

# 'Button' vs. 'Slumdog': A study in contrasts

By **CHRISTY LEMIRE**  
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One is a grand, sweeping epic, a dazzling technical achievement starring THE A-Lister of all A-Listers.

The other is a gritty tale, partly told in subtitled Hindi, with a tiny budget and no known stars that almost didn't make it to theaters.

Now, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" and "Slumdog Millionaire" share the spotlight with the most nominations heading into the 81st Academy Awards, including best picture.

"Benjamin Button," which leads with 13 nominations, features Brad Pitt as a man aging in reverse, pining for the woman he's always loved over an extraordinary lifetime. Directed by David Fincher and running nearly three hours, it features eye-popping special effects that allow sexiest-man-alive Pitt to appear seamlessly as a hunched, shriveled old man.

"Slumdog," with 10 nominations, is a heart-pounding drama about an orphan who rises from poverty in Mumbai to become the biggest winner ever on India's version of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" Directed by Danny Boyle with

visceral cinematography and fluid edits, it draws you into the squalor but ends with unexpected hope.

The contrast represents the cinematic extremes that appealed to Oscar voters this year, with pictures and performances large and small receiving equal consideration. (The other best-

as Richard Nixon in "Frost/Nixon." Also in the category are a couple of first-time nominees in independent movies: Mickey Rourke as a grappler struggling to make a comeback in "The Wrestler" and, in a surprise entry, longtime character actor Richard Jenkins as a lonely widower in

at the Feb. 22 ceremony at the Kodak Theatre, which he's never attended before: "I think there's this red thing you walk down, and then you go sit down and wait. Isn't that how it works? I'm not sure."

The best-actress category also has a couple of women in tiny, stripped-

Academy Awards: Angelina Jolie as a mother searching for her young son in "Changeling," Kate Winslet as a former Nazi concentration camp guard in "The Reader" and Meryl Streep — the most honored actor in Oscar history with 15 nominations — as a viciously judgmental nun in "Doubt."

"It's really just so remarkable, really like a modern-day miracle," said Leo, who got word of her nomination at the Sundance Film Festival, the same place the low-budget film got its start a year ago. "An inspiration to independent film, truly independent film, and the vision of a filmmaker (original screenplay nominee Courtney Hunt) being stuck to from script to screen."

"It's really unbelievable. It does not seem real," said "Milk" writer Dustin Lance Black, a nominee for original screenplay. "I started crying as soon as Gus (Van Sant) got nominated, because I started to feel a little bit of the groundswell. And I started to feel like, 'My god, this movie is gonna be released wider now.' ... It's finally gonna get to the people who I think need the message and need the message just for themselves, for survival, for hope. And so that's when I just started bawling. I just really lost it."



Photo courtesy of Reuters

picture nominees are "Milk," "Frost/Nixon" and "The Reader." The biggest blockbuster of the year, "The Dark Knight," got eight nominations but was shut out of the best-picture race.)

Pitt, for example, is competing against previous Oscar winner Sean Penn as Harvey Milk in "Milk" and veteran Frank Langella

"The Visitor."

"I've been doing this long enough to know that expectations, they are the enemy," Jenkins said. "I really didn't think I would be nominated. It's such an amazing year with incredible performances. I used to say, 'Just my luck,' but it was incredibly humbling."

As for what he thinks will happen

down films who heard their names for the first time Thursday morning: Anne Hathaway as a recovering addict in "Rachel Getting Married" and Melissa Leo as an impoverished mother of two who turns to immigrant smuggling in "Frozen River." They're up against a few actresses who have just a bit more experience at the

## 'Button' rules Oscars, Batman's snubbed

By **DAVID GERMAIN**  
AP MOVIE WRITER

"The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" is the Academy Awards heavyweight with 13 nominations, yet the shadow of Batman loomed large with the absence of "The Dark Knight" in the best-picture race.

An epic romance that earned a best-actor nomination for Brad Pitt and a directing spot for David Fincher, "Benjamin Button" was joined in the best-picture category Thursday by the Richard Nixon tale "Frost/Nixon," the chronicle of gay-rights leader Harvey Milk in "Milk," the Holocaust-themed drama "The Reader" and the rags-to-riches crowd-pleaser "Slumdog Millionaire."

The Batman blockbuster "The Dark Knight" had picked up so

much momentum from honors by Hollywood trade unions that awards watchers generally thought it would land a best-picture nomination.

"Benjamin Button" producer Frank Marshall said "it was a bit of a surprise" that his movie would not be competing with "The Dark Knight" for the top prize.

"The fact that 'The Dark Knight' did so well at the box office was probably a good thing and maybe a not-so-good thing," Marshall said. "People tend to think films as successful as that are not well made, but certainly, 'Dark Knight' is exceptionally well made."

As expected, "Dark Knight" co-star Heath Ledger earned a supporting-actor nomination on the one-year anniversary of his death from an accidental overdose of prescription drugs. If Ledger wins, he would become only the

second actor to receive an Oscar posthumously, following Peter Finch, the best-actor recipient for 1976's "Network."

Josh Brolin, competing against Ledger with a supporting-actor nomination for "Milk," said the acclaim for Ledger was bittersweet.

"It's too bad, because every time I think of Heath, I'm split down the middle," Brolin said. "I think of his performance. I think of the work that he's done, and then the fact that this tragedy happened. It's an uncomfortable situation, for sure, but it makes sense to me, because I thought he did a bang-out job."

"Benjamin Button" leads a bold batch of best-picture candidates, among them Golden Globes champ "Slumdog Millionaire," which came in second at the Oscars with 10 nominations.

Based on an F. Scott Fitzgerald story, "Benjamin Button" stars

Pitt as a man aging backward toward infancy, caught in a tragic romance with the love of his life as she ages in the opposite direction.

The Oscars will be a family affair for Pitt, whose romantic partner Angelina Jolie has a best-actress nomination for the missing-child drama "Changeling."

The best-picture field includes two 1970s tales of fallen political figures. "Frost/Nixon" stars best-actor nominee Frank Langella as the disgraced president in his battle of wits with TV interviewer David Frost. "Milk" features best-actor contender Sean Penn as the slain gay-rights pioneer.

Joining Jolie in the best-actress field were Anne Hathaway for the family drama "Rachel Getting Married," Melissa Leo for the smuggling saga "Frozen River," Meryl Streep for the Roman Catholic tale "Doubt" and Kate Winslet for "The Reader."

Winslet plays a woman having a fling with a teenager who encounters her again years later as she is on trial for Holocaust atrocities.

At the Globes, Winslet was a dual winner, as dramatic actress for "Revolutionary Road" and supporting actress for "The Reader." But the Academy saw Winslet's turn in "The Reader" as a leading role, and one worthy of nomination.

Stephen Daldry, a directing nominee for "The Reader," suspects Winslet will be going home with an Oscar.

"I'm delighted for Kate," Daldry said. "I think she did two astonishing performances in 'Revolutionary Road' and in 'The Reader.' Whichever one the academy went for, I think it's her year. I think it's her turn."

The 81st Oscars will be presented Feb. 22 at Hollywood's Kodak Theatre and broadcast on ABC.