

Hollywood primed for (possibly soggy) Oscars night

Hollywood is ready for its close-up tomorrow as stars gather for the most fiercely contested Oscars show in decades, but organizers hope the weather doesn't rain on their glamorous red carpet parade. Forecasters predict Los Angeles could have its biggest storm for two years potentially through the weekend, when the movie industry's finest come together for the climax of the annual awards season. Three movies-harrowing historical drama "12 Years a Slave," 3D space thriller "Gravity" and 1970s crime caper "American Hustle"—are leading a packed field for the top prizes.

On the acting front, Cate Blanchett is the hot favorite for her turn in Woody Allen's "Blue Jasmine," while Matthew McConaughey is widely tipped to strike Oscars gold for his portrayal of homophobic AIDS activist Ron Woodroof in "Dallas Buyers Club." Jared Leto's role as Woodroof's unlikely transgender business partner has put him ahead of the field for best supporting actor, and Lupita Nyong'o could take home a statuette for her big-screen debut in "12 Years a Slave."

'Genuine suspense'

But all bets are off for the big prize of the night, the best picture Oscar, which will be handed out at the end of the 86th Academy Awards ceremony hosted by US talk show host Ellen DeGeneres. "There's going to be genuine suspense this year when that final envelope is opened," awards consultant Tony Angelotti told the Los Angeles Times. The 6,000 or so voting members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences cast their ballots over 12 days starting on Valentine's Day and ending on Tuesday.

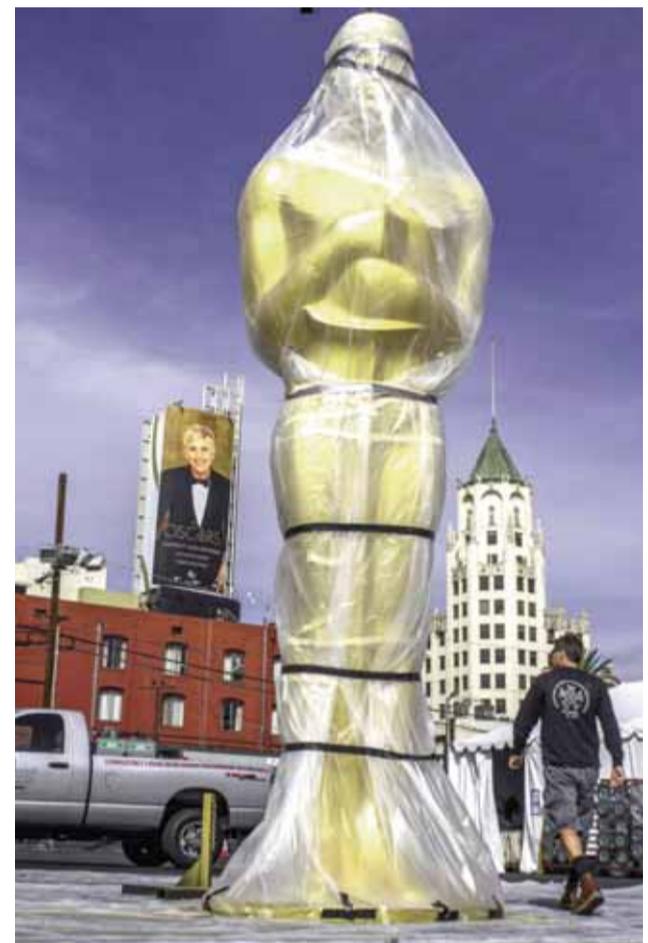
But the best picture race is so close that the winner could come down to only a few votes, under the Academy's preferential voting system. Under the rules, voters rank all nine nominated films. They are: "American Hustle," "Captain Phillips," "Dallas Buyers Club," "Gravity," "Her," "Nebraska," "Philomena," "12 Years A Slave" and Martin Scorsese's "The Wolf of Wall Street."

