

A Year of Stunning Possibilities: Laura's Choice for 2011's Best Director Oscar

By Laura Vasilion
SPECIAL FOR FILMS FOR TWO®

The 2011 Academy Award Nominees for Best Director explored a wide range of subjects that included an unbalanced ballerina, a frustrated fighter, a stammering sovereign, a cold-hearted computer whiz, and a tenacious teen bent on avenging her father's murder. Some of the directors excelled at restraint, some at illusion, and others at spellbinding suspense. But on February 27, only one (or possibly two) can walk away with the Oscar.



Clockwise from top left:
Darren Aronofsky, Ethan Coen, Joel Coen, David O. Russell, Tom Hopper & David Fincher.

And the nominees are:

Darren Aronofsky for *Black Swan*

Directed by Darren Aronofsky, *Black Swan* is the story of "Nina Sayers," a driven ballerina up for the starring role in a New York City production of *Swan Lake*. Played by Natalie Portman, Nina executes the part of "The White Swan" with graceful perfection in auditions. But when asked to perform the dual role of "The Black Swan," she struggles to bring the same sensual abandon to the part as her malicious rival "Lily" (Mila Kunis).

Desperate to please the ballet company's artistic director/sexual predator "Thomas Leroy" (Vincent Cassel), Nina begins to arouse her latent sexuality. This isn't easy to do under the suffocating control of her stage mother "Erica Sayers," played by Barbara Hershey. Afraid of ending up like her idol/predecessor "Beth MacIntyre" (Winona Ryder), Nina escalates the demands on her body and mind as her worlds collide.

There are visceral depictions of self-mutilation in this film that I found difficult to watch. They are necessary, however, to fully appreciate Nina's descent into the dark recesses of her mind.

Stunning black and white imagery throughout the film reinforces Nina's inner conflict. Subtle line graphics on her bedspread and on a tile rimming her bathtub underscore the film's bird motif. A great foreshadowing element was the Rorschach inkblot print hanging on a wall in Thomas's apartment.

Most compelling of all was Portman's portrayal of the tortured ballerina. Using the instrument of her refined, lithe body in combination with her astonishing acting, Portman was mesmerizing when she danced, and haunting when she slipped into madness.

David O. Russell for *The Fighter*

Directed by David O. Russell, *The Fighter* is based on the true story of struggling fighter "Micky Ward" (Mark Wahlberg). Micky's challenges in the ring are compounded by the smothering involvement of his large, dysfunctional Lowell, MA family.

Looming large in Micky's life is his chain-smoking mother/manager "Alice" (Melissa Leo) and his half-brother "Dicky Eklund" (Christian Bale). Dicky, a former fighter, is a local hero for once knocking down Sugar Ray Leonard. Addicted to crack and a destructive lifestyle, Dicky will never repeat that greatness but, at Alice's urging, he attempts to help Micky reach his goals.

Everything changes when Micky falls in love with "Charlene" (Amy Adams), a tough-talking barmaid. Charlene takes on Micky's entire family to help him achieve success. Faced with choosing Charlene over his domineering family, Micky prepares for one of the hardest fights he's ever fought.

Unfortunately, Micky is the weak link in this film. Maybe Wahlberg intentionally played Micky flat because he is so repressed by his family. The result was that I that I didn't root for Micky the way I did Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky* or Mickey Rourke in *The Wrestler*.

Bale, on the other hand, was brilliant as Dicky. Gaunt, hyper, flashing a mouthful of decayed teeth, he was so transformed I honestly didn't know it was him until halfway through the movie. Leo was also superb as Micky's smart-mouthed, over-involved mother Alice. The other bright spot was Adams, who played Micky's spunky girlfriend with an intensity that made me alternately laugh and cry.

Tom Hopper for *The King's Speech*

Directed by Tom Hopper, *The King's Speech* shadows the personal torment of His Highness Prince Albert of York (aka "Bertie"), second son of George V (who was King of the United Kingdom and the Dominions of the British Commonwealth from 1910 to 1936). Colin Firth is masterful as the reluctant, stammering Bertie, thrust into the spotlight when his elder brother "Edward" (Guy Pearce) renounces the throne to marry the thrice-divorced American socialite "Wallis Simpson" (Eve Best).

The film opens at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1925. With the advent of radio and newsreels, Bertie knows he will have to make public the impediment that plagues him: his stuttering. While his sympathetic wife "Elizabeth" (Helena Bonham

Carter) and a packed arena look on, Bertie walks up to the oversized microphone and attempts to utter his first public address over the radio. Freezing up in painful silence for several moments, he eventually delivers each quivering word.

Following that embarrassment, speech therapists are summoned to the royal residence to help cure Bertie. Elizabeth, the future Queen Mother of England, watches her husband endure one demoralizing therapy after another without success. Frustrated, she seeks out an Australian speech therapist named “Lionel Logue” (Geoffrey Rush). Impressed by his unorthodox approach, she makes an appointment for Bertie.

Before beginning therapy, Lionel insists on dispensing with formalities by calling his new patient “Bertie.” Bristling, the prince replies: “It is not done.” But Lionel stands his ground until Bertie, knowing there are no other options, slowly relents. Gradually, a most unlikely friendship deepens as Lionel prepares King George VI for the most important speech of his life.

The only drawback to this film was that it had to end. Perhaps there could have been a bit more done with the Edward/Wallis affair in terms of how the world reacted to the scandal. Then again, this wasn’t their story.

Firth and Russell were remarkable in their respective roles. Their unusual bond felt authentic, never contrived. The devotion and determination of Bertie’s wife also came through in Bonham Carter’s lovely portrayal. Filmed in small interior spaces, there was a pervading sense of restraint and constriction in *The King’s Speech* that made me understand the hesitant king’s struggle and root for him to overcome it. The tense final moments were handled with such grace and dignified emotion the theater audience erupted in applause and I found myself crying.

