

Shot IN THE *Dark*

Critics agree that choosing a sure thing this year is virtually impossible.

By **Todd Longwell**

This is the year Hollywood did not hold up its end of the bargain," says David Sterritt, this year's chairman of the New York Film Critics Circle and film critic for the Christian Science Monitor.

It's truly a confusing year for Oscar. Not only are there no obvious big-studio favorites, but the independent film world is also devoid of strong contenders, save for perhaps "You Can Count on Me." Traditionally, when faced with a lack of obvious options, the academy likes to give statuettes to sweeping epics, message films, oh-so-reserved British costume dramas and big-name actors playing crazy, sick or disabled. But this year, it's even hard to apply the fail-safe formulas.

A case in point is "Quills." On the surface, it seems like a surefire Oscar contender. Named Best Picture by the National Board of Review, it's packed with period costumes and British thespians, and it features an Oscar-winning actor (Geoffrey Rush) playing a certified loon. But the loon in question is the seminal sadist Marquis de Sade, and certain scenes could turn off members of the academy.

"There might be some older people that might have a problem," says Bill Zwecker, entertainment reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times and Chicago Fox-TV affiliate WFLD. "I'd hope that they wouldn't, because I think that what he did is just incredible. He'd certainly be my top pick for Best Actor."

But Oscar voters aren't the only ones with potential qualms about "Quills." "This film sharply divided the critics," says Michael Rechtshaffen, a member of the L.A. Film Critics. "People either loved it or hated it, and I came closer to the second group than the first."

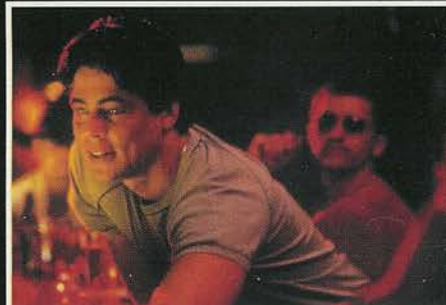
SIXTH IN A SERIES

It's hard to ignore Tom Hanks' work in "Cast Away," which has already earned him Best Actor

honors from the New York Film Critics Circle. First of all, he carries the movie virtually single-handedly. Oscar voters — the majority of whom know him personally and/or think he's a swell guy — are undoubtedly aware of the torture he went through behind the scenes (weight gain, weight loss, growing the unsightly beard).

"I'm sure Hanks will get nominated for that," says Zwecker, "but I don't think he'll win. First of all, he's already got two in the bag. While it's an amazing performance, I don't know if it's enough to push him over."

There have been others mentioned as potential nominees for Best Actor — Ed Harris ("Pollock"), Mark Ruffalo ("You Can Count on Me"), Russell Crowe ("Gladiator") —



CRITICAL VALUE: With Oscar quickly on its way, films that have been honored thus far from critics associations include (from top) "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," "Quills," "Traffic" and "Almost Famous."



On the Road to Oscar

A look at honorees thus far

but the only other clear favorite is Michael Douglas for his performance as a dissolute college professor in "Wonder Boys."

Wade Major of Box Office Magazine feels that certain cultural forces might help tip Oscar his way. "There's this contingent that clearly identifies with the plight of this pot-smoking brilliant guy who's never made anything of his life. A lot of the self-pitying baby boomer critics are able to relate to that. Because the baby boomers really are a strong demographic now in the academy, I think he has a shot."

The race for Best Actress is much more cut and dried. It is between Julia Roberts ("Erin Brockovich") and ... Julia Roberts.

"It's a thin field, she's extremely well-liked in Hollywood and the performance is sort of the complete Julia Roberts," says Peter Rainer, film critic for New York Magazine and chairman of the National Society of Film Critics.

Other names have been mentioned for Best Actress — Gillian Anderson ("The House of Mirth"), Michelle Yeoh ("Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon") — but there's only one woman who has any realistic chance of beating out Roberts: Laura Linney ("You Can Count on Me").

Says Joe Morgenstern, film critic for the Wall Street Journal and co-founder (with Richard Schickel) of the National Society of Film Critics: "When it comes to Julia Roberts and Laura Linney, one is a great, showy, dazzling role that's done to perfection, and the other is a more inward, nuanced, painfully beautiful role that's done to perfection."

Best Supporting Actor and Actress are perennial dark-horse categories, often honoring the young newcomers or veteran actors. But if the critics' opinions are any indication, these could generate surprisingly little suspense this year.

Right now, Best Supporting Actor seems to be a race between Joaquin Phoenix, who turned in strong performances in three films ("Gladiator," "The Yards" and "Quills") and Benicio Del Toro ("Traffic"). Critics have also pegged Philip Seymour Hoffman ("Almost Famous"), Willem Dafoe ("Shadow of the Vampire"), Rob Brown ("Finding Forrester") and Tobey Maguire ("Wonder Boys") as potential nominees.

