Hollywood of the respectable sort. Hugely entertaining and a bit stodgy but I can only choose from the stuff they nominated and this is the cream of the crop. Plus it costars Jack Lemmon, so there's that.

**1954: On the Waterfront** beat

The Caine Mutiny

The Country Girl

Seven Brides for Seven Brothers

Three Coins in the Fountain

We say: **ON THE WATERFRONT**

They got it right. *The Caine Mutiny* is the only sane option and it's not remotely on the same level.

**1953: From Here to Eternity** beat

Julius Caesar

Roman Holiday

Shane

The Robe

We say: **SHANE**

We can't keep saying "they got it right." This is the Alternative Oscars, after all. It's hard to argue with *From Here To Eternity* and Frank Sinatra would beat the crap out of me for taking away his film's Best Picture win. (Though it's more likely he'd get one of his bodyguards to do it for him.) Nonetheless, it does have a little aura of importance that's deadly for a film, not to mention dealing with disreputable issues in a manner so polite and discreet it's a little silly. So I'm going to plunk for the flawed but compelling western *Shane*, the last great role for Alan Ladd. Mind you, if Oscar had picked *Shane* I would gladly be naming *From Here To Eternity* and chiding their lack of taste. So this is a close call.



**1952: The Greatest Show on Earth beat**

High Noon

Ivanhoe

Moulin Rouge

The Quiet Man

**We say: THE QUIET MAN**

Oy. Not until *Around The World In Eighty Days* would Oscar honor a movie so inherently boring as this one. They only had two chances to get it right: the western *High Noon* or the romantic drama *The Quiet Man*. *High Noon* is actually a bit of a pill; see it once and you're most assuredly done. *The Quiet Man* however is a peak for director John Ford and showcases the appeal of John Wayne like never before. Toss in Maureen O'Hara and her fiery red hair, a wonderful supporting cast, some of the most gorgeous scenery of the Irish countryside you'll ever see and a memorable score I'm starting to hum even as I type this and you've got what we call in the business a classic.

**1951: An American in Paris beat**

Decision Before Dawn

A Place in the Sun

Quo Vadis

A Streetcar Named Desire

**We say: A PLACE IN THE SUN**

I really am not a fan of Gene Kelly's arty dance movies and the dull film *An American In Paris* is a prime example. Give me Fred Astaire's unassuming grace any day. And the movies based on Tennessee Williams' plays all suffer from cutting the more scandalous elements so they could make it past the censors. (Which begs the question of why no one is making new films of those plays using the original text — we've certainly got actresses like Cate Blanchett and Gillian Anderson pulling it off onstage.) Luckily, we've got a tremendous Hollywood drama in our back pocket. Director George Stevens would get real world Oscar nominations for movies like *Shane* and *Giant* and *The Diary Of Anne Frank* but he deservedly won for this one. Montgomery Clift is married to the harridan Shelley Winters (wonderfully hateful) but he wants to be with Elizabeth Taylor. Can you blame him? Would anyone really mind if they just sort of drowned her? Clift and Taylor at this particular moment in time are the two most beautiful people on the

planet and arguably the two most beautiful people who would ever walk the face of the earth. (Let's not downplay how much sex appeal is part of Hollywood's allure.) It's a magnetic film with the audience knowing that of course they *shouldn't* be rooting for the lovers to get away with this terrible scheme...and yet doing so anyway.

**1950: All About Eve** beat

Born Yesterday

Father of the Bride

King Solomon's Mines

Sunset Blvd.

We say: **ALL ABOUT EVE**

Actually, *Father Of The Bride* is a treat and Judy Holliday deserved to win for her never to be equalled ditzy turn in *Born Yesterday*. Not a bad crop, really. (The less said about *King Solomon's Mines* the better.) But really you've got two masterpieces vying against one another for Best Picture. Either one is a credit to the industry and a worthy Oscar winner. It would be easy to swap out *Sunset Blvd.* and who could object? But the gothic horror of the Billy Wilder film is slightly less perfect than the bitchy treat that is *All About Eve*, so we'll stick with it.

