Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

Predicting the winners behind the scenes

The Academy Awards will be broadcast on March 4. In my last column, I discussed the individual films competing for the Best Picture Academy Award.

Here, we'll take a look at the nominees in the acting, writing and cinematography categories.

Send your Oscar predictions to me at rford@scharfbanks.com.

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Lead actor

Timothee Chalamet is astonishing and true as a teen in love with his father's research assistant in "Call Me by Your Name."

Daniel Day-Lewis precisely constructs the couturier Reynolds Woodcock in the exquisitely rendered (and incomprehensible) "Phantom Thread."

Daniel Kaluuya's Chris, who battles body snatchers in "Get Out," is surely the most imperiled character on this slate.

Gary Oldman and Denzel Washington are both unrecognizable in their roles — Oldman as Winston Churchill and Washington as a 1970s-era Berkeley radical, lost in chaotic and morally ambiguous present.

Collectively, audiences understand the stakes Churchill faced and experience him as our charming English uncle who won the war. Oldman will win the Best Actor Award.

Should Win: Gary Oldman, "Darkest Hour"

Will Win: Gary Oldman, "Darkest Hour"

Shout Out: Denzel Washington for his "Rain Man"-worthy performance in "Roman J. Israel, Esq."

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Lead actress

Meryl Streep, as reliable as your mom, delivers the bulls-eye performance one would expect as Catherine Graham in "The Post."

Frances McDormand — someone else's scarier mom in "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri" — presents the sort of relentless woman who takes matters into her own hands that the times seem to demand.

Saoirse Ronan is charming as Lady Bird in the film of the same name, and Margot Robbie is acidic and vulnerable Tonya Harding in "I, Tonya."

Yet it is Sally Hawkins as the deaf laboratory janitress in "The Shape of Water" who does the impossible by expressively communicating a love story of oceanic dimension.

Should Win: Sally Hawkins, "The Shape of Water"

Will Win: Frances McDormand, "Three Billboards"

Shout Out: Margot Robbie, "I Tonya," for nailing an unpopular character with humor and affection.

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Supporting actor

Rendered radioactive by a sex scandal, Kevin Spacey was excised from "All the Money in the World" in his role as the oil tycoon John Paul Getty, whose grandson's ear was amateurishly amputated by the teen's Italian abductors. Christopher Plummer, age 88, was cast as Getty with only 10 days' notice, and he made off with the movie.

Sam Rockwell transformed a villainous racist cop into a sympathetic-if-flawed everyman, throwing off the moral balance of "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri."

And the frequently menacing Willem Dafoe played a soulful-eyed softie managing a kid-filled Florida flophouse motel.

Harrelson, also in "Three Billboards," and Jenkins in "The Shape of Water" well deserve their nominations, but in such a strong Best Supporting Actor field, it's not an insult to leave them behind.

Should Win: Christopher Plummer, "All the Money in the World"

Will Win: Sam Rockwell, "Three Billboards"

Shout Out: Willem Dafoe, "The Florida Project," for a moving portrayal of a humane character in the "real" America.

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Supporting actress

Lesley Manville as the couturier Reynolds Woodcock's imposing sister in "Phantom Thread" reminds movie buffs of the looming, imperious Mrs. Danvers in Hitchcock's "Rebecca."

Octavia Spencer (yet again) plays the sassy black friend in "The Shape of Water" and received her perennial nod for this cliched role.

Allison Janney, the raging Zamboni of a tiger mom in "I, Tonya" and Steppenwolf's Laurie Metcalf in "Lady Bird" — champions both — are not entirely cloaked by their mean-mom robes.

Mary J. Blige, as the mournful mother in "Mudbound," is the only stirring surprise.

Should Win: Mary J. Blige, "Mudbound"

Will Win: Laurie Metcalf, "Lady Bird"

Shout Out: Lesley Manville, "Phantom Thread" for making us dream of Manderley again.

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Director

The comedy-horror film "Get Out" addresses the serious topic of race in a way that is novel and fresh. Made with a $4.5 million budget and earning more than $250 million at the box office, its ROI alone should qualify writer-director Jordan Peele for bagfuls of golden statuettes.

Greta Gerwig's "Lady Bird' has a similar story. Her well-made feminist coming-of-age film arrived exactly when the zeitgeist demanded such a product.

The youthful Peele and Gerwig are likely to cancel each other out in this category.

Christopher Nolan's "Dunkirk" and Paul Thomas Anderson's "Phantom Thread," while extreme feats of directorial artistry, simply aren't engaging enough as movies to deliver their directors this prize.

Which leaves Guillermo del Toro, magical auteur of "The Shape of Water," to head the class.

Should Win: Jordan Peele, "Get Out"

Will Win: Guillermo del Toro, "The Shape of Water"

Shout Out: Greta Gerwig, "Lady Bird," for representing women positively in every aspect of the film, behind and in front of the camera.

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Adapted screenplay

The skill in adapting screenplays resides in translating a narrative product into a visual medium.

The "Molly's Game" (Aaron Sorkin) and "Mudbound" (Virgil Williams, Dee Rees) screenplays over-rely on the lyrical aural particulars of their original works.

With "Call Me by Your Name," the late James Ivory left exposition behind and delivered an emotionally powerful and visual interpretation of Andre Aciman's novel that gained potency from its verbal selectiveness.

Also nominated were "The Disaster Artist," Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber; and "Logan," Scott Frank, James Mangold and Michael Green.

Should Win: James Ivory, "Call Me by Your Name"

Will Win: James Ivory, "Call me by Your Name"

Shout Out: Virgil Williams

and Dee Rees, "Mudbound," for leaving the poetry in the script.

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Original screenplay

Despite the critical and financial success of "Get Out" and "Lady Bird," it's likely that the Best Picture and Best Director Awards will go to films with an established director.

Best Screenplay, a lesser spoil, will likely be tossed to either Jordan Peele or Greta Gerwig, who wrote the screenplays for as well as directed their respective movies.

Also nominated were "The Big Sick," Emily V. Gordon and Kumail Nanjiani; "The Shape of Water," Guillermo del Toro and Vanessa Taylor; and "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri," Martin McDonagh.

Should Win: Jordan Peele, "Get Out

Will Win: Greta Gerwig, "Lady Bird"

Shout Out: Martin McDonagh, "Three Billboards," for its meandering unpredictability.

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Cinematography

Every film nominated for Best Cinematography immerses viewers in spectacular historical or surrealist environments. The question is whether the candidate's beauty and texture is derived from the artistry of the movie's set, costume and art design or the way it is photographed. Is the picture taker or the thing pictured to be most credited?

In "Mudbound," Rachael Morrison gives a dignifying softness to scenes of hardship and despair.

Hoyte van Hoytema displays his mastery of vast sky, claustrophobic interiors and tense close-ups in "Dunkirk."

"Blade Runner 2049" (Roger Deakins) displays spectacular effects, and "The Shape of Water" (Dan Laustsen) exhibits jewel-box design. Yet it is the painterly, galleristic visual expression of "Darkest Hour" (Bruno Delbonnel) that deserves this award.

Should Win: Bruno Delbonnel, "Darkest Hour"

Will Win: Hoyte van Hoytema, "Dunkirk"

Shout Out: Rachael Morrison, "Mudbound" for her outstanding use of light.