

Wanna Win Your Oscar Ballot? Watch The Shorts!

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THE OSCAR NOMINATED SHORT FILMS 2015

You want to win your Oscar pool, don't you? Well, guessing how long the show will run in case of a tie is fun. But it's just a shot in the dark. If you want to gain a real edge, check out the [Oscar Nominated Shorts of 2015](#). Those three categories -- live action, animated and documentary -- are the ones you usually skim over, taking a stab at any you recognize but not really knowing what's what. Luckily, your chance to see them is better than ever. This year, varied screenings of the shorts opened at more than 450 theaters around the country. Add in one-off screenings and you really have no choice, do you?

It's not all fun and games, however. The documentary shorts should be dubbed the documentary not-so-shorts since they run from a minimum of 20 minutes to 45 minutes. And while the Academy is drawing upon shorts made all over the world, the quality is actually quite spotty. I've no idea why. Are these really the best in these categories made in the past year? And yet year after year, you attend and are invariably left wishing more of the shorts were better.

But here's a secret: when only one or two shorts in each category are actually good, your chances of picking the winner leap exponentially. Instead of a 1 in 5 chance, you usually have a 50-50 chance. And sometimes a short is good enough (and its competition weak enough) so that you just KNOW it'll win. And before you know it, you've got a one or two point lead over the competition on your ballot. So head to your local movie theater or anywhere these shorts are screening and invest the time in checking them out. Come Oscar Sunday, you'll be a lot better informed than your friends and a few hours of your time might just result in you getting crowned the winner.

Here are my run-downs of the live action and animated shorts. I'll update if and when I get around to the rather longer documentary shorts.

LIVE ACTION SHORTS

AYA (French/Israel) ** 1/2 out of **** -- I watched the shorts in alphabetical order so this was the first I saw. In retrospect, it became my second favorite. A woman waiting for someone at an airport in Israel is asked to hold one of those signs for a chauffeur who must step away. Of course, before you know it she's serving as a driver for a Danish man in town to judge a piano competition. It's an ambiguous work with some strong moments -- especially the scene where the judge "plays" the piano on the woman's hand and thigh at her request and the two actors are very good. But this short bungles that essential moment where the woman decides to go along with the man's confusion as to her being his driver. Not explaining everything? Fine. Not convincing us of exactly what is going on? Not so good. Other plot elements simply make no sense at the end. Still, it's intelligently acted and though it waaaaaay overstates its welcome at 40 minutes, this was a noble effort.

BOOGALOO AND GRAHAM ** (UK) -- Too cute by half, this features two raucous lads living in Ireland during the Troubles. They fall for two baby chicks and are soon carting the animals everywhere as their personal pets. It's aggressively eccentric in nature and goes nowhere until the long-suffering mum says the chickens have to go because she's pregnant again. A last minute reprise involves an overly sentimental twist but this is mishandled in a too-quick voice-over in which we're told both about what happens in years to come and what it really means. It's too much effort just to provide an "aaah" moment that could have been done quite simply with

one wordless moment we see that the kids don't.

BUTTER LAMP/ LA LAMPE AU BEURRE DE YAK *** 1/2 out of **** (France/China) -- Leagues better than everything else in either category, this short is the exemplar of what these shorts should be. It's not a teaser for what someone hopes to make a feature film; this short works perfectly on its own terms. It's a great calling card for a director. And it's entertaining! The set-up is simplicity itself; making a virtue of a limited budget and what I assume is mostly a non-professional cast. A photographer in a village in Tibet is taking pictures of local people in front of varied backdrops. Groups of people pose in front of a canvas backdrop depicting the Great Wall of China or Tiananman Square and so on. The camera never moves: it shows the people getting into place while the photographer herds them around, offers props or changes the backdrop. They finally pose and the shutter clicks and a new group springs into action. We see a family, a young couple, an elderly lady (who can't take her eyes off the canvas backdrop), a group of kids and so on. The scenes are often comic but each has its own logic and rhythm. The kicker can be seen coming a mile away but happily there's a subtle nuance to it that shows this film knows what it's doing. Wei Hu wrote and directed this and I'm writing his name down: I can't wait to see his first feature and this short should make that leap inevitable.

PARVENAH ** (Switzerland) -- An Afghan teenager seems to be in Switzerland working illegally (though press notes say she's staying at a refugee center). In any case, she has some money desperately needed back home. Unfortunately, this underage girl in a strange country doesn't have the documentation needed to wire money. She warily asks another girl to help her and they strike up an unlikely friendship. Of course! A simple task becomes an over-night odyssey including cultural confusion, a disco, an overbearing date-rapish guy and too much alcohol. This short crams in a lot of hot-button issues including Islamic faith in a western country, illegals (or perhaps just refugees), male aggression and -- in an aside so perfunctory I found it offensive -- teenage self-mutilation known as cutting. The lead is appealing but it skims over the surface of the issues raised and never really comes to life.