**1949: All the King's Men** beat

Battleground

The Heiress

A Letter to Three Wives

Twelve O'Clock High

We say: **THE HEIRESS**

Not a bad one in the bunch really. But it comes down to the brilliant *A Letter To Three Wives* and the equally brilliant play adaptation *The Heiress*. I'm giving the edge to *The Heiress* because it improves on the play at the crushing finale in a way the play couldn't match. Plus it has Montgomery Clift as the gentleman caller and while you know you shouldn't believe him you just can't help yourself, can you? Ralph Richardson is hateful as the father who can't love his daughter. And frankly I never saw Olivia de Havilland as a romantic lead so it made perfect sense to me that she would be cast as a plain, dull overlooked child.

(It's not like the travesty of casting Michelle Pfeiffer in *Frankie & Johnnie*, for example.) Besides, I've taken away three of director William Wyler's wins for Best Picture so I'm giving one back here.

**1948: Hamlet beat**

Johnny Belinda

The Red Shoes

The Snake Pit

The Treasure of the Sierra Madre

**We say: THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE**

My heart belongs to the great British team of Powell and Pressburger, but *The Red Shoes* is one of their rare films I'm not wildly enamored by. (Sorry, Marty!) So let's stick with John Huston's memorable film about the lust for gold. It's surely a lot more fun than Laurence Olivier's self-consciously tony *Hamlet*.

**1947: Gentleman's Agreement beat**

The Bishop's Wife

Crossfire

Great Expectations

Miracle on 34th Street

**We say: GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

*Gentleman's Agreement* is an Important Film about anti-Semitism. While apparently it's a lesson that needs to be learned again every generation, that doesn't make this bore of a film starring Gregory Peck any better. ("But would you rent me a room in your hotel if I told you I was a JEW?" is the sort of line Peck has to intone at restaurants and hotels throughout the movie.) *Miracle On 34th Street* is a sweet little film but we just honored a holiday movie one year ago. *Great Expectations* is simply a masterpiece, an early peak for director David Lean featuring an opening scene that is a textbook example of great filmmaking. It happens to have great source material (thanks, Charles Dickens!) but it helps even more to have a great technical team and a superlative cast with even small roles anchored by the likes of Alec Guinness and the great Francis L. Sullivan. Favoring *Gentleman's Agreement* over this is Hollywood back-patting at its worst.

**1946: The Best Years of Our Lives beat**

Henry V

It's a Wonderful Life

The Razor's Edge

The Yearling

**We say: IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE**

Now mind you, most critics consider *The Best Years of Our Lives* a peak film from director William Wyler. Clearly it struck a nerve and captured something about life in the US at the end of the war; the movie was a monster box office hit (only *Gone With The Wind* was bigger) and swept the Oscars. It's admirable for using a real-life veteran to play a major character. And many scenes are tastefully done and often moving, like the near silent beauty where Frederic March returns home unannounced from overseas and surprises his wife Myrna Loy. For all that, it's always left me a little cold. So I won't hesitate to name Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life* as the best film of 1946. At the time it made decent box office but not nearly enough to break even. Reviews were pretty mixed (especially given Frank Capra's record) but some were strong. Of course, the film might have won the Oscar outright if it hadn't rushed to come out in December of 1946 to make the awards cutoff, since the following year was notably weaker. And as you know TV reruns and being in the public domain have proven its savior. That only means the public has caught up to what I imagine critics would have recognized long ago: this is a dark, dark film with a lot more hard-hitting despair than the warm sentiment at the end that everyone remembers. Yes, that sentiment is there, but boy does Jimmy Stewart have to earn it.

