

THE CampChuck REVIEWER

A nonprofit subsidiary of CampChuck

TWENTY SIXTH ANNUAL EDITION

<http://www.startlets.com>

February 20, 2005

Editor, critic, layout, distribution, and general factotum ...



Meryl Streep's Talent was Digitally Implanted

page 9

The 77th ANNUAL ACADEMY AWARDS Nominations

Oscar Night: Sunday, February 27

Best Picture

The Aviator
Finding Neverland
Million Dollar Baby
Ray
Sideways

Best Director

Martin Scorsese
Clint Eastwood
Taylor Hackford
Alexander Payne

Best Director Nomination Only

for *Vera Drake* Mike Leigh

Best Actor

Don Cheadle
Johnny Depp
Leonardo DiCaprio
Clint Eastwood
Jamie Foxx
Hotel Rwanda
Finding Neverland
The Aviator
Million Dollar Baby
Ray

Best Actress

Annette Bening
Catalina Sandino Moreno
Imelda Staunton
Hilary Swank
Kate Winslet
Being Julia
Maria Full of Grace
Vera Drake
Million Dollar Baby
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind

Best Supporting Actor

Alan Alda
Thomas Haden Church
Jamie Foxx
Morgan Freeman
Clive Owen
The Aviator
Sideways
Collateral
Million Dollar Baby
Closer

Best Supporting Actress

Cate Blanchett
Laura Linney
Virginia Madsen
Sophie Okonedo
Natalie Portman
The Aviator
Kinsey
Sideways
Hotel Rwanda
Closer

(Underlined nominees equal CampChuck predictions)

Manufactured Mailbag	2
Democratization and Freedom	3
Best Picture / Director	5-6
Best Actor / Actress	7-8

Sunshine and other DVDends

For the first time in 26 years of newsletters, I have not been to movie theaters before Oscar night to see all the films nominated in the major categories. I let the theater run of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* get past me, even though the film with Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet had some Oscar buzz and bizarre appeal from screenwriter Charlie Kaufman (*Being John Malkovich* and *Adaptation*).

I have seen *Eternal Sunshine* twice, however: one time on satellite pay per view and the other using Netflix. The unfortunate chink in my well intentioned tradition aside, Netflix is a bigger story. Not just Netflix. Typically slow to acquire toys, CampChuck succumbed to pressure on the home front and purchased a \$500 DVD player. That's an \$80 DVD player plus a TV set new enough to accommodate a DVD player plus a subscription to Netflix, which for \$18 per month affords me as many DVDs as I can manage to see. Through the internet and a cleverly responsive use of the post office, I saw 12 films in the first month. Sounds like a commercial for Netflix, but it's more about me choosing to see 12 films without commercials or other hassles.

Going to movie theaters is still the priority show. This year, it included driving to San Francisco, 3 hours away, to see *Vera Drake* in time to publish this newsletter. Having moved to Nevada City, CA, in 2003 – not exactly a major metropolitan movie market – CampChuck does what it must for Oscar crunch time.

Best Supporting Actor

Essentially, the same semi-dismissive paragraph applies for Natalie Portman and Clive Owen, both with Best Support nominations. *Closer* is a play-like film, adept and provocative as it examines the sexually charged rationalizations of four people's intertwined lives. None of the four are particularly likable, however attractive they may be. This film seems to leave you watching at the door, when it should have you rolling inside these people's psyches. Maybe that's intentional, but it seems that this distances them from deserving Academy Awards.

No one makes acting look easier than Morgan Freeman does. No one makes acting look truer. With Oscar nominations already for *Street Smart*, *Driving Miss Daisy*, and *The Shawshank Redemption*, this 68 year old veteran will win his first Oscar for *Million Dollar Baby*.

In the past, he's been beaten out by the part-of-a-lifetime Daniel Day-Lewis played in *My Left Foot* and by the irresistibly likable Tom Hanks in *Forrest Gump*. With more than 10 years of mounting respect since then, there are no performances to pass Freeman this time.