THE PHONE CALL * (UK) -- You can sometimes spot a ringer in the shorts. That would be the one directed by a well-known actor (Hollywood loves its own) or one just stuffed with name talent, which understandably helps garner attention. This very familiar, even rote story of a woman working a crisis line has two top names attached: Sally Hawkins is the crisis center woman and the voice of Jim Broadbent is the man in crisis who is in the midst of attempting suicide. This is smoothly directed and of course Hawkins and Broadbent are pros of the highest order. But the script is so banal -- from its trite, cliched storyline to the "twist" ending and un-earned sentimentality of the coda -- that it's ultimately quite bad. I didn't even like the production design of the potential suicide's home, which is seen in pure, angelic white, a choice that seems to glorify and make lovely a desperate, sad act of suicide, an implication which I doubt is intended here. It would be a bloody shame if the generous participation of two talents like Hawkins and Broadbent swayed voters to this.

So those are the five live action shorts. And I'll eat my shirt if Butter Lamp loses. It has everything going for it: it's the shortest entry (believe me, when people sit through all five, these things matter), it's the only one with a sense of humor and indeed is very funny throughout, it has a nice kicker and a political and environmental undertone that gives it gravitas. It's also undeniably a work of genuine talent and that sense of discovery is exciting.

ANIMATED SHORT FILMS

THE BIGGER PICTURE ** (UK) -- Two brothers bicker over the care of their aging mother: one brother is successful at work and her favorite; the other actually does the hard work of caring for her and feels unappreciated. This short is here mostly for its technique, which is visually striking and fresh looking, thanks to its combination of varied approaches that feel both tactile and emotional. The story itself is rather muted and doesn't quite build or reveal anything beyond the set-up. Still, the visual style -- which would prove exhausting at feature length, I imagine -- keeps you engaged.

THE DAM KEEPER * (US) -- This muddy, indistinctive short is by far the longest at 18 minutes and feels it. A pig is somehow in charge of the dam that protects a village when his father dies. Nonetheless, the lonely pig (who always has some dirt on his face) is bullied and picked on by all the other animals at school. (Mostly we see one of various creatures; why a pig should be singled out isn't quite explained.) Things change when a new kid joins the school, a fox who is a talented drawer and soon befriends the pig. They have a brief misunderstanding but all is soon explained. End of story. The look is un-involving and the short takes a long time to tell a very basic story.

FEAST *** (US) -- This is by far the most commercial offering. It has been included in the theatrical release of Disney's Big Hero 6, where reviews often singled it out. Essentially, it's the life of a dog through food. We see him as a puppy getting indulged by his master, growing bigger and getting better and better scraps, watch the food get "healthy" when a girlfriend enters the picture and so on. It's all told from a below-the-knees perspective, with food falling from the table to dolloped out to our hero. Aesthetically, I don't really like the look of this short. But it has a strong storyline, clear point of view and tells its tale with entertaining elan. These shorts are often a training ground for directors at Disney so I'm sure we'll see Patrick Osborne take the helm on a feature length project soon.

ME AND MY MOULTON ** (Canada) ** -- This quirky tale comes from Canada but is Danish to its core. Torill Kove wrote and directed this seemingly autobiographical story about the middle child of three sisters and their embarrassingly different, liberal parents who always do stuff out of the ordinary. It has a charming visual style and distinctive tone. Nonetheless the very slight story is stretched out to 13 minutes in length, reducing any goodwill it initially garnered.

A SINGLE LIFE ** 1/2 (Netherlands) -- This is the only serious competition to Feast. A Single Life shows a woman playing a single on her turntable (someone explain to the kids what a "single" and a "45" and a turntable" are, please). When the needle skips, the woman jumps forward in age, when she places the needle back towards the start, she becomes younger than ever. We also seem to glimpse changes in her life, from single to married and so on. It's visually striking and has a smart kicker at the end. But the rules of this transformation are never established: are we seeing just the varied stages of her life or various possibilities of how her life might go? Without that grounding, it's hard to enjoy the quick changes since we don't quite know what they mean. We "get" the finale but it too feels a little confusing. This short needed to catch its breath and let us know what was exactly going on. Watching it three times, I'm still not quite sure what they intended. It's fun, but a little muddled.

So those are the five animated shorts. In years past, a short with some bold technique could steal the Oscar from a crowd-pleaser. But now with the honor system and shorts available on screeners, a lot more people can vote without having the bother of going to specific screeners in LA and NYC. So I'd go with the obvious crowd-pleaser and the most clearly successful short here, even if some might grumble Disney and Pixar have dominated too much in recent years.

So there you have it: Butter Lamp for Live Action Short and Feast for Animated Short. Your Oscar ballot just got two picks smarter. But if you really want to be smart, check them out yourself. I've been wrong before!

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the founder and CEO of the forthcoming website [BookFilter, a book lover's best friend](#). It's a website that lets you browse for books online the way you do in a physical bookstore, provides comprehensive info on new releases every week in every category and offers passionate personal recommendations every step of the way. It's like a fall book preview or holiday gift guide -- but every week in every category. He's also the cohost of [Showbiz Sandbox](#), a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of