People's Choices Vs. the Critics'

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BETWEEN the year's end and the Academy Awards, Hollywood producers, critics, agents, stars and studio PR departments engage in that elaborate kabuki dance known as "the Awards Season." Beneath the glamourous gowns and tight smiles, it's war for Oscar gold. Their battlefields are billboards on the Sunset Strip, ads in Variety, and particularly awards shows. As the financial importance of the Academy Awards grows -- an Oscar nom can make a career, add prestige to a studio, and most importantly double a film's profits -- a constellation of awards ceremonies have proliferated to cash in on the hubbub.

There are awards for pretty much every guild in Hollywood, from Screen Actors to Cinematographers to Costume Designers, and prizes for most every critics association in the country. Some are geared towards a very narrow group of people -- hello, Visual Effects Society -- while others like this week's People's Choice Awards aim for the widest possible audience. All of these venues intend to influence in some manner who gets the gold.

Though this weekend's Golden Globes will kick Tinseltown's Oscar-mania into high gear, the aforementioned People's Choice awards and the Critic's Choice sashayed across America's airways earlier this week. The two are very different beasts though the both may say something about which movies and actors get the Oscar noms.

The People's Choice Awards is essentially a big on-line poll, where, in theory, anyone with access to the net can vote. If you remember the long lines of Joker-faced fanboys at the movieplex this summer, it shouldn't be too much of a surprise that "the people" threw pretty much every award they could at "The Dark Knight." It won for Favorite Movie, Favorite Cast, Favorite On Screen Match Up and Favorite Superhero. "WALL-E" also not surprisingly won Favorite Family Movie. Both were among the best reviewed and most profitable movies of 2008.





Aside from these two flicks, there were a lot of odd films featured at the People's Choice Awards. The forgettable "27 Dresses," which disappeared down the rom-com memory hole long before the summer was out, won for "Favorite Comedy Movie." More critically and financially popular movies like "Tropic Thunder," "Role Models," "Sex and the City," and "Pineapple Express" weren't even nominated. The other two movies that did get the mod in the category were "Get Smart" and "Mamma Mia." Though watching Pierce Brosnan bray like a sea elephant was marginally amusing, none of those movies were really comedies. "Eagle Eye," which was inexplicably tapped for "Favorite Movie Drama," was more (unintentionally) hilarious than anything in the Comedy category.

The Critic's Choice Awards speaks specifically for the Broadcast Film Critic Association, a large organization that represents some of America's biggest and most photogenic arbiters of movie taste. And the critics apparently really, really like "Slumdog Millionaire," giving it five prizes including Best picture, Best Director, and Young Actor/Actress. This was a bit of surprise considering the field of contenders was so strong. But the critics seem to prefer Danny Boyle's crowd-pleasing Bollywood-inspired fairy tale over standard issue Oscar-bait like "Revolutionary Road" and "The Curious Tale of Benjamin Button." Though this is heartening in a way, I would have preferred the critics showing a little love to smaller (and better) movies like "The Wrestler" and "Happy-Go-Lucky." Yet the critics were not immune to the immense popularity of "The Dark Knight;" it landed not only a posthumous prize for Heath Ledger but also the BFCA's first Best Action movie prize. Rumors abound that the category was created just to give "The Dark Knight" a trophy. Finally, the critics, not the people, got it right in the Best Comedy category; Ben Stiller's "Tropic Thunder" got the prize.

So what does this say about the Oscar nominations, which are announced on January 22? Though the People's Choice Awards may feel shallow and arbitrary in places, it did prove the enduring popularity of "The Dark Knight" and "WALL-E." And while the Critic's Choice Awards were relatively unadventurous (does Meryl Streep really need another trophy?) it did show that stolid studio prestige movies like "Revolutionary Road" and "The Changeling" might not have as much traction with the Academy as crowd-pleasers like "Slumdog." Of course, the Oscars have a history of surprising people; I still can't believe that "Crash" won for Best Picture in 2005. The next big bellwether event, the Golden Globes, air this Sunday at 8pm ET.

Source: Internet