Million Dollar Baby is this year's best story. Freeman's voice and face steady the film's matter-of-fact gravity. His presence helps human foolishness and hopefulness know a wiser place. Freeman might well

say that he just said what the script said there was to say. This time, that's exactly what Oscar is meant to celebrate.



Manufactured Mailbag

Dear Editor,

Did you ever notice that when you come upon a dead body in movies, one or both of its legs are almost always bent in some unnatural direction?

Morton Bertram, Pittsburgh, PA

Dear Morton,

This is the official violent death posture prescribed by the CoCD (Code of Cinematic Death) especially when falling is involved.

Ed.

Dear Editor,

You are gloating, right, over getting your six for six predictions last year? Well, how come it's the first time in 25 years?

A friend, Los Angeles

Dear friend,

Actually, it happened once before in the 1994 newsletter (66th Oscars), but thanks for trying to keep track.

Ed.

Dear Editor,

I enjoy your newsletter. Keep in touch.

Louella Mernt, Concord, NH

Dear Louella,

Thanks. I enjoyed receiving a torn-in-half page from your CampChuck newsletter with this compliment scrawled on it.

Ed.

Dear Editor,

I especially appreciated you including a top ten list last year. Doing it again?

Lindy Warne, Roseburg, OR

Dear Lindy,

1. *Million Dollar Baby*
2. *Super Size Me*
3. *Hotel Rwanda*
4. *Kinsey*
5. *Ray*
6. *Finding Neverland*
7. *Fahrenheit 9/11*
8. *The Aviator*
9. *The Incredibles*
10. *Vera Drake*

Contenders for the top ten include *Garden State* and *Love Song for Bobby Long*. A few characterizing words hint about each of the top ten.

1. story-rich, character-rich; Eastwood's best ever
2. important, eye-opening, fun
3. important, eye-opening, scary
4. a textbook new look at sex
5. Soulerrific Foxx and Charles
6. gently grounded and fanciful
7. manipulative, granted; but smart, crafted, provoking
8. complex, careening biopic
9. animated vitality wins again
10. impressively dreary

The CampChuck Reviewer is now available at <http://www.startlets.com>.

Send email anytime to jaffee@startlets.com

Investing in Democratization and Freedom

Voting is an important component, but what is critical to any discussion of democracy is widely held access to information and power. Restrictions come in myriad forms, but seen through the filter of economics, you couldn't have a more useful word handy than "scarcity." Scarcity is more the master of ideology and policy than the other way around.

One reason that CampChuck supports the Rocky Mountain Institute so enthusiastically is that they pursue a non-partisan quest for sustainable economic practice. Here is a quote from what RMI calls its politics: "...entering, in a friendly and open spirit, into the midst of even bitter controversy. Handling conflict with integrity, respect, and sincerity, we've found, can often turn it into an opportunity for mutual learning, trust-building, and resolution."

Where are the encouraging, hopeful approaches? Check out www.rmi.org for a wealth of opportunities, a recent one being their book "Winning the Oil Endgame."

CampChuck continues as it has **since 1992, matching every subscription dollar for dollar**. All subscriptions -- more than \$20,000 plus CampChuck's 100% match of \$20,000 -- have funneled through CampChuck to RMI and Food Banks. Whether you subscribe at the official \$5 level or the average participation of \$30, think sustainable economic practice and the golden rule. And think access to CampChuck's newsletters.

Some dictionary definitions of "sustainable":

able to maintain or prolong

able to support the burden

able to strengthen spirit and courage

able to uphold the validity or justice of

Food Bank of Nevada County

CampChuck continues its encouragement of the fundamental human sharing embodied by the "Food Banking" concept. Since CampChuck now resides in Nevada County, CA, please make checks payable to "Food Bank of Nevada County." Of course, if your inclination is to continue with a check to "Second Harvest Food Bank," you are still riding the CampChuck spirit.

