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On the Oscars: The Best Picture nominees

This column is the first in a series discussing the incredibly strong slate of 2018 Academy Award nominees.

We'll compare the contestants in different Oscar categories each week until the Oscars are awarded.

I encourage readers to send me their Oscar predictions at any time before the Sunday, March 4, broadcast of the Academy Awards ceremony at rford@scharfbanks.com.

You don't need a ballot. You can simply send me your predictions — shoot me a request if you would like one sent to you.

Winners will be acknowledged in the following week's column.

"Call Me by Your Name"

This romance between a teenaged boy and his professor father's research assistant during a summer in Italy is a story of first love and first heartbreak.

Luca Guadagnino, assisted by James Ivory's screenplay and Andre Aciman's novel, has delivered a universal story about longing, heartbreak, romance and its inevitable end.

Timothee Chalamet, who plays the son, is a preternaturally fine actor. Armie Hammer, the love interest, is so handsome, physically confident and kind, he is everyone's ideal.

"Call Me by Your Name" is a small movie with an indie feel. That the Best Picture winner in 2017, "Moonlight," was also a sensitive gay-themed film might influence the Academy to reward this film in other categories than Best Picture.

"Darkest Hour"

Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, who shall forever be known to history as an appeaser of Adolf Hitler, is forced to step down, and Winston Churchill is grudgingly elected by Parliament to be the prime minister of Great Britain in 1940.

"Darkest Hour" takes us into the war room to witness the early days of World War II in Great Britain.

It's the perfect upstairs-downstairs companion to "Dunkirk," also nominated for Best Picture, because the Dunkirk evacuation took place in the same early days of Churchill's leadership — "Darkest Hour" in the war room and "Dunkirk" on the ground, in the air and at sea.

Gary Oldman invisibly blends into the Churchill character. There is never a moment when we are conscious of the actor under the prime minister. Bruno Delbonnel's cinematography has a painterly quality, and many of the movie's scenes are experienced as if they were artworks in a gallery. (Director Joe Wright is also an artist and painter.)

There are stronger contestants in the Best Picture field, including "Dunkirk," and it was probably Oldman's performance that propelled this contender into the Best Picture category. If Oldman wins Best Actor, "Darkest Hour" will have received the full honors it deserves.

"Dunkirk"

The Battle of Dunkirk wasn't a battle. It was an evacuation of British soldiers from the beach when Germany was in the process of capturing France. Two weeks after first taking office as prime minister, Churchill (yes, that guy) commandeered private pleasure and fishing vessels to rescue the infantry when the Dunkirk harbor became too jammed with sunken ships to navigate.

Directed by Christopher Nolan, "Dunkirk," with its eerie you-are-there soundscape and open-yet-claustrophobic cinematography, follows three characters: a fighter pilot and infantryman and the captain of a private vessel.

The theme is a bit specialized for such the broad Best Picture category. It's expertly executed, but it isn't groundbreaking or fresh — it's nostalgia, a WWII movie.

Although "Dunkirk" is probably the year's most respected film, the statuette will likely go to a sprightlier contestant.



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"Get Out"

Made for \$4.5 million with box office receipts currently in excess of \$250 million, "Get Out" hit the zeitgeist with a bang.

Written and directed by comedian Jordan Peele (best known for his unflappable Barack Obama impersonation) and residing somewhere on the horror-parody spectrum, the movie presented a novel take on race relations, and the Transportation Security Administration.

In this movie, it is a family of white liberals the black hero has to fear.

The quality of moviemaking in "Get Out," its originality and pluck, gives it a shot at the golden trophy.

"Lady Bird"

With #MeToo and the Time's Up movement, the Weinstein scandals and the spotlight on unequal pay, one can't help but reflect on the way women directors, writers and actors are received and rewarded. The year of the woman is 2018.

"Lady Bird," the charming, autobiographical-ish film written and directed by Greta Gerwig, about a Sacramento high school senior's coming-of-age adventures, her romances and conflicts. The title character, played by Saoirse Ronan, has her ups and downs — and she has agency, the greatest complement

a writer or director can give a fictional character.

As millennial-friendly movies that repudiated the standard takes on coming of age and race relations, "Lady Bird" and "Get Out" are competing companion pieces in much the same way as "Darkest Hour" and "Dunkirk."

The delightfully fresh "Lady Bird" treats its title character, who would have been sidelined in the past, with humor, sympathy and respect.

"Phantom Thread"

According to the actor, Paul Thomas Anderson's "Phantom Thread" will be Daniel Day-Lewis' final movie. He'll be leaving on a decidedly odd note.

Reynolds Woodcock is a British couture dressmaker in postwar London. He's engaged in a battle of iron wills with his main muse, who ups the ante in their relationship to shockingly high stakes.

His creations are beautifully made, if not beautiful to behold.

Like Woodcock's dresses, this film's directing and acting are of the highest quality. But the sum of the parts do not add up to a transporting whole.

"The Post"

We love Tom Hanks, Meryl Streep and Steven Spielberg. We love pining for the days when cities like Chicago or the Washington could support four or five newspapers. We love to see underdogs prevail. We love to see presses roll. We love for the Supreme Court to rule in our favor. We love to see women get their due. We love to see Richard Nixon get what's coming to him. We love feeling wistfully patriotic.

We love "The Post" the way we love Jimmy Stewart. It's timely because it reminds us of a courageous past. This nomination is an acknowledgement of the star power of the cast and director, but it's not the soaring movie it would need to be to hold its own against the other contenders.

"The Shape of Water"

Director Guillermo del Toro says his love of monsters comes

from being afraid of them as a little boy. As a toddler he made a deal with the monsters hiding under his bed: If they did not hurt him, he'd become their friend.

In "The Shape of Water," del Toro's love for freakish misfits and fantastical beasts is on full display. It's a paean to "Creature From the Black Lagoon," except in del Toro's movie, the creature gets the girl.

Because "The Shape of Water" is so firmly rooted in the monster movie genre, this strangest of films is oddly familiar. It is as

beautiful and exotic as any underwater seascape.

It's a blood-soaked gentle jewel.

If the moment's cultural appetite is for magical realism and the healing powers of courage and kindness, "The Shape of Water" will make a strong appearance in a number of Oscar categories.

"Three Billboard Outside of Ebbing, Missouri"

"A cupcake rolled in glass," is how Wesley Morris of the New York Times described "Three Billboard Outside of Ebbing, Missouri."

Frances McDormand plays Mildred, a tough blue-collar mom whose daughter storms out of the house after an argument with her, then is raped and murdered, her body set afire. The murder is unsolved, and Mildred rents the titular three billboards to shock and embarrass the police into stepping up their efforts to solve the crime.

Because there are no straight paths for writer and director Martin McDonagh — and even the crooked ones lead to misery — the movie is engrossingly unpredictable.

"Three Billboards" has been criticized because its storyline veers into the redemption of a racist cop who has a history of torturing black prisoners. The cop doesn't earn it. Sam Rockwell is so great in the role that his character is given a pass.

The tone of "Three Billboards" is on the opposite end of the spectrum from "The Shape of Water."

In this year's Oscar race, anything could happen.

In next week's column: The acting categories.