

THE BLOG

Oscar Shorts 2016: Would It Kill You to Lighten Up?

□ 01/29/2016 03:55 am ET | Updated Jan 29, 2016

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SHUTTERSTOCK

If the Oscars want to promote diversity, they should start with their shorts. I don't mean diversity in gender or color or worldview. In fact, the shorts nominated for Live Action, Animation and Documentary are invariably shorts that come from around the world and feature a virtual rainbow of skin color, geographic perspective and (sometimes) women behind the camera as well as in front. So by that measure, the Academy should be trumpeting their shorts more than ever.

But in terms of stylistic diversity, the shorts are depressingly alike. Year after year, they are earnest, issue-oriented and just plain a downer. They are Oscar bait and Oscar keeps gobbling them up. The batch of live

action and animated shorts I watched this year are no exception. Usually one can expect the animated shorts to contain a few laughs, but not this time around, not really. I hope in years to come they can reward filmmakers not for the issues they tackle or the timeliness of their topics but for the artistry they display.

Still, everyone knows if you want an edge on your Oscar ballot, the shorts are a great place to dive in. Watch them and you often can make a pretty good guess as to which will win. At the very least you'll be informed. The shorts play in movie theaters around the country, they can be seen on TV on the cable channel [Shorts: The Short Movie Channel](#) and you can buy them online from many platforms.

ANIMATED SHORTS

Bear Story -- For me, this wordless piece is the most satisfying work visually. It combines various forms of animation and tells a rather sad story within a story. A bear wakes up and gets to work: work, for him, is standing on a street corner trying to entice people to part with a coin and watch his wind-mechanical gizmo tell a story. That story turns out to be the rather sad one of how the bear was abducted by evil men and forced to work in a circus until he finally broke away and returned home in hopes of finding his wife and child again. The animation is distinctive and top-notch but the final resolution is actually a little confusing. Still, this is the one I admire the most. But be warned: show it to little ones and you will never be able to take them to a traditional circus again.

Prologue -- Easily the most perplexing short, this begins in live action with a pair of hands shaving off colored pencils and then drawing the title card "PROLOGUE" onto a piece of paper. Then we see a sketch of a flower which becomes animated and a bee appears. It seems like a nature short

with rather lovely imagery...until a face looms up. Slowly we realize we're seeing an ancient battle between warriors. It's violent, brutal and kind of pointless, until the unintentionally hilarious climactic moment. Bewildering.

Sanjay's Super Team -- A Pixar short, which means expectations are immediately raised. It's a Bollywood flavored tale with a lot of heart, showing a little boy enamored with his favorite TV show while the kid's dad prepares for the daily rituals of his faith. The boy is dragooned into participating and is clearly bored until he imagines his superheroes combining with the deities on display in a thrilling showdown with a villain. The visuals are strong and the story sweet, as one expects. It ends modestly and the actual action is more confusing than anything but the perspective of another culture and the generally fine focus on conventional storytelling make this satisfying.

We Can't Live Without Cosmos -- This Russian short is also quite good and light-hearted...for a while. It's about cosmonauts competing for the chance to go into space. We spend our time with two men who make a great team and after numerous amusing trials they make it to the top! Their tale is well told with unexpected turns and some genuine drama. But yet again, the elliptical finale is not satisfying: I remained uncertain as to their actual relationship. Were they childhood best friends, brothers, or even perhaps lovers? One shouldn't be confused at such a fundamental level and it makes the denouement a little less gratifying.

World Of Tomorrow -- Easily the boldest short, this one takes welcome visual risks as it shows a little girl being greeted by a visitor from the future. It's a clone of herself, speaking in a slightly mechanical tone about the world the little girl can expect to see. The future proves a bit of a disappointment, however, with repeated jokes about the sorry lot of people without money, the flaws that pop up once you've cloned yourself five or ten times and so on. Though admirably out there, this maintains a rather flat tone and becomes too repetitive in style and substance.