Please,
Make checks payable to
"Rocky Mountain Institute"
(or to
"Food Bank of Nevada County")

Rocky Mountain Institute

This nonprofit helps individuals and communities and businesses and governments to make money, yes, make money, by being smart about the environment. By research and science, by education and negotiation, by example, the Rocky Mountain Institute helps us ... and the U.S. ... and the world "us" to make long term economic sense by making long term environmental sense.

Please,
Send "subscription" donations to
CampChuck
15656 Mountain View Dr.
Nevada City, CA 95959

CampChuck Predictions (as also indicated by underlined nominees on page one)

Million Dollar Baby, the best story and the richest character chemistry this year, will beat *The Aviator* and Martin Scorsese as the sentimental favorite for Best Director. No one touches Hilary Swank's frontrunner role except Imelda Staunton in a film too small and dreary to grab attention. Several actors deserve parallel mention with Jamie Foxx, but he drives a steam-rollin' role. Morgan Freeman is overdue with no one standing as tall. Laura Linney, in the toughest category this year, does more to make her film work than the others.

Picture and Director:	<i>Million Dollar Baby</i>	Clint Eastwood	<i>Million Dollar Baby</i>	
Actress and Actor:	Hilary Swank	<i>Million Dollar Baby</i>	Jamie Foxx	<i>Ray</i>
Supporting Actress & Actor:	Laura Linney	<i>Kinsey</i>	Morgan Freeman	<i>Million Dollar Baby</i>

Best Supporting Actress

The tallest order in the Best Supporting categories is playing cinema icon, Katharine Hepburn, in *The Aviator*. Cate Blanchett makes the character her own while capturing many of Hepburn's unique affectations. Cate helps you spy on this famous person's life without losing the fact that she is a character in a story being told. For Oscar figuring, though, her greatest success is that she did not fall flat. Ultimately, this front runner is too much of a novelty part, though Hollywood voters must enjoy this sort of savory rendering.

The most heart wrenching role amongst the Best Supporting nominees is playing the wife of Paul Rusesabagina in *Hotel Rwanda*. Sophie Okonedo is the clearest window and the clearest reflection of the real-world hell depicted in this film. Her character is the emotion meter of the story as she and her children and her extended family and neighbors shiver under grave threats and expanding carnage. She is the anchor for presenting whole human being that could blur or numb if it were only regarded as victimized masses. For Oscar figuring, though, the spotlight shines on the harsh, masterful telling as a whole.

The most irrelevant Best Supporting actress nominee plays the primary love interest in *Sideways*. Virginia Madsen is fine enough. She is appealing. She is believable. None of this is worth much mention except for the unexplainable shouts of praise *Sideways* receives. A win for Madsen, and this is possible, is a win for blandness. It's OK if

Okonedo doesn't win for making people feel helpless sympathy, but it seems embarrassing if Madsen wins for putting a shallow smile on people's faces.

The darling of the bunch, Natalie Portman, does more than reprise *Star Wars* roles. Now in her twenties, she mixes her strong willed but cute-as-a-button presence into a sexed out role in *Closer*. This faceted part could definitely seduce Oscar, while she can still dip into her girlishness at the same time she is stretching into womanhood.

Clive Owen and Natalie Portman both have supporting actor nominations for *Closer*. Unlike Owen, the glare of Portman's darling status is both an advantage and a disadvantage for her. Will they award her early on to push her along, or will they hold off because they expect more from this precocious actress? Beyond that, see the supporting actor paragraph about Clive Owen to see both their limitations in this year's Oscar race.

Laura Linney. Here is an actress who has cultivated her allure through a special kind of plainness. She always lays something genuine and complex on this foundation, as she did in her other Oscar nominated role in *You Can Count on Me*. In *Kinsey*, Linney offers the most affecting support to the excellence of any of the films. As the wife and partner to sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, Linney makes the balance between the public man and the private man work. In this toughest category, I cast my preference as my prediction.



