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Early Oscar contenders scarce despite rule change

2:50am EDT

By Gregg Kilday

LOS ANGELES (Hollywood Reporter) - As the first half of 2010 draws to a close, serious Academy Awards contenders have yet to emerge.

Admittedly, the 83rd annual Academy Awards ceremony, set for February 27, is a long way off. And traditionally most awards hopefuls arrive during the second half of the year.

But when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences expanded its best picture race to ten nominees last year, it opened the door so that commercial hits could be rewarded alongside narrower, specialty fare.

At its March meeting, the Academy's board of governors approved following the ten-best formula again. "It worked out really well last year," Academy president Tom Sherak says. "And, hopefully, it will work out really well this year. Even if it hadn't been as successful as it was, we always felt you had to try it for a couple of years."

Yet despite the Academy's open-door policy, the film industry hasn't been pumping out likely nominees.

"I don't think we're going to look back on the first six months and find anything," says one campaign consultant, who's been stymied in drawing up early tout sheets.

"Robin Hood," given the full red-carpet treatment at the Cannes Film Festival, may have reteamed Russell Crowe and director Ridley Scott, but it paled next to their Oscar-winning "Gladiator." With more than \$300 million in domestic grosses, "Iron Man 2" has moved ahead of the original's box office at the same point in its release, but the sequel failed to generate the critical enthusiasm that greeted its 2008 predecessor.

Far from championing awards hopefuls, critics have spent the first half of Hollywood's summer movie season competing to see who could deliver the most devastating put-downs of movies like "Sex and the City 2" and "The A-Team."

All that should change this weekend, as Disney releases Pixar's "Toy Story 3," the first blue-chip contender in the 2010 awards race. As of Thursday, it boasted a 100% rating on Rotten Tomatoes -- just like the first two installments in the franchise.

And just as Pixar's "Up" was the earliest 2009 release -- it opened on May 29 last year -- to go on to score a best picture nomination, the third "Toy Story" could become the first 2010 entry to make it into the circle of ten.

Last year, at this point, Oscar pundits were debating whether a cartoon could break out of the animated feature ghetto to score a best picture nomination. "Up," which ultimately lifted off with five noms, made that conversation moot.

This year, the debate could well center on whether more than one animated movie can hold down a spot in the best picture circle. DreamWorks Animation's "How to Train Your Dragon," racked up some of the best reviews of the year to date. And Sylvain Chomet's "The Illusionist," which Sony Pictures Classics will release toward year's end, is not only directed by the creator of 2003's "The Triplets of Belleville," which collected two Oscar nominations, it is based on an unproduced screenplay by late cinematic titan Jacques Tati.

Looking toward July, the next great Oscar hope likely to stake its claim is Christopher Nolan's "Inception," starring Leonardo DiCaprio, which Warners opens July 16. Visually-arresting trailers have only hinted at what Nolan's original screenplay is all about -- something about invading dreams -- but the director has built up such a loyal fan-base and devoted critical following that there will be cries of distress if the movie fails to deliver. (When the Academy failed to nominate his last film, "The Dark Knight," for best picture, it set off a fury of criticism that, in part, led to the new ten-picture field.)

On the other hand, the Academy's new model doesn't guarantee that every box office hit is guaranteed automatic tickets to the Kodak Theater.

Currently, Tim Burton's "Alice in Wonderland," which Disney released in March, is the year's top grosser: It has taken in more than \$1 billion worldwide. But the idiosyncratic Burton has yet to be embraced by the Academy -- he has received only one

nomination, as producer of the animated "Corpse Bride" -- and "Alice" was greeted with decidedly mixed reviews. All of which could limit its Oscar profile to tech categories.

Sight unseen last year, Martin Scorsese's "Shutter Island" was on many handicappers' lists as a 2009 competitor. But then Paramount delayed its release to February for budgetary reasons. In its new release slot, the psycho-thriller collected \$295 million worldwide, a personal best for Scorsese. But lukewarm reviews have diminished its awards appeal.

Prospects are similarly sparse on the specialty front.

Debra Granik's hard-scrabble Ozarks-set drama "Winter's Bone" was the big narrative film winner at this year's Sundance, where it took the dramatic grand jury prize and a screenplay award. Its young star Jennifer Lawrence could follow in the footsteps of "Precious" Gabourey Sidibe or "An Education's" Carey Mulligan, both of whom began their awards season trek at the previous year's Sundance.

Roadside Attractions released the film last weekend to enthusiastic reviews and an impressive \$84,887 in just four theaters. Still, it's a long haul to end-of-year nominations.

"Oscar positioning hasn't been a major part of our release strategy, but we'd certainly be excited if that's its destiny," says Roadside co-head Howard Cohen, who opted for a summer release to offer up the critical hit in counterpoint to bigger, escapist entertainments.

Lisa Cholodenko's "The Kids Are All Right," another Sundance debutante, is also looking to succeed as counterprogramming when Focus releases it July 9. Starring Annette Bening and Julianne Moore as lesbian parents whose comfortable life is upended by the sudden appearance of sperm donor Mark Ruffalo, it's the sort of upscale crowd-pleaser that could find favor.

Meanwhile, Cannes didn't push many other films to the fore. The Palme d'Or winner, Apichatpong Weerasethakul's demanding "Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall his Past Lives," doesn't yet have an American distributor.

Although applauded by critics, Mike Leigh's "Another Year" went home empty-handed. But the slice-of-life movie about a circle of middle-aged friends should still find itself on the radar when Sony Classics releases it later this year -- especially for Lesley Manville's performance as a quietly desperate single woman, which includes a drunk scene that's got to be considered awards bait.

There weren't any Cannes honors, either, for a couple of Hollywood entries: Oliver Stone's "Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps," from Fox, and Doug Liman's "Fair Game," from Summit. But both movies combine stars ("Street's" Michael Douglas and Shia LaBeouf, "Game's" Naomi Watts and Sean Penn) with hot-button topics (high finance, political payback) that might allow them to ride the zeitgeist into the Academy conversation.

Still, that leaves a lot of very open slots awaiting the onslaught of wannabes that will attempt to survive the Venice-Telluride-Toronto obstacle course in September. As far as Oscar 2010 is concerned, the race has only just begun.

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