Overall, it's always telling how much animation can tackle. It's a pity feature length films are so often limited to fairy tales, pre-sold products and indeed films suitable for kids. We've known for a long time animation can be a vehicle for just about anything but sadly the only time we see that proven in a movie theater is when we see shorts. I think Oscar voters are tired of supporting Pixar and think the melancholy of *Bear Story* will stick with them.

Oscar Winner: *Bear Story*.

LIVE ACTION SHORTS

Ave Maria -- This is the would-be comedic short, using the backdrop of tensions in Israel and the Gaza Strip to mine some laughs and of course suggest we could all get along if we'd just work together, giggle a bit and so on. A Jewish man, his wife and mother accidentally run into a statue of the Virgin Mary, decapitating it in the process. Their car is damaged and they need to use a phone. The problem? The statue is in front of a convent of nuns who've taken a vow of silence. The mother and daughter-in-law bicker, the husband won't pick up a phone after sundown and the nuns won't speak. Hilarity, however, does not ensue. It's a rather forced bit of whimsy with people acting annoyed at each other for no good reason. (Everyone's pretty grumpy.) It has a visual gag at the end, but this is hackneyed fare and easily the weakest of the five.

Day One -- Like the three below it, this is a well-made, well-acted short of high quality in technical terms. Here we watch the hellish first day of a female interpreter joining a unit in Afghanistan. Needless to say, everything that can happen does, from an explosion to a pregnant woman to moments funny and awkward and moving. It's inspired by the tour of duty of writer-director Henry Hughes. Unfortunately, in dramatic terms it feels manipulative in ways I can't describe without giving away the plot. We feel jerked around by the story, rather than caught up in twists and turns.

Everything Will Be Okay -- The most rock solid short, this shows a German father picking up his little girl for a day at the fair. Clearly, he's a divorced man reduced to the "every other weekend" relationship with his child. No dummy, his little girl wraps daddy around her finger, turning a trip to a toy store from the promised one toy to two, both of them imposingly big. We soon suspect he's planning to abduct and so does his child, whose face creases in worry as they don't seem to be going where they should. This is a superior work with excellent performances all around, tension and a conclusion that is fully earned and quite moving, without resorting to fireworks.

Shok -- Set during the Kosovo war, it's reportedly based on a true story. But being "true" does not guarantee being convincing. Two boys are best friends despite the tense militarized world they live in, complete with occupying troops and curfews. When one boy is doing some mysterious dealings with the troops terrorizing their world, the other feels betrayed. A precious bike becomes endangered, their friendship falters even more and then each of them sacrifices for the other. But the movie pushes this even further with a hardly surprising tragic finale and a present-day denouement. While the real-life incident is surely heartrending, making such tragic moments play well on film is no easy task and not one *Shok* accomplishes.

Stutterer -- This should have been the winner. It's a pretty charming tale of a young man who has a severe stutter. He's got an online romance with a girl who we assume doesn't know about his speech defect and the boy is frightened naturally about meeting up in the real world. Over and over in his head he practices dialogue that in real life struggles to come out. Eventually, he agrees to meet and they do only to discover.... Well, I'm hardly going to ruin the ending. You spend the short imagining a number of different scenarios, not to mention wondering why he just doesn't warn her in advance. I'm assuming he hasn't told her. But in fact the fatal weakness here is that the ending is rather bungled on several levels. Even discussing it over with friends afterwards, we couldn't quite agree on what happened or what was intended. It's a pity because this short had a winning tone and easy charm that was vastly appealing after the other shorts all so burdened by the issues of the day. I'll be sure to keep an eye out for writer-director Benjamin Cleary (not to mention the winning star, Matthew Needham) but can't in good conscience overlook the flaws of the last scene.

It is a pity the live action shorts have such an Afterschool Special vibe to their plot lines this year. I'm most intrigued to see what Cleary does next, but the satisfaction of *Everything Will Be Okay* on every level gets my vote.

Oscar Winner: *Everything Will Be Okay*.

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