Best Supporting Actor

The buzz on Oscar night would be electric if Jamie Foxx won Best Supporting Actor for *Collateral*, since he seems like a lock for Best Actor in *Ray*. In *Collateral*, he plays a cab driver who was essentially kidnapped into helping a paid killer make his rounds, Foxx does much to ground this preposterous script in reality, but Best Actor Gold will have to do.

Alan Alda plays a corrupt Senator who tries to railroad the business dealings of Howard Hughes. It's a marginal role, and Alda's nomination is riding the train with 10 other nominations for *The Aviator*, this year's closest thing to an epic film. Mostly, any attention to Alda lies in the noticeable contrast this character lends to the tactical idealist Alan Alda played in his glory days on TV's *MASH*.

Thomas Haden Church also harkens back to a bygone TV show – not that Church or his show, *Wings*, or his slim credits since then offer any parallel to Alda or *MASH* or Alda's career path. Nonetheless, Church will receive a huge boost from his role in *Sideways*. Part of the supposed charm of this role is that he plays a post-semi-famous actor. People supposedly like him for still being able to use this and other puppy wolf antics to attract women during a one week getaway before his wedding.

Along with “who cares,” I repeat my favorite incredulity of the year. How can it be that acclaim for *Sideways* is such that it actually threatens to win Oscars?

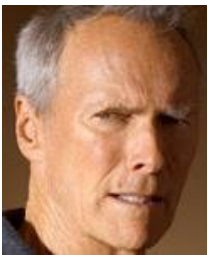
(continued on page 2)

Best Picture / Best Director

It is so tempting to say that Martin Scorsese will win the Best Director Oscar. However, it is not the quality of *The Aviator* or the meticulous genius of Martin Scorsese that reaches out to grab the honor. It is the fact that Scorsese is the most revered director working today who has NOT won an Academy Award. Now 62 years old with no Oscar for *Raging Bull* or *Goodfellas*, and with a range that includes *The Age of Innocence*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and *Gangs of New York*, Scorsese is the clear sentimental favorite.

Lacking royalty, American culture dotes on business and celebrity to make history. Scorsese's drama integrates innovative and risk taking entrepreneurial spirit with the sex and glamour of Hollywood. No shortage of power and privilege there. He artfully keeps the story of Howard Hughes high class, showing how Hughes designed and flew the fastest planes of the day and crashed them, too. He shows how Hughes designed and flew his life and crashed that, too.

But, hey, Clint Eastwood is 74 years old, if you're worried about people aging. Not only did he write, produce, star in, and write music for *Million Dollar*



Baby, director Clint Eastwood created something marvelous without relying on bigness as a crutch for excellence. Fair enough, Scorsese scores high for master working a complex and ambitious undertaking. He did well steering clear of exploitive or caricaturing extremes.

Eastwood won Best Picture and Best Director for *Unforgiven*. While Clint has made better films, he certainly took the Western genre to a place it had never been. With *Million Dollar Baby*, Eastwood takes the boxing genre to a compelling new place – and *Million Dollar Baby* is Eastwood's best work.

Scorsese benefited, in *Raging Bull*, by focusing on a tornado of a man to anchor an intimate film portrait of middle weight boxing champion, Jake LaMotta. Eastwood harnesses a quieter storm. The story is not, foremost, a boxing story, despite a couple of eye-averting moments unlike any you've ever seen in the movie ring.

Rather than a spotlight on a raging bull or a ranting Howard Hughes, Eastwood's film is a disarmingly humble look at a marriage. Without any sexuality needed to define it, this story communicates responsibility and loyalty and making do. It's about the adopted child of that marriage and the trials and tribulations of an unlikely little "family."

The "daughter" is Hilary Swank, a no account woman in her thirties who needs nurturing and attention to reach her potential. She latches onto Eastwood, a crusty old trainer and manager who runs a well intentioned but dingy boxing business. In effect, Eastwood is married to Morgan Freeman, who does most of the grunt work, with more than a watchful eye on Eastwood's small domain. They know each other. They sustain each other. It's the only relationship that ever worked in either man's life -- made meaningful when Hilary comes along.