**1945: The Lost Weekend beat**

Anchors Aweigh

Mildred Pierce

Spellbound

The Bells of St. Mary's

**We say: MILDRED PIERCE**

*The Lost Weekend* is another Important Film, like *Gentleman's Agreement*. This time Hollywood is exposing the dangers of alcoholism. Good for them! Just don't name it the Best Picture of the year. That leaves *The Bells Of St. Mary's* and *Mildred Pierce*. *Bells* is one of the great sequels of all time and far less bloody than *The Godfather Part II*. Bing Crosby and Ingrid Bergman are so appealing as a priest and a nun

that I imagine they alone kept vocations soaring for a decade or so. I hate to disappoint the great Leo McCarey but I'm going to go for the tough-minded women's film *Mildred Pierce*. It's helmed by my favorite studio director — Michael Curtiz — and the unlikely screen legend Joan Crawford has never been better. Has an actor so inherently unappealing ever proven such a star? Bette Davis comes close but she never asked you to identify with her, while Crawford craved approval. It's as if every person who ever felt unlucky or unloved got their revenge by identifying with Crawford and simply *pretending* she was a glamorous, likable figure. Remarkable and in this film it works brilliantly.

**1944: Going My Way beat**

Double Indemnity

Gaslight

Since You Went Away

Wilson

**We say: DOUBLE INDEMNITY**

Oh how tempted I am to leave *Going My Way* right where it is. Bing Crosby is charm itself as a traveling priest who comes to a parish, sings a few songs and makes everything better. Who could fear Catholics after seeing it? But surely the cynical *Double Indemnity* deserves the top award even more. It's a simple fact that cynicism ages a lot better than optimism or its kissing cousin earnestness. And *Double Indemnity* has cynicism in spades. For those who knew Fred MacMurray from the mild sitcom *My Three Sons*, discovering this film on late night TV was head-spinning. Thanks to director Billy Wilder, he pulls it off. (Frankly, seeing all his other films before and after, I still wouldn't have thought he had it in him!) He's great, Edward G. Robinson is great and of course Barbara Stanwyck is great too. I hate to admit it, but I think Stanwyck has replaced Katharine Hepburn as my favorite actress of all time.

**1943: Casablanca beat**

For Whom the Bell Tolls

Heaven Can Wait

The Human Comedy

In Which We Serve

Madame Curie

The More the Merrier

The Ox-Bow Incident

The Song of Bernadette

Watch on the Rhine

We say: **CASABLANCA**

Well, duh.

**1942: Mrs. Miniver** beat

49th Parallel

Kings Row

The Magnificent Ambersons

The Pied Piper

The Pride of the Yankees

Random Harvest

The Talk of the Town

Wake Island

Yankee Doodle Dandy

We say: **THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS**

*Mrs. Miniver* is the greatest piece of propaganda ever made. (Yes, even better than *Triumph Of the Will*.) It's also a fun movie with the added spice of knowing star Greer Garson would marry the actor playing her son just one year later. Winston Churchill loved it and Hitler hated it and that should be good enough for anyone. But half the fun of Alternative Oscars is the What If factor. What if foreign films started winning Best Picture right away? What if animated movies snagged the top prize? What if Orson Welles had seen his debut honored rightly as the Best Picture of the year? Maybe he would have had more clout with the studios and not abandoned *Ambersons* or at least not seen it butchered in his absence. Screen history might have been very different indeed. Even in its truncated form ( I still await a final reel to pop up somewhere so it can be restored), *Ambersons* is a remarkable movie and wholly satisfying. If nothing else,

it reminds us that Joseph Cotten is easily one of the most underrated actors in film history. Light comedy, dark drama and everything in between — like Jimmy Stewart, Spencer Tracy and Cary Grant, he could do it all.

**1941: How Green Was My Valley** beat

Blossoms in the Dust

Citizen Kane

Here Comes Mr. Jordan

Hold Back the Dawn

The Little Foxes

The Maltese Falcon

One Foot in Heaven

Sergeant York

Suspicion

We say: **CITIZEN KANE**

The consensus choice for the best film of all time and who am I to argue. (A recent poll put *Vertigo* at the top but frankly *Vertigo* isn't even the best film by Alfred Hitchcock.) Again, cinematic history might have gone off the rails the night this was dissed. On the other hand, Orson Welles *did* win an Oscar for Best Screenplay and had a free rein with his next film so he was probably self-destructive anyway. I mean, a guy who enjoys unmatched success as a child and then in radio and then on stage and then in film? Well, there's nowhere to go but down.

