

UNH Professor Says No Clear Favorite for This Year's Oscars

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DURHAM, N.H. -- Peter Mascuch, coordinator of the cinema studies program at the University of New Hampshire, says it's hard to make any predictions about this year's Academy Awards because there are no clear favorites.

But, there is an important rule: the film with the most nominations often gets best picture. If that holds, "Gladiator" will take the top honor in that category when winners are announced on Sunday, March 25. Another way to tell is to look at other, earlier awards. Winners there become odds on favorites for an Oscar. "Gladiator" won the Producer's Guild of America prize for best picture, and Ang Lee won top honors from the Director's Guild of America for his work on "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon." That makes it likely that Lee will win the Oscar, too, especially because votes for Stephen Soderbergh are split between two films ("Erin Brockovich" and "Traffic") since Soderbergh received a Best Director nomination for each (the first time that's happened in more than 60 years).

"'Gladiator' is contemporarily excessive and traditionally conventional in a lot of annoying ways," Mascuch says. "I'm afraid that it's this year's 'bad' movie that's most likely to win. It was a return to the epic that wasn't. In the 1950s and 60s, Roman and biblical epics were a leading genre, and quite frankly, they did it better then. 'Spartacus' and 'The Fall of the Roman Empire' are much more interesting than 'Gladiator,' which seems most heavily influenced by elements of the World Wrestling Federation and isn't particularly sophisticated or thoughtful."

“What I consider the films likely to win — ‘Gladiator’ and ‘Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon’ — are of such different types that it’s hard to say which one will win,” Mascuch says.

But he can tell you what films weren’t nominated and should have been. “You Can Count on Me,” “Almost Famous” and “Wonder Boys.” In turn, he was surprised to see “Chocolat” and “Erin Brockovich” on the list for best picture.

Two categories could produce notable firsts. If Tom Hanks wins best actor for “Castaway,” he will be the first three-time best actor winner. Right now he joins Jack Nicholson, Dustin Hoffman and Marlon Brando, Spencer Tracy, Gary Cooper and Fredric March with two each. And “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” would be the first fully subtitled film to win as best picture. Mascuch says it is more likely the film will win best foreign film, however.

“The Oscars are honors given by a company town rewarding its own, and it’s hard to imagine they’ll vote for a film made so far outside of Hollywood,” he says. “I’d be pleasantly surprised, but I doubt it.”

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