

Oscar nominations favor themes of hope and justice

Rejane Cytacki | Feb. 28, 2014 NCR Today

On a couple of gray Saturdays at the end of February, you can always find me in a movie theater. It may sound crazy to spend 12 straight hours in a movie theater two Saturdays in a row, but I love to see what Hollywood deems to be the year's best films all at the same time.

Plus, watching them on the big screen maximizes their emotional and visual impact, and watching with other people makes it a communal experience. I like watching all the movies together, too, because common themes emerge. This year, I definitely found that the Academy picked a number of movies that focused on justice and how people maintain hope in the face of adversity. Three movies nominated for Best Picture (and many other awards) shine a transformative light on modern historical issues, from unwed mothers to HIV/AIDS and slavery.

Starting with the movie *Philomena*, we watch the journey of a woman bowed down with grief and self-loathing over the loss of her son to forcible adoption. Meanwhile she continues to hold on to the hope that she will find him again one day. A powerful scene of her in a church confessional is a pivotal point in the movie. All of her bottled-up emotions come spilling out in her tears of anger and grief — she is speechless before the priest. It is her moment of becoming aware that she is part of a larger societal and church system that has placed the unjust burden of shame and sin on unwed teenage mothers. Enlightened, she has the courage to stand up and share her personal story with the world. Judi Dench is nominated for Best Actress for her portrayal of the real-life Philomena Lee.

Matthew McConaughey is contending for Best Actor for his lead role in *Dallas Buyers Club*. This is the story of a Ron, a sleazy rodeo electrician living in a narrow world of booze, drugs, sex and gambling during the early 1980s. When he becomes ill with HIV/AIDS, he loses his job and friends but realizes he doesn't want to die. His resilience leads him to Mexico where he finds a compassionate and unorthodox doctor who restores his hope in life. Both men recognize the stringent ban the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has on specific drugs that could save the lives of people like him. In another moving scene, Ron is exploring the doctor's research lab: he stands still, arms outstretched, and becomes covered with butterflies. In this moment, he expands his personal struggle for life to compassionately help others in his own situation. He uses the legal system to bend the FDA rules and seek justice for those struggling to survive with HIV/AIDS.

Playing the lead character in *Twelve Years a Slave*, Chiwetel Ejiofor is up against McConaughey (and two others) for Best Actor. Like *Philomena*, the script is based on a book, and here we see a free black man kidnapped and forced to engage in a way of life that is completely degrading to him. He loses everything dear to him, including his name, Solomon. It is his inner strength and the hope of reuniting with his family that keep him from being broken by the system of slavery. His resilience to survive gives him the courage to ask for justice for himself.

Sometimes the best stories of hope and justice come from real life heroes and heroines. All three of these films are based on true stories, and what powerful testimonies to the strength of the human spirit they are. I came out of the movie theater truly inspired. Regardless of whether any of these films win best picture at the Academy Awards this Sunday, I recommend all three!

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