**1940: Rebecca** beat

All This and Heaven Too

Foreign Correspondent

The Grapes of Wrath

The Great Dictator

Kitty Foyle

The Letter

The Long Voyage Home

Our Town

The Philadelphia Story

**We say: THE PHILADELPHIA STORY**

Really? Alfred Hitchcock delivers a string of matchless entertainments from the UK and then comes to the US and arguably tops himself here? And the *one* movie Hollywood honors is the atypical and not very interesting *Rebecca*? Heck, it's not even my favorite Hitchcock film nominated for Best Picture *this year!* (That would be the drum-beating propaganda film *Foreign Correspondent* starring the great stone-faced Joel McCrea.) And what else is on the list? Just one of Hollywood's peak achievements in romantic comedy, the absolutely delightful triumph *The Philadelphia Story*. It turned Katharine Hepburn from "box office poison" to a Hollywood legend now and forever. Director George Cukor and co-stars Cary Grant and Jimmy Stewart are all in peak form here. It manages to be family friendly and yet sophisticated adult entertainment all at the same time, one of the glories of the studio system at its best. Shockingly, not on the list is another romantic comedy every bit its equal: *The Shop Around The Corner*.

**1939: Gone with the Wind beat**

Dark Victory

Goodbye Mr. Chips

Love Affair

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington

Ninotchka

Of Mice and Men

Stagecoach

The Wizard of Oz

Wuthering Heights



## We say: **MR. SMITH GOES TO WASHINGTON**

Maybe you're shocked but most critics and certainly most film historians would put a big fat asterisk next to *Gone With The Wind*, one of the great technical achievements of Hollywood and beautifully acted but little better than the more virulently racist *Birth Of A Nation* in its distortion of history. (In fact, by making that prejudice go down sweeter, it's even worse than *Birth Of A Nation*.) But hold on, hold on! Putting aside politics and decency, most film critics would also say that there are better, more influential movies than *GWTW* in 1939. *The Wizard Of Oz* was a groundbreaker in terms of fantasy and musicals. If you loved those 1970s disaster flicks and *Die Hard* and a ton of other similar films, they owe a huge debt to *Stagecoach*, which served as a template for every movie that showed a microcosm of society trapped in a life or death situation (the hero, the coward, the cynical observer, the love interest and so on). Plus it turned John Wayne into a star. Bette Davis holds forth in *Dark Victory* to great effect. And while I don't think *Ninotchka* holds up on repeated viewings (Ernst Lubitsch made many better ones, including next year's *The Shop Around The Corner*) it is a great deal of fun to see Garbo laugh. *Wuthering Heights* is notable and it's easy to see why *Love Affair* has been remade so many times and yes, *Goodbye Mr Chips* tugs at the heart. (Shamelessly.) Yes, there's a reason 1939 is often cited as the greatest year for the studio system in movie history. But I'm going to go with *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington* because *Stagecoach* simply wouldn't have had the gravitas to beat *GWTW* even in the Alternative Oscars. *Mr. Smith* is Frank Capra at his absolute best. For a director often derided as cornpone and with a sentimental streak a mile wide, you have to wonder exactly how he got that reputation. His films are clear-eyed and nobody's fool when it comes to the corruption that can corrode politics and our democracy as a whole. *Meet John Doe*. *It's A Wonderful Life*. *Mr. Smith Goes To Washington*. These are powerful and dangerous films — at least they are dangerous to the people in power. As usual, a timeless classic like this can speak to us today loud and clear.