Million Dollar Baby is storytelling at its best -- character depth and balance meant for Oscars. By comparison, the characters are accessories to the Howard Hughes spectacle in *The Aviator*. This year, sentiment on the screen will beat sentiment for the filmmaker. This year, relationship will win out over the larger-than-life size of a title character.



Taylor Hackford's *Ray* is a challenge well met, with more than a brilliant impersonation by Jamie Foxx. The film makes some intentional compromises that will keep it from winning Best Picture or Best Director. It keeps us rolling with the wall to wall music of Ray Charles, which shifts the biography toward a hit parade. It keeps us transfixed on the elements of this blind, resilient, and self indulgent genius, but it crunches and reconstitutes the biography into an affecting but too overtly arty packaging of the artist's life.

The beat of the movie is Ray, Ray, Ray, but the drama of the film stands on the shoulders of the women in his life. If it were possible to wrap into one slot Ray's mom (Sharon Warren), wife (Kerry Washington), his "wife on the road" (Regina King), and a taste of his other womanizing (Aunjanue Ellis), you'd have a Best Actress Oscar. You wouldn't have heard of Ray Charles without those women.

(continued on page 6)

Best Picture / Best Director

You also couldn't do justice to the story of Ray Charles without showing his drug addiction, which Hackford does to good effect. This is not a message picture, but it seems evident that most people don't have what Ray Charles had to function and survive beyond heroin, and it pretty near ruined him, too.

Talk to someone else if you need an explanation of why Alexander Payne's *Sideways* is so highly acclaimed. I don't get it. It's a funny buddy picture with touching elements, but essentially, it's about a thinly charming slimeball and a depressed nerdball and the contrivance of wine tasting to carry a fairly ordinary romantic comedy. Excellent acting by an intertwined foursome lifts the film, but not deservingly to Oscar heights. Most notable is Paul Giamotti, not nominated, although Virginia Madsen and Thomas Haden Church are.

Hotel Rwanda and *Kinsey* are far more challenging films to make and to appreciate. *Sideways* usurps a precious slot that those two films richly deserve. Better to showcase the fun of *The Incredibles* on a Best Picture list over a movie Merlot like *Sideways*.

Finding Neverland weaves a tale around J.M. Barrie. The magic of this story is more than insight into the playwright who created "Peter Pan." The magic is the heartbeat of child-like imagination that only an adult can bring to life. The reality of this story is a deep strain of sadness being channeled to a better place. The kids in *Finding Neverland* are endearing conduits for the gentle excellence of Johnny Depp.

Finding Neverland does not have enough faerie dust to win Best Picture, especially without a nomination for its director Marc Forster. Nonetheless, this refreshing film shows you what believing needs to be made of.

Director Mike Leigh sets a tone in *Vera Drake* that makes a positive attitude seem like a rainy day.

The list of reasons why Mike Leigh cannot win as Best Director is long. His film was not nominated for Best Picture. No one famous stars in it. Only 82

people have seen it. The film is uncompromisingly dreary. Its controversial topic, abortion, is not even the central point.

Set in 1950's England, *Vera Drake* paints an excellent cinematic museum piece about the routine and profound burdens of repressive cultural norms. People dare not talk about what they dare not talk about. "Can I fix you a cup of tea?" is the repeated punctuation for lives meant to be bland and cordial. A woman committed to helping women "in trouble" dares not examine or treat the trouble beyond removing the narrow fact of it. A woman, however saintly and dutiful and criminal her lot in life, must not speak of such things to anyone, not even to herself.

This film is a cup of tea that shatters. This difficult-to-recommend film is not what the Academy Awards tumult is about, but fortunately such films earn nominations here and there.

Johnny Depp: *The Acting Career to Watch*

From page 7: "There is no actor with anything like his peculiarly affecting resume of film roles." Here's an abridged list of Johnny Depp-ness.