David Fincher for *The Social Network*

Directed by David Fincher, *The Social Network* is the astounding story of Facebook creator “Mark Zuckerberg” (played with eerie believability by Jesse Eisenberg). Inept in social situations, Mark, a Harvard student, distills the beauty of human relations into a virtual version of the six degrees of separation theory.

And he gets it right. So right, 500 million people sign up for his program, making the computer whiz kid a billionaire in his early 20s.

The movie opens on Mark’s date with “Erica” (Rooney Mara), a beautiful co-ed who grows increasingly irritated with her date’s arrogant interrogation of her. Fed up, she calls him an asshole and storms out of his life. In retaliation, Mark goes back to his dorm room and hacks into the university’s data base of campus women. Seizing their headshots, he creates a computer page rating the women on their beauty and “other” assets. The site becomes so popular with the student body it crashes the campus servers.

Mark grows this site into Facebook.

On his path to success, Mark dismisses anyone who isn’t as obsessed with his creation as he is. One of them, “Eduardo Saverin,” is the only friend Mark has ever had. When

Eduardo (Andrew Garfield) is cut out of the business by Mark's new partner, Napster founder "Sean Parker" (Justin Timberlake), Mark seems incapable of understanding how much Eduardo is hurt.

The character of Erica is fictional. Realizing that, I was annoyed by her inclusion. Once I gave it some thought, I realized she was a necessary metaphor for the one thing Mark does not excel at: human interactions.

I really like the rapid fire, quick-witted dialogue and the way Eisenberg delivers it. One of the best demonstrations of his verbal acumen is during a legal battle with the twins "Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss" (both played by Armie Hammer), who claimed Mark stole their idea (Harvard Connection) idea and turned it into Facebook. With piercing arrogance, Mark delivers one blow after another until you see the physical pain on each twin's face. This intense, fast-paced film about the egotistical brilliance of a social misfit had me totally engrossed from start to finish.

Ethan & Joel Coen for *True Grit*

Co-directed by the Coen Brothers (Ethan & Joel), *True Grit*, is the story of "Mattie Ross" (Hailee Steinfeld), a tough teen bent on avenging her father's murder. Cloaked in the righteous resolve of a girl raised on church hymns and an Old West way of settling injustices, Mattie aims to hire U.S. Marshall "Rooster Cogburn" (Jeff Bridges) to hunt down the villainous "Tom Chaney" (Josh Brolin) in the lawless Native American territory of Oklahoma.

Tagging along with Mattie and Rooster is a Texas Ranger named "LaBoeuf" (Matt Damon). Possessing very different temperaments, Rooster and LaBoeuf tangle and eventually LaBoeuf leaves the grizzled Marshall and determined teen to hunt the killer alone. The dangers Mattie and Rooster encounter on their quest range from gunslingers and rattlesnakes to their differing perspectives on life.

I admit I'm not a fan of Westerns and I wasn't enthused about seeing this remake of the John Wayne/Kim Darby classic. I stand corrected. From the moment the film started, I was hooked.

Bridge's performance as Rooster is dirty, gritty, and repulsive but above all authentic. Steinfeld is captivating as the levelheaded, determined Mattie. The opening scene of her bargaining with a horse thief is masterful. Matt Damon is almost a "Dudley DoRight" version of a Texas Ranger. Several times he made me laugh, especially when he delivered my favorite line from the film: "Stalwart on!" Above all, the artful filming of the sweeping, rugged, unforgiving Old West took my breath away and elevated this genre for me.

My Choice for Best Director?

For days I've been torn between two films and their directors for this award. The first is *The King's Speech*, directed by Tom Hopper. Filmed in the stuffy inner sanctums of royal rooms and Lionel's secluded, dingy, paint-splattered basement office, this film conveyed visually what the king must have been feeling.

Seeing Firth sitting in Rush's office—the staid, proper prince seated on a battered settee propped against a chaotic wall of chipping plaster and paint—I thought the way the director collided both worlds so simply and completely was brilliant. I also loved the long, narrow shots of corridors funneling the new king to the looming, oversized microphone. Like a stiff white collar, I could see and feel the king's confining world tightening around his throat.

Then I think about *True Grit*, directed by the unpredictable Coen brothers. Moved by the masterful dialogue and skillful filming, I was surprised by how much I loved the retelling of this classic Western. Yet this version was arresting in its approach. I particularly loved the surrealism of the scene where Mattie and Rooster stop in the woods to wait for a stranger to show himself. As snow flies around them, the man emerges, draped in a bearskin complete with the animals' head. The conversation is as peculiar as the men, like something out of *Alice in Wonderland*. And why not? How odd it must have been to be traveling in the vast, unpopulated wilderness, then suddenly bump into another person.

What finally made me choose the Coen Brothers over Tom Hopper as this year's winners for Best Director was recalling the scene of Mattie racing through the night on horseback with Rooster. Filmed at Mattie's eye level on the horse, the directors let me see what she saw during those harrowing moments. Camera squarely on her feverish face, I saw the orange sun slip below the horizon. Like her, I clung to the horse's black glistening neck and heard its labored breathing. I smelled the animal's sweat, heard its beating heart over the strains of an old hymn playing in the background, reminding me of Mattie's strength of character. Although I couldn't see his face, I felt, like Mattie, the warm embrace of Rooster's protective feelings.

Mattie is the undeniable heroine of this breathtaking film. But in those desperate moments when she and Rooster thunder across the darkened western landscape, Rooster takes on heroic status. Remembering Rooster carrying Mattie to safety helped me make my final decision and cast my vote for Best Director decidedly on Ethan and Joel Coen.

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(Laura's son)

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