### **1938: You Can't Take it With You** beat

Alexander's Ragtime Band

Boys Town

Four Daughters

Grand Illusion

Jezebel

Pygmalion

Test Pilot

The Adventures of Robin Hood

The Citadel

We say: **THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD**

*You Can't Take It With You* is based on the hugely acclaimed play by George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart about a family of adorable eccentrics. Neither the play nor the film has aged well in the least. Most critics —and Woody Allen — consider *Grand Illusion* one of the greatest films of all time. It's an easy choice to stake a claim that the Oscars should have recognized international films right from the start. But try as I might, I've never taken to it. There's something about its attitude towards the aristocracy that doesn't sit well with me. "Sure, it's a war, but we're both gentlemen and can rise above that" is the vibe between Jean Gabin and his German captor Erich von Stroheim. To me, it romanticizes war, though I know that's not the intent or how most people see it. I enjoy many Jean Renoir films but not this one. Besides, I can wholeheartedly endorse my favorite studio director Michael Curtiz and the unalloyed joys of *The Adventures Of Robin Hood*. Errol Flynn is Robin of Locksley now and forever but the entire cast is pitch perfect. A great villain in Basil Rathbone and a hiss-ably fun one in Claude Rains, terrific action scenes, humor, romance and a classic sword fight at the finale! It just doesn't get any more entertaining than this. I understand why people keep retelling this tale but I don't think they'll ever match it, much less do better. I can *imagine* it, a *Robin Hood* rooted in the real world and burning with the injustice of it all, one with tension and danger and without the certainty that the hero (especially when embodied by Errol Flynn) was NOT going to die. But they haven't done it yet.

1937: **The Life of Emile Zola** beat

The Awful Truth

Captains Courageous

Dead End

The Good Earth

In Old Chicago

Lost Horizon

One Hundred Men and a Girl

Stage Door

A Star Is Born

We say: **THE AWFUL TRUTH**

Hey, director Leo McCarey! We robbed you with *Going My Way* so here's our make-good. *The Awful Truth* is a delightful screwball comedy with that tried and true device of a married couple who are going to be divorced or get divorced or somehow were never married at all but love each other madly, even if they won't admit it until the final reel. In this case it's Cary Grant and Irene Dunne *determined* to get a divorce but also determined to make sure the other has no successful romantic interest in anyone else. This film put the stamp on Cary Grant as "Cary Grant" once and for all and since along with Spencer Tracy he's probably the greatest actor of them all, that's saying something. McCarey actually won the Oscar for Best Director and he claimed he won it for the wrong movie that year. And he was right: *Make Way For Tomorrow* is a superlative heart-tugger about an elderly couple who are deeply in love but must live apart for financial reasons. You can't watch *The Awful Truth* without laughing and you can't watch *Make Way For Tomorrow* without crying. Now that's a director!

**1936: The Great Ziegfeld beat**

A Tale of Two Cities

Anthony Adverse

Dodsworth

Libeled Lady

Mr. Deeds Goes to Town

Romeo and Juliet

San Francisco

The Story of Louis Pasteur

Three Smart Girls

**We say: DODSWORTH**

This is where Oscar really started to go wrong, believing that dull bio-pics like *The Great Ziegfeld* and the even worse one-two punch of this year's nominee *The Story Of Louis Pasteur* and next year's winner *The Life Of Emile Zola* (both starring the dull as dishwater Paul Muni) were what Oscar should be about. God help us all. Let's celebrate instead the subtle work of Walter Huston in *Dodsworth*. He plays an unsophisticated but kind business tycoon who sets off on a Grand Tour of Europe with his wife at the end of his career. They both discover that — now that he's actually retired and spending time with her — well they have absolutely nothing in common, don't even really like each other and want very different things in

life. (What? He couldn't have noticed that on the weekends?) She wants a divorce and cheats on him. It's all very adult and quietly devastating thanks to Huston, who is recreating his stage triumph.

