

WEDNESDAY PRIMETIME/LATE NIGHT SEPTEMBER 12, 2012. Table with columns for time slots (3:00-1:30) and broadcast stations. Includes sub-sections for BROADCAST STATIONS, PAY CHANNELS, and CABLE STATIONS.

Early Oscar Buzz Comes Down From Mountains

BY JOHN HORN © 2012, Los Angeles Times

TELLURIDE, Colo. — Two years ago, a prominent Oscar voter left the Telluride Film Festival's world premiere screening of "The King's Speech" and said with certainty that the film would be shortlisted for best picture. At the festival this past weekend, that same voter issued a new prediction: Ben Affleck's "Argo" will be among the finalists for the top Academy Award.

The Telluride festival, which concluded its 39th annual installment on Monday, prides itself on eccentric programming (among the offerings was the nearly three-hour Russian film "Stalker" from 1979) and against-the-grain tributes (the 2012 actor award went to Denmark's Mads Mikkelsen). But in recent years the Labor Day weekend gathering has become something of a herald of awards season success.

In addition to booking the best picture winner "King's Speech," Telluride programmers over the last few festivals have scheduled the world or North American premiers of "Slumdog Millionaire," "The Artist," "The Descendants," "Black Swan" and "A Separation," all of which either won or were nominated for prominent Academy Awards.

It's a record the festival feels conflicted about, as Telluride officials would rather their lineup be more focused on surprises than trophies. "I worry about the time when we don't have 25 Oscar nominations for films playing at the festival," said Gary Meyer, who with Tom Luddy and Julie Huntsinger directs the festival. "It's not our purpose in life."

In this year's schedule, the programmers partially may have achieved their desire. Though "Argo," a story about the 1980 rescue of State Department employees hiding in Iran during the hostage crisis, will leave the mountain resort town with tremendous momentum heading into its Oct. 12 release, the festival did not clarify a clouded awards picture.

In large measure, that's a reflection of the movies Telluride couldn't play, mostly because they weren't finished. Meyer said the festival would have loved to consider Ang Lee's "Life of Pi" and Steven Spielberg's "Lincoln," but neither film was completed, the same as with Sacha Gervasi's "Hitchcock," which hasn't yet been added to the 2012 release calendar.

Concerned that the makers of Paul Thomas Anderson's "The Master" had held too many sneak previews around the country, Telluride programmers declined to invite that film, and they also refused to book the sex surrogate story "The Sessions," which had played in January's Sundance Film Festival.

A number of potentially contending films will be shown at the Toronto International Film Festival, which opens Thursday and has screened six of the last seven best picture winners. The upcoming Toronto titles include, in addition to "Argo," "The Master" and "The Sessions," David O. Russell's "Silver Linings Playbook" and "Cloud Atlas," from directors Lana and Andy Wachowski and Tom Tykwer.

The Telluride slate elevated a number of distinct individual performances, primarily Bill Murray as Franklin Delano Roosevelt in "Hyde Park on Hudson," a Telluride world premiere, and Greta Gerwig as a 27-year-old New Yorker trying to make sense of her life in "Frances Ha," which also had never been shown before Telluride.

Murray said playing FDR was scary but that he rarely has felt so satisfied by a performance. "It's like a carpenter who's building a chair — you know when you nailed it," Murray said in an interview. "And this one is going to last."

Gerwig co-wrote the script for "Frances Ha" with her boyfriend Noah Baumbach ("The Squid and the Whale"), who directed the black-and-white film. Frances calls herself "undateable" but she's one of the most appealing characters of any film in Telluride.

"I'm gonna start crying again if I talk about it," Gerwig said after the film's first screening. "I've never had a happier experience making anything."

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