

MOVIES

OSCAR-BASHING

Memo to the Academy on Its 64th Birthday: Retire or Reform

By Peter Travers

THE OSCAR TELECAST ON March 30th is an occasion to dis the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for sixty-four years of consistent obtuseness. Though it's probably just a nasty rumor that the median age of the academy's 4993 voting members is also sixty-four, the membership's racist, sexist, elitist and resolutely old-fart mentality is self-evident. Only one woman director (Lina Wertmüller) has ever been nominated, only one black actor (Sidney Poitier) has won for a leading role, and no independent film has won Best Picture. The academy's exclusionist practices have become embarrassing. *Dances With Wolves*, *Driving Miss Daisy* and *Rain Man* win Best Picture Oscars while *Do the Right Thing*, *Dragstone Cowboy* and *Blue Velvet* are not even nominated. Why not just ignore the fossilized academy? Because Oscar nominees get a boost at the box office, prosper on video and win their creators other jobs; the more progressive rejects might as well be wearing toe tags. The time for an overhaul of voting procedures is now.

It's ironic that the outcry over this year's nominations centers on Oscar's commendable snub of Barbra Streisand. How gratifying to think that the academy overlooked her because her direction of the lachrymose *Prince of Tides* was as grating as her fingernails, er, perform-



ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID COWLES

ance. But the seven nominations for *Tales*, including one for Best Picture, indicate that the academy boys' club is once again feeling its manhood squeezed. More disturbing is the omission of Agnieszka Holland (*Europa, Europa*), Martha Coolidge (*Rambling Rose*), and Jane Campion (*An Angel at My Table*), gifted women directors working outside the studio system.

As things stand, promotion decides who gets nominated. Disney littered the trade papers with ads to get a well-deserved Best Picture nomination for the animated *Beauty and the Beast*; the release of *The Silence of the Lambs* on video helped keep Jonathan Demme's stunning thriller in voters' minds. Streisand overcame her reclusiveness to launch a blitz for *Tales*, and Warren Beatty, a bigger press later than Streisand, topped her on the chat-show circuit ("Warren and An-

pendents as Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* (with the superb River Phoenix), Mike Leigh's *Life Is Sweet* and Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* were left to languish for lack of big-studio backing.

Oscar defenders point to the academy's nomination of *Boyz n the Hood*'s John Singleton — at twenty-four, the youngest Best Director nominee, as well as the first black one. But the gesture smacks of tokenism. *Boyz* wasn't nominated as Best Picture, and Larry Fishburne, Ice Cube and Cuba Gooding Jr. didn't make it in the acting categories. In fact, Oscar found no room for a single black actor in the twenty acting slots, not even Samuel Jackson, whose *Jungle Fever* performance won him prizes at Cannes and from the New York Film Critics Circle.

Clearly, the academy needs to open its shop to more women, more minorities,

Howards End

ACADEMICS USUALLY SQUEEZE THIS life out of E.M. Forster's classic novel *Howards End* by treating it as an allegory for the class war in Edwardian England. Rest assured, there is nothing pedantic about the movie version, which bows closer to Forster's humanism than his symbolism. Incisively

witty, provocative and acted to perfection, this sublime entertainment is a career peak for producer Ismail Merchant, director James Ivory and screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, who also triumphed with Forster's *Room With a View*. Forster's effort to draw meaning and hope from a society divided by money, class, culture and social irresponsibility is timelier than ever in the post-*Bonfire* era. The film serves Forster by taking to heart the book's epigraph: "Only connect."

Check the hypnotic opening scene: In the hush of evening, Ruth Wilcox (Vanessa Redgrave) — the mistress of a country manor called Howards End — strolls the grounds, blissfully unconcerned that she's trailing her gown in the sopping grass. Inside the house her businessman husband, Henry (Anthony Hopkins), and greedy children busy themselves in separate worlds while her younger son, Paul (Joseph Bennett), flirts with his free-thinking house guest, Helen Schlegel (a radiant Helena Bonham Carter). The scene, deftly shot by Tony Pierce-Roberts, captures the novel's essence in quick strokes. We sense Ruth's love of nature and Henry's abhorrence of it, just as we discern Paul's fear of Helen's emancipation.