<i>Ed Wood</i>	incidentally weird
<i>Edward Scissorhands</i>	adorably weirder
<i>Before Night Falls</i>	kick-and-a-half weirdest
<i>Benny and Joon</i>	unpresupposingly appealing
<i>What's Eating Gilbert Grape</i>	sadly appealing
<i>Don Juan DeMarco</i>	psychiatrically appealing
<i>Chocolat</i>	just plain appealing

He's even interesting in a nondescript action yarn like *Nick of Time*, a boring misfire like *Sleepy Hollow*, and an unwatchable clunker like *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

By the way, Leonardo DiCaprio's best performance to date is as Depp's brother in *Gilbert Grape*.

Best Actor

Best Actor pulses from Jamie Foxx through his uncanny impersonation of Ray Charles. Impersonation. That's the stumbling block. If the voters differentiate acting from brilliant mimicry, Foxx could lose.

No way. Jamie does more than conquer the difficulty of dramatizing a real-life icon. While perfectly recreating Ray Charles on the outside, Jamie Foxx perfectly represented the glorious and pained self-indulgences of a man who broke so many barriers. Even though Ray Charles died last year, Jamie gives us an enduring opportunity to have the soul of Ray Charles rub off on us.

Ray is a very serious film, but the sun shines, no matter what else is in the sky. For Jamie Foxx, that is Oscar golden.

The other dominant force in the Oscar race for Best Actor is Leonardo DiCaprio. Fine actors like Paul Newman and Robert Redford went decades being underappreciated because they were considered "pretty boys." *Titanic* star, DiCaprio, employs the same kind of intensity that Tom Cruise does to try to accelerate beyond this double-edged label.

Playing the billionaire industrialist, Howard Hughes, in *The Aviator*, DiCaprio never quite escapes boyish charm. As DiCaprio commands the complex dynamism and risky accomplishment and crazed undoings that define Howard Hughes, maybe boyishness is partly the point.

DiCaprio gives us the biggest excellence in the biggest film on this year's list of Best Pictures. That bigness helps *The Aviator's* Oscar chances more than it helps DiCaprio's.

Wearing a wholly different (and also boyish) face of acting excellence, Johnny Depp plays J.M. Barrie in *Finding Neverland*. Barrie wrote "Peter Pan." Gentle -- Depp colors his portrayal of gentle with sad and bemused. It is a refreshing performance in a refreshing film.

Maybe they don't give Best Actor Oscars for gentle, but Johnny Depp hitches himself to that breeze in

Finding Neverland, and with a deft sprinkling of wonder, that's all you need to fly. Believe it. Through Depp, the story of how the story of Peter Pan came to life comes to life.



Nominated last year for chewing up the screen in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Depp didn't deserve an Oscar then. *Finding Neverland* is not really the Oscar picture for him either, but there is no actor with anything like his peculiarly affecting resume of film roles. (See page 6 for some Johnny Depp pointers.)

Clint Eastwood defies the notion of a Best Actor. He is more of a presence on screen, and not because he's one of the most successful stars in film history. As he stands gruff and hard in *Million Dollar Baby*, Eastwood also stands humble and vulnerable. This is an intimate film where what Eastwood does folds into what Swank and Freeman do.

No film this year is poised to sweep more than *Million Dollar Baby*. Clint might be called the Best Actor of the year on a wave of Oscars for the best film of the year. If it happens, it would be to honor the stature that continues to grow, of a man who has never let tinsel hang on his version of Hollywood.

The nomination of Don Cheadle for Best Actor brings to light a harsh and truth-bearing film called *Hotel Rwanda*. See it. Cheadle plays the real-life Paul Rusesabagina, an excellent employee at a high-style hotel, an impressive husband and father. And his brother's keeper.

This man is intelligent and loving and poised enough to save 1200 people from inescapable madness. The madness killed a million people in a part of the world that somehow does not rate the terror busting or freedom building crusaded elsewhere.

