

Oscars Go Big, Small With 'Avatar,' 'Hurt Locker'

BEVERLY HILLS, California (AP) — "Avatar" is a dreamy space fantasy that has made more money than any movie in history. "The Hurt Locker" is a ground-level dose of Iraq war reality and one of the lowest-grossing best-picture contenders ever.

With a leading nine Oscar nominations each and ex-spouses James Cameron and Kathryn Bigelow as directors, the films are a study in extremes. They're also the only two movies that really matter in the expanded race for Hollywood's top prize March 7.

"Avatar," about the human invasion of a faraway moon populated by blue-hued creatures, won best drama and director at the Golden Globes. "The Hurt Locker," a disturbingly close and claustrophobic look at the strains of disabling bombs in Iraq, earned the top prizes from guilds representing directors and producers, and was chosen as the year's best film by many key critics groups.

It's a true David and Goliath

kind of story, isn't it?" said Jeremy Renner, a best-actor nominee for his performance as a bomb-disposal expert in "The Hurt Locker." "You know what? I love being David. ... It's like 'The Bad News Bears' or something, or Rocky Balboa."

In between the two films in the Academy Award best-picture nominations announced Tuesday is a range of mainstream hits and critical darlings that deliver just what Oscar overseers wanted when they expanded the category from five films to 10 — something for everyone.

"Extraordinary company. Every film is a masterpiece in and of itself," said Bigelow, whose best-director nod for "The Hurt Locker" makes her the fourth woman ever nominated in that category. "It creates a lot to choose from, let's put it that way."

Despite the head-to-head awards rivalry between Bigelow and Cameron, who were married from 1989 to 1991, they don't seem to share any animosity.

Along with Cameron's behemoth "Avatar," which has surpassed his own "Titanic" as the biggest modern blockbuster at the box office, four other huge hits earned best-picture nominations: the animated comedy "Up," the football drama "The Blind Side," the World War II saga "Inglourious Basterds" and the science-fiction tale "District 9."

Two other nominees, the recession tale "Up in the Air" and the Harlem drama "Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' By Sapphire," have been solid moneymakers.

Then there's "The Hurt Locker," the teen drama "An Education" and the offbeat academia story "A Serious Man," little arthouse triumphs whose domestic grosses — ranging from \$9 million to \$12.7 million — amount to popcorn money compared with the \$600 million in the U.S. and more than \$2 billion-plus worldwide "Avatar" has made.

Nominees for best foreign language film included Germany's

"The White Ribbon," the likely front-runner after taking the same prize at the Golden Globes and top honors at last May's Cannes Film Festival. Also nominated were the Cannes runner-up, France's "A Prophet," and Israel's "Ajami," Argentina's "The Secret in Their Eyes" and Peru's "The Milk of Sorrow."

Diversity rules the directing category; traditionally a white man's club, Bigelow has a good shot to become the first woman to win the directing Oscar, while "Precious" filmmaker Lee Daniels is

only the second black director ever nominated.

Acting nominees include the four stars who have emerged as favorites from previous awards shows: lead players Sandra Bullock for "The Blind Side" and Jeff Bridges for the country-music tale "Crazy Heart" and supporting performers Mo'Nique for "Precious" and Austrian Christoph Waltz for "Inglourious Basterds."

More best-picture choices this time means more types of films in the awards spotlight, said Bullock, who scored her first Oscar nomi-

nation as a wealthy woman who takes in a homeless teen who goes on to National Football League stardom.

She said expanding the nominees means more types of films, from blockbusters to small independents, have a chance.

"It's so right and timely, and I'm so happy about it, because I think it's going to excite filmmakers even more now to just do the types of films they want to make without worrying about fitting it into this mold that would get recognition," she said.

COUNTY

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rejected as it is a waste of money," Hunhoff wrote, recommending that the county instead adopt the plan developed by Deputy Sheriff Steve Larson and county Emergency Management Director Jeremy Dangel to place the answering point in the EOC. "There are already 16 phone lines running into that building, three of which could certainly be used to answer 911 calls in an emergency."

Hisek said the fire department is a better location because it is further away from the current answering point, making it less likely to be affected by a natural disaster or hazardous materials event that would cause the closure of the downtown dispatch center. The

fire station is also better equipped with the infrastructure for a communications facility, and has more space for it, he said.

"In my opinion, you don't want the EOC and the dispatch center together," Hisek added. "You're going to have people coming and going. You want your dispatch to be dispatching and still have contact with the EOC."

Hisek acknowledged the unlikelihood of needing a back-up answering point.

"We're hoping this is never going to happen," he said. "You know the old adage, 'Plan for the worst, and hope for the best.' That's what this is."

Commissioner Mark Johnson concurred. "All the stuff we do for emergency management and the fire department is a 'big waste of money' until we need it. That's just the way it is."

Ultimately, the commission unanimously agreed to proceed

with the plan to use E911 funds to install the secondary answering point in the fire station.

"It shows the city and the county are working together," Commission Chairman Bruce Jensen said. "We're going to save property and lives. Hopefully, we never have to use it."

The commission also agreed to proceed with an almost \$25,000 plan to purchase Bullberry equipment with E911 funds that would allow aerial photography to be incorporated with GIS information in portable units carried in emergency response vehicles. The county would pay a consultant up to \$4,000 a year for consulting fees on the equipment, as well.

"(This) enables the people in the vehicle to punch in where they want to go, and it will route them right there," Johnson said.

"It will show them a picture from however many angles we have in that area of the building they are going to. It's so useful."

OBAMA

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"perpetual campaigning" of late. So the White House is trying to tread carefully.

As Obama seeks to right his presidency and his agenda amid falling poll numbers and ballot box losses, he and his advisers have concluded that the gloves must come off more often. He intends to unleash more tough talk for Republicans in the coming weeks, under the theme that they, too, must be held accountable for solving the nation's ills, a senior administration official said.

Since last Wednesday's State of the Union address, Obama has held two campaign-style town hall meetings. In both he has called out Republicans for opposing him on health care, federal spending and other issues. He also spoke at a meeting of House Republican lawmakers, where both sides aired their complaints against the other, sometimes sharply.

The idea is to stop allowing Republicans to define the White House through their nearly unanimous opposition to Obama's proposals and to start using them as a foil to better define themselves, the official said.

As Obama put it Tuesday in New Hampshire: "You can't walk away from your responsibilities to confront the challenges facing this country because you think it's good short-term politics."

But he also will continue to reach out to Republicans, asking them to work with him and defining areas where cooperation may be possible. This serves two purposes: put Republicans on the spot, and show himself as a willing conciliator.

On Tuesday, as he has done almost daily since last week's State of the Union address, Obama made a play for bipartisanship. He urged the Republican minority in Congress to work with him and the Democratic leadership to overhaul education, energy and health care policies and take on crippling federal budget deficits.

"I can't do this alone. Democrats can't do this alone — nor should we," he said.

While he spoke there, the White House pressed the message on another front, releasing a letter from Obama to U.S. Chamber of Commerce President Tom Donohue asking for the leading business lobby's support for his jobs proposals.

"Understanding that we may not always agree on every issue or how to achieve the goals we all share, let us build on the progress we've seen and work together wherever possible," Obama wrote.

Press & Dakotan

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