The field is even narrower for Best Supporting Actress. There are several names being bandied about — Marcia Gay Harden ("Pollock"), Ellen Burstyn ("Requiem for a

Dream"), Frances McDormand ("Almost Famous," "Wonder Boys") and Zhang Ziyi ("Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon") — but one seems to be the runaway favorite: Kate Hudson ("Almost Famous").

In truth, outside of the universally lambasted "Battlefield Earth," it's hard to get critics to agree on anything. Zwecker "loved" the Sean Connery vehicle "Finding Forrester," while Morgenstern felt the film was a "complete fraud."

One must remember that critics are not always the best Oscar prognosticators. Take 1997, for example. "L.A. Confidential" made a clean sweep of the major critics awards, while eventual winner "Titanic" was virtually shut out. That same year, the Best Actress critics honors were divided between Helena Bonham Carter ("The Wings of the Dove") and Julie Christie ("Afterglow"). While both were eventual Oscar nominees, the statuette went to Helen Hunt for "As Good as It Gets."

"The Oscars are primarily about celebrating Hollywood's achievement in the last year," says Sterritt. "Awards groups are more about celebrating good cinema. I'm not saying that the Oscars are bad, and we're good. I think that the Oscars tilt a bit in the direction of success, and the critics groups tilt a bit in the direction of thoughtfulness."

Of all the major categories, Best Picture is the hardest to handicap. Contenders include "Almost Famous," "Billy Elliot," "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," "Erin Brockovich," "Gladiator," "Thirteen Days," "Traffic" and "You Can Count on Me."

"I think that 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' is extremely well liked by a majority of critics," says Rainer, "and it's probably liked overall by more critics than any other movie."

"It's terrific, but it's a subtitled film," demurs Anderson. "My feeling is that Oscar is going to go as it usually does: for the movie that hired the most people, the most image-enhancing film they can get their mitts on."

Major isn't optimistic about the chances for "Crouching Tiger" either: "There's definitely this feeling that it's really just a fancy karate movie."

Then there are those who just don't think it lives up to its buzz. "'Crouching Tiger' is a good movie — not a great movie," says Sterritt. "It's exactly the sort of thing that may be featured more prominently in the Oscar race than you would normally expect. We're going to see things like 'Gladiator,'

BOSTON SOCIETY OF FILM CRITICS

BEST PICTURE: "Almost Famous"
BEST DIRECTOR: Cameron Crowe ("Almost Famous")
BEST ACTRESS: Ellen Burstyn ("Requiem for a Dream")
BEST ACTOR: Colin Farrell ("Tigerland")
BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS: Frances McDormand ("Almost Famous," "Wonder Boys")
BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR: Fred Willard ("Best in Show")

LOS ANGELES FILM CRITICS ASSN.

BEST PICTURE: "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"
BEST DIRECTOR: Steven Soderbergh ("Erin Brockovich," "Traffic")
BEST ACTRESS: Julia Roberts ("Erin Brockovich")
BEST ACTOR: Michael Douglas ("Wonder Boys")
BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS: Frances McDormand ("Almost Famous," "Wonder Boys")
BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR: Willem Dafoe ("Shadow of the Vampire")

NATIONAL BOARD OF REVIEW OF MOTION PICTURES

BEST PICTURE: "Quills"
BEST DIRECTOR: Steven Soderbergh ("Erin Brockovich," "Traffic")
BEST ACTRESS: Julia Roberts ("Erin Brockovich")
BEST ACTOR: Javier Bardem ("Before Night Falls")
BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS: Lupe Ontiveros ("Chuck & Buck")
BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR: Joaquin Phoenix ("Gladiator," "Quills," "The Yards")

NEW YORK FILM CRITICS CIRCLE

BEST PICTURE: "Traffic"
BEST DIRECTOR: Steven Soderbergh ("Erin Brockovich," "Traffic")
BEST ACTRESS: Laura Linney ("You Can Count on Me")
BEST ACTOR: Tom Hanks ("Cast Away")
BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS: Marcia Gay Harden ("Pollock")
BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR: Benicio Del Toro ("Traffic")

TORONTO FILM CRITICS ASSN.

BEST PICTURE: "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"
BEST DIRECTOR: Steven Soderbergh ("Traffic")
BEST ACTRESS: Laura Linney ("You Can Count on Me")
BEST ACTOR: Benicio Del Toro ("Traffic")
BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS: Zhang Ziyi ("Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon")
BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR: A tie between Tobey Maguire ("Wonder Boys") and Jeffrey Wright ("Shaft") □

which shouldn't really be in any Oscar race. The other side of the coin is that there may be a bit more art film product than we usually expect, and by that I mean things like 'You Can Count on Me.'"

In the end, the only thing certain about this year's Oscar race is its very uncertainty.

"I think people are going to be very surprised when the nominations come out," says Major. "They're going to scratch their heads and say, 'What's that doing in there?'" □