Don Cheadle holds center stage throughout *Hotel Rwanda*, but the compelling immediacy in this important story transcends the performance. Maybe that is best acting. Still, it's OK to give gold statues elsewhere. Cheadle has no star power, although he is a recognizable face in many films, like *Oceans Twelve* and *Traffic*. Cheadle's triumph is undercut by the difficult-to-market courage of *Hotel Rwanda*.

Best Actress

If there were more notable leads for women this year, Catalina Sandino Moreno probably would not have been nominated. Nonetheless, the list can be a showcase for photogenic young actresses who effectively help to put humanity and truth on the screen. In *Maria Full of Grace*, Moreno plays a young Colombian woman drawn by otherwise unattainable opportunity into drug smuggling. She is a pawn, a mule it is called, who swallows dozens of pellets of drugs for delivery to dealers in the United States. The job does not go well, to say the least. On Moreno's face, we see an engaging range of emotion and intelligence, but mostly she is an appealing focus for the cameras while some very real exploitation is chronicled.

Annette Bening is so good in *The American President* (classic formula romantic comedy) and so good in *American Beauty* (a uniquely biting examination of middle class life). In *Being Julia*, she dons a British accent in a vanity piece about a theater star going through a mid-life crisis. *Being Julia* does not detract from Bening's accumulating body of work, although the nomination is more about her willingness to look middle-aged during those years when it can still be hidden. Despite this big, empty role, Bening also benefits from how few impressive leading roles women had in 2004.

One of those impressive roles was Kate Winslet in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. Well, not impressive exactly, because the ordinary, messed up woman she plays is mostly a vessel for Charlie Kaufman's wild screenwriting imagination. It must be wonderful for an actress to be a part of such an experiment, even if it's impossible for the story to work completely. As with Bening, Winslet is ripe for repeat nominations because it is apparent she is onto something as an actress. Unlike Winslet, this time around, Bening is the prominent thing in something stiff, while Winslet is a melded thing in weird, twisted putty. Neither deserves an Oscar yet.

The battle for Oscar boils down to two performances: Hilary Swank in *Million Dollar Baby* and the dark horse, Imelda Staunton, in *Vera Drake*.

Imelda Staunton basically wears two faces in the title role. One is *uncritically* comfortable with her

dutiful lot in life; the other is overcome with paralyzing shame when her secret is uncovered. Given the dreary atmosphere throughout the film, Staunton puts grand vitality into the role.

We watch a wife and mother and a caretaking daughter. She is a busy little bee, including her hired work as a maid and her kind gestures toward those less fortunate than she. She is ever helpful, ever cheery in her lower middle class world. Mixed in this, Vera Drake also performs abortions. Her life just is, until the day her life becomes worse than nothing. The challenge for Staunton was to house the under story without it ever seeming to be about a flawed human being. Indeed, she makes it feel like the movie is not about her at all, but about the repressive cultural reality that encases her. The performance is remarkable.

Is Staunton Oscarable? Hilary Swank, not exactly a household name yet, has already won an Academy Award. – a courageous performance in a small, depressing film. However, in *Boys Don't Cry*, Swank's character engages in high hopes and trips dramatically on flawed judgment, playing a young woman who deceives people by trying to have them think she is a man. The film has juice and splashes controversy all over the audience. Swank's audacity in that role compelled voters in a way that Staunton's masterful plainness will not.

Ah, but can Hilary Swank swing a second Oscar in her young and only mildly celebrated career? *Million Dollar Baby* has the juice. Hilary's character is unique, yet still in that Hollywood mold of dreams throbbing to come true.

Hilary plays a woman whose only passion and talent seems to be boxing, a curious revelation at age thirty. She's tough. She's stubborn. With the right mentors, she's committed. Most of all, she has respect – for herself and for the calling and for her allegiance to two people who believe in her.

It may not be fair to say there are no ripe contenders for taking this year's Best Actress from her, but riding the wave of the Best Picture of the year, Hilary Swank is the champion.