Though Helen soon breaks off with Paul, her sharp-witted older sister, Margaret (Emma Thompson), befriends his mother. Ruth's spiritual bond to the rural tradition of *Howards End* strikes a chord in Margaret, who lives with Helen and their student brother, Tibby (Adrian Ross Magenty), in a London Victorian about to be razed for modern flats that Forster called "the architecture of hurry."

Though Redgrave's role is small, she's never given a more delicate or heartfelt performance. Given the actress's leftist politics, the scene in which Ruth chides Margaret for supporting women's suffrage wins unintentional laughs, but Redgrave's hold on her character soon restores the balance. On her deathbed, Ruth scrawls a note leaving *Howards End* (one of many Wilcox properties) to Margaret — a note that her family destroys.

A twinge of guilt leads the widowed Henry to pay a call on the Schlegels. He scorns the chaos of their lively London household and their friendship with Leonard Bast (Sam West), a timid married clerk whom the sisters have decided to in-

struct in the arts and social graces. But Henry is bewitched by Margaret's vitality. His later marriage proposal to her on a staircase is uncommonly funny and touching — he lacks the romantic finesse to do it properly, and she is too filled with ardor to respond in more than monosyllables.

The marriage of Henry and Margaret links the worlds of money and intellect and the strands of the plot. Henry's reluctant efforts to help Bast leave the clerk



Hopkins and Thompson battle for home and England.



They was robbed (clockwise from top): 'Cape Fear' director Scorsese; 'Barton Fink,' with John Turturro and John Goodman; Phoenix in 'My Own Private Idaho'; 'Life Is Sweet' and stars Horrocks and Alison Steadman; Jackson, with Halle Berry, in 'Jungle Fever.'

nette talk about the baby on tomorrow's *Today*"), helping the stylish *Bugsy* win ten nominations (the year's record). But even Beatty took a back seat to Oliver "Free the Films" Stone, who did every show but *Sesame Street* to sell his compromised *JFK* as the hottest crusade for truth since Gerald opened the Capone vaults on TV.

Grandstanding like Stone's often hits home with the academy, which likes to reward movies with important subjects because then it seems important too. Never mind that Martin Scorsese's *Cape Fear*, Joel Coen's *Barton Fink* and David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* were more effective cinema. Never mind that such inde-

pendent artists and especially more voters whose idea of innovation doesn't stop with the advent of sound. Then we might see a Best Actress nod for Jane Horrocks's nuanced portrayal in *Life Is Sweet* instead of Bette Midler's star turn in *For the Boys*; a Best Screenplay spot for the inventive *Naked Lunch* instead of the indigestible *Frank Green Tomatoes*; a Best Song nomination for one of Stevie Wonder's excitingly varied songs from *Jungle Fever* instead of Bryan Adams's insipid ballad from *Robin Hood*. Oscar doesn't need to blow out the candles on March 30th; he needs to blow away the cobwebs and win a stake in the future. ■

jobless and nearly homeless, while revelations of adultery and out-of-wedlock pregnancy prompt Henry's older son, Charles (James Wilby), to take precipitous action that results in tragedy.

Hopkins, the thinking Oscar voter's choice for *The Silence of the Lambs*, makes Henry a seductive blend of charm and ruthlessness. And Thompson is chilling in a performance that ranks her with the best actresses of her generation. Nothing in Thompson's previous film work — the light-comic *Tall Guy* and *Dead Again* — prepares us for the depth of feeling she brings to Margaret. Growing less verbal and more reflective, she absorbs betrayals, initiates change and creates the balance necessary for the warring factions around her to achieve a hard-won harmony.

For Forster, the fight over who will inherit *Howards End* was a symbolic fight over England itself. His acceptance of the melting pot and the blurring of class distinctions didn't stop him from mourning the passing of tradition. Jhabvala's remarkably fluid script eviscerates the core of Forster's concerns about the danger of shutting off feeling. In detailing the problems of rebuilding a society from the ashes of greed, the film of *Howards End* speaks in fresh, startling ways to a new generation. It's a satisfying irony indeed that a book published in 1910 has become the first great movie of 1992.

Edward II

LIKE 'HOWARDS END,' 'EDWARD II' reaches back to the past — this time to a 1392 Christopher Marlowe play — to illuminate the present. Unlike E.M. Forster, British director Derek Jarman does not hide his homosexuality. Forster delayed publication of his gay-themed novel *Maurice* un-