

YOU CAN THANK THE ACADEMY

By Jeanette Leigh

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If you are one of the millions of dedicated viewers of the Academy Awards then why not go Oscar wild this year and stage your own "viewing" party? "bling" in the celebrations with people you really love. You can shmooze the room, get "papped" and say fatuous things like what Kim Basinger said on winning her 13½ inch gong at the 1998 Academies, "I just want to thank everybody I've ever met in my entire life."

For 82 years the Academy Awards have been rolling out the carpet of Vaseline smiles, however this year there will be a slight variation. For the first time since 1944, 10 motion pictures will vie for the top prize, best picture, instead of the usual five.

The competition is fierce, with the most expensive film ever made, Avatar, looking to Hoover up the happy statues with nine nominations. It is arguably well deserved. Set in 2154, the technological wizardry dupes our brain to take us into the other worldliness of extraordinary jungles occupied by intelligent, beguiling blue aliens in a parable of western imperialism. So far it is the highest grossing film ever with box office revenue in the billions.

Holding its own against Avatar with nine nominations including best picture is The Hurt Locker, a war drama set in Iraq. Proving that size isn't everything, The Hurt Locker's budget was only a fraction of Avatar's - a mere \$US10 million.

There is something perhaps fatalistic about this particular talky tango because the director of Avatar, James Cameron, and Kathryn Bigelow, the director of The Hurt Locker, are ex spouses. They will go head-to-head for best director; reminiscent of War of the Roses perhaps? It will be exciting viewing to see if Bigelow becomes the first woman to win best director.

Only four women in the Academy's history have ever been nominated for directing. The priors were Lina Wertmüller (Italy) for "Seven Beauties" in 1976, Jane Campion (NZ) for "The Piano" in 1993 and Sofia Coppola (US), nominated in 2003 for "Lost in Translation".

And let's see if Meryl, of Mumma Mia fame - now that was a fun film, can win yet another Oscar for her role as Julia Childs in Nora Ephron's Julie & Julia. Streep's portrayal of Childs, who cooks her way to fame, is masterful.

Streep has been nominated a grand total of 16 times, (winning three) making her the most nominated performer. She outdoes Katharine Hepburn and Jack Nicholson who tied at 12. Is there an award for that?

For best actress Meryl's competing against Sandra Bullock (The Blind Side), Helen Mirren (The Last Station), Carey Mulligan (An Education) and Gabourey Sidibe (Precious).

It could be a close shave for the boys. Nominated for best actors are Morgan Freeman (Invictus), George Clooney (Up in the Air), Jeff Bridges (Crazy Heart), Colin Firth (A Single Man) and Jeremy Renner (The Hurt Locker). This could be Bridge's first Oscar. His performance in Crazy Heart has already won a Golden Globe.

And, the other nominees for best motion picture are, Up, An Education, Inglourious Basterds, A Serious Man, Up In The Air, The Blind Side, Precious and District 9.