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Sandler, Pattinson indie films top Spirit Award nominations



Actress Natasha Lyonne

Adam Sandler and Robert Pattinson saw their Oscar hopes boosted Thursday as "Uncut Gems" and "The Lighthouse" led the Film Independent Spirit Awards nominations with five each, in the unofficial start to Hollywood's annual prize-giving season. While major studio releases are not eligible for the Spirit Awards, the prizes are still seen as a strong indicator of the independent movies that could eventually be Oscar winners.

Sandler stars as a brash, larger-than-life New York jewel dealer in the high-octane drama "Uncut Gems" from the Safdie brothers, who also earned a directing nod. Former "Twilight" and "Harry Potter" star Pattinson underlined his indie credentials with a nomination for Robert Eggers' black-and-white tale of two lighthouse keepers on a remote island.

Both films were made by production house A24, which once again dominated, earning 18 nods. The indie powerhouse is behind previous Oscar winner "Moonlight," as well as "Lady Bird" and "The Disaster Artist." Actresses Zazie Beetz ("Joker") and Natasha Lyonne ("Orange Is The New Black") presented the nominations at a Los Angeles press conference.

Film Independent President Josh Welsh described 2019 as "a year of bold, audacious and accomplished filmmaking" despite significant change and challenges affecting the movie industry. Netflix's "Marriage Story" was selected to receive the Robert Altman Award, which is bestowed upon one film's director, casting director and cast. The movie, starring Scarlett Johansson and Adam Driver, will

vie with "Uncut Gems" for the best feature prize.

While Sandler and Pattinson will compete for best male lead, A-listers Renee Zellweger ("Judy") and Elisabeth Moss ("Her Smell") were nominated for best female lead, and Jennifer Lopez ("Hustlers") will vie for the best supporting female award. Five best feature winners this decade have gone on to best picture glory at the Academy Awards, including "Moonlight," "Spotlight" and "Birdman." The winners, selected by Film Independent members, will be announced at the Spirit Awards on February 8 — the day before the Oscars. — AFP



Actress Zazie Beetz, right, attends the Film Independent Spirit Awards Nominations Announcement Press Conference, in Los Angeles, California. — AFP photos

From Bardot to Diana, Paris Match photos to go under hammer

They are the defining images of newsmakers down the decades from Princess Diana to Brigitte Bardot to Pope John Paul II. And now some 130 of the most iconic pictures taken by the French magazine Paris Match are to be auctioned on November 25 in Paris for prices of between 1,500-4,000 euros (\$1,660-4,400). The auction of the celebrated covers and double-spreads will mark the 70th anniversary of a publication whose trend-setting influence has always gone well beyond France.

The pictures include powerful images from nature and conflict zones and also of politicians ranging from the deposed shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, to Charles de Gaulle and late French president Jacques Chirac. But among the most unforgettable are those of personalities who have shaped the zeitgeist of the last decades.

Perhaps the most famous is the image of Britain's Princess Diana, sitting alone on the diving board of a luxury yacht as a bird flies by, just a week before her death in a Paris road accident in 1997. "Yes, it is a paparazzi photo, but it's one that has gone down in history. This photo is Diana, it's Lady Di and she only had eight days to live," said Marc Brincourt, former photo editor-in-chief at Paris Match and curator of the exhibition at the Cornette de Saint Cyr auction house in Paris.

"She is alone, on the diving board. And then the seagull going by," he added. Another image, by photographer Jack Garofalo from 1974, celebrates the 40th birthday of actress Brigitte Bardot, her chest exposed and flowers in her hair. "In order to pose like that in front of Jack Garofalo, you need to have trust," said Brincourt. "There is a trust between star and the photographer. Why? Because in that era, the stars were friends with the photographers and the Paris Match reporters," he added. — AFP