**1935: Mutiny on the Bounty – beat**

Alice Adams

Broadway Melody of 1936

Captain Blood

David Copperfield

The Informer

The Lives of a Bengal Lancer

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Les Misérables

Naughty Marietta

Ruggles of Red Gap

Top Hat

**We say: TOP HAT**

See? Everything old is new again, since you've realized now that for many years the Academy Awards honored about ten films every year before switching to five and the more recent sliding scale approach. *Mutiny On The Bounty* is an honorable choice, as would be *David Copperfield*, *Captain Blood*, *Alice Adams* and the *Bounty's* closest competitor *The Informer*. But we must crown *Top Hat*, the most popular film in the Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers library. Some say the choreography in 1936's *Swing Time* is even better and certainly if it were nominated we would have chosen that over *Dodsworth*. But we play the hand we're dealt by the Academy and that means *Top Hat*. Since that also means celebrating song and dance perfection like "Top Hat, White Tie And Tails" and "Cheek To Cheek," we can live with that. It's all stuff and nonsense, delightfully so and just the sort of tonic to help you forget the country was still in the throes of the Depression.

**1934: It Happened One Night – beat**

Cleopatra

Flirtation Walk

Here Comes the Navy

Imitation of Life

One Night of Love

The Barretts of Wimpole Street

The Gay Divorcee

The House of Rothschild

The Thin Man

The White Parade

Viva Villa!

We say: **THE THIN MAN**

Only three films in history have swept the Big Five at the Academy Awards (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress and Best Screenplay). They are *The Silence Of The Lambs*, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* and the best of the bunch by a mile, *It Happened One Night*. It deserves its place in film history and movies don't get much more influential than this road trip romance. I love it. But director Frank Capra will win it all in 1939, the greatest year for movies in history. Besides, the Alternative Oscars tries to resist endorsing what actually happened whenever possible. There's another movie on this line that I would argue is equally if not MORE influential and that's the peerless comic mystery *The Thin Man*. William Powell and Myrna Loy remain my image for what married life can and should be (with Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn a close second). And boy could they drink! Loy is a great gal and Powell is (just barely) her match in this charmer about a wealthy couple that stumble into one mystery after another. Yes, the second film in the series is even better but it's all here from the start and their banter/good-natured sparring has been copied again and again in a thousand films and tv shows.

**1932-33: Cavalcade — beat**

42nd Street

A Farewell to Arms

I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang

Lady for a Day

Little Women

She Done Him Wrong

Smilin' Through

State Fair

The Private Life of Henry VIII

**We say: LITTLE WOMEN**

I want to honor *42nd Street*, a dazzling early musical with great choreography by Busby Berkeley and an archetypal storyline that have since launched a thousand imitators. Its influence is inestimable. But the greater film is director George Cukor's triumph with *Little Women*. Katharine Hepburn was born to play the irrepressible Jo Marsh but the entire cast is perfectly in tune with the material and you can't fault a single element of the production. Hepburn is one of the greatest stage and screen stars of all time and her legend starts here, not with the more melodramatic *Morning Glory* that came out this same year.

**1931-32: Grand Hotel — beat**

Arrowsmith

Bad Girl

Five Star Final

One Hour with You

Shanghai Express

The Champ

The Smiling Lieutenant

**We say: SHANGHAI EXPRESS**

*Grand Hotel* is a lot of fun, very influential (you can blame it for *The Love Boat* and a thousand similar TV shows and movies over the years, for starters) and inspired a musical I wish I'd seen. But it's not nearly as good as the novel it's based on. Others have their appeal like the overlooked *Bad Girl* and *Five Star Final* and the weepy Jackie Cooper flick *The Champ*. But the two giants battling it out are Garbo and Dietrich in

*Grand Hotel* and *Shanghai Express* and the latter is clearly the winner. It was also the highest grossing film of the year, which is a bit of a surprise since it's never enjoyed the same visibility since. *Shanghai Express* is a terrific drama set in China in 1931 while the country is embroiled in civil war. Dietrich is a famous courtesan (i.e. high priced hooker) who unexpectedly meets up again with her true love on the titular train. "It took more than one man to change my name to Shanghai Lily," Dietrich states bluntly in one of the film's most memorable lines. The movie is very smart and modern on race, politics and feminist issues. Josef von Sternberg directed and — according to Dietrich — is mostly responsible for the film's remarkable cinematography, among the most dazzling in history. That alone makes this a must see.