Those with the least first-place votes are dropped, and their votes given to the next highest-ranked nominees. This continues until one movie has 50 percent plus one vote. It has been a long awards season—extended by the Sochi Winter Olympics, which bumped the Oscars from February into March. And it has also been among the most grueling, partly due to the bumper crop of films vying for glory.

Topping nominations are "American Hustle" and Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón's "Gravity," with 10 nods apiece, followed by "12 Years a Slave," a true story of a black man sold into slavery, with nine. Cuarón is the frontrunner for the best director prize, and his star Sandra Bullock earned high praise for her work in the spectacular space drama, prompting some to suggest she could cause an upset in the best actress race. But Australia's Blanchett remains the firm favorite in that category, despite a strong field also containing Meryl Streep ("August: Osage County"), Judi Dench ("Philomena") and Amy Adams ("American Hustle").

Star-studded night

The star-studded Oscars broadcast will feature performances by Irish rockers U2, playing their nominated song from "Mandela: Long Walk To Freedom," and a first Oscars turn by veteran Bette Midler. Tomorrow night's show will be preceded by the usual fashion extravaganza on the red carpet, as Tinseltown's finest parade along Hollywood Boulevard and into the Dolby Theatre. Organizers hope rain doesn't affect the parade; they hastily rescheduled the carpet roll-out to avoid forecast rain earlier in the week, and said Thursday they were reviewing some camera positions, partly due to the weather. The storm clouds come as a relief to many locals, as California has been suffering its worst drought for a century over the last few months, threatening farmers and cattle ranchers. But for organizers of Tinseltown's biggest night, it is probably one headache they could do without. — AFP



A worker walks before a giant Oscar statue outside the Dolby Theater on Hollywood Boulevard February 27, 2014 in Hollywood, California, during preparations for the upcoming 86th Academy Awards to take place on March 2. — AFP

AND THE WINNER IS... MEMORABLE OSCARS MOMENTS

From winners sobbing uncontrollably to shocking political outbursts, bizarre snubs and streakers, the Oscars have seen it all—and tomorrow's Academy Awards ceremony could provide fresh drama. Organizers of Hollywood's biggest night are white-knuckled as they brace for more unscripted moments that could anger television viewers or throw the finely calibrated global telecast off schedule.

With a worldwide television audience in the hundreds of millions, the temptation to use the event as a platform for political statements has proved irresistible for past winners. Boos rang out around the Kodak Theater in 2003 when maverick filmmaker Michael Moore launched a vitriolic attack on then-US president George W Bush for

waging war in Iraq. But Moore was only following the tradition of turning the Oscars podium into a bully pulpit. Arguably, the most famous example came in 1973, when a woman calling herself Sacheen Littlefeather stood before the stunned audience to collect Marlon Brando's best actor Oscar for "The Godfather."

Littlefeather promptly refused to collect the award on Brando's behalf to protest the movie industry's treatment of native Americans. Four years later, Vanessa Redgrave drew gasps and boos from the Oscars faithful when she thanked the Academy for honoring her in "Julia" despite "the threats of a small bunch of Zionist hoodlums."

Oscars presenter Paddy Chayefsky chastised her to much applause: "I am sick and tired of people exploiting the Academy

Awards for the propagation of their own personal propaganda." "I would like to suggest to Miss Redgrave that her winning an Academy Award is not a pivotal moment in history, does not require a proclamation, and a simple 'thank you' would have sufficed." Sometimes, the choice of awards recipients can stoke controversy. The decision to grant director Elia Kazan a lifetime achievement award in 1999 divided the glitterati, with dozens of stars refusing to rise or applaud, in protest at the filmmaker's decision to cooperate with the authorities during the 1950s communist witch-hunts. — AFP



Rumer Willis arrives at the Hollywood Domino & Bovet 1822's 7th Annual Pre-Oscar Hollywood Domino Gala & Tournament at Sunset Tower Hotel on February 27, 2014 in West Hollywood, California. — AFP photos



Actress Vanessa Hudgens arrives.



Amy Adams arrives.