**1930-31: Cimarron — beat**

East Lynne

Skippy

The Front Page

Trader Horn

**We say: THE FRONT PAGE**

That was a close one! Very early on in Oscar history we might have had to declare No Winner. *Cimarron* has a great land rush scene and a lot of ugly stereotypes and is generally dated. Almost no one has seen *East Lynne* since and the kiddie flick *Skippy* is similarly invisible for the most part. *Trader Horn* is problematic for about a hundred reasons (animals were treated cruelly and film crew members killed while making this tale of hunters in Africa). So thank goodness for that ode to ink-stained wretches *The Front Page*. You know it's already a big improvement on the stodgy stage play because the film is about an hour shorter. Sure it was vastly improved when they remade it as 1940's *His Girl Friday* (shockingly, not even nominated that year!). But even this first stab at the story (lauded in its day) is easily the best option on the table.

**1929-30: All Quiet on the Western Front — beat**

Disraeli

The Divorcee

The Big House

The Love Parade

**We say: ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT**

They got it right.

**1928-29: The Broadway Melody – beat\***

*Alibi*

*In Old Arizona*

*The Hollywood Revue of 1929*

*The Patriot*

(\*unofficial nominees deemed by AMPAS)

**We say: IN OLD ARIZONA**

By and large, these five films have been lost in the mists of time. The winner of the Oscar is the best-preserved of the bunch though its rushed final sequence (shot in color) is gone. *Alibi* sounds interesting and I'd sure love to see Ernst Lubitch's lost drama *The Patriot*, starring Emil Jannings. *The Hollywood Revue Of 1929* is exactly what it sounds like, an MGM grab bag of stars performing this or that number, with Laurel and Hardy doing a bit and a game Joan Crawford singing and dancing. The western *In Old Arizona* helped cement the idea of the singing cowboy, though sadly a freak accident with a jackrabbit left Raoul Walsh with only one eye and he gave up his acting career to stick behind the camera. (Mind you, he was a great director, so it's not too sad.) Since I've seen both it and *The Broadway Melody* and since *In Old Arizona* is better, that gets my vote. But I was strongly tempted to give no award.

**1927-28: Wings – (best picture, production) beat**

*7th Heaven*

*The Racket*

and

**Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans – (best picture, unique and artistic production) beat**

*Chang: A Drama of the Wilderness*

*The Crowd*

**We say: SUNRISE**

So even at the very start, Hollywood got it wrong. At the very first Academy Awards, they gave out two



Best Picture Oscars. One went to the silent film spectacle *Wings*, a movie like *Titanic* that was hailed more for its effects than its story. (Also like *Titanic*, it was hugely expensive at \$2 million.) Nonetheless, the film did launch the career of Gary Cooper and featured nudity and two male friends kissing (somewhat) chastely, making it a landmark in numerous ways. The aerial photography remains amazing. The other Oscar for Best Picture was given to *Sunrise* for “unique and artistic production.” In other words, right from the start Hollywood was saying ok, yeah, here’s your art but here’s the film that’ll wow ‘em. To add insult to injury, the following year they said, “Never mind that Oscar for *Sunrise*. The Best Picture was *Wings*, period.” Ever since you’ll hear *Wings* mentioned as the first winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture and nary a mention of *Sunrise*. You won’t be surprised I imagine to hear that they got it wrong. *Sunrise* directed by F.W. Murnau is by far the better film and often named as one of the greatest silent films in history. It’s gorgeously shot, deeply moving and just as powerful today. Damn near as good and a masterpiece in its own right is King Vidor’s marvelously humane film *The Crowd*. They’re both proof that Hollywood was making great films right from the start. So no wonder they decided to create an award to pat themselves on the back. Every other artistic endeavor has followed suit with the likes of the Tony, the Emmy and the Grammy. And just like the rest of them, it’s a shame that so often the Academy Awards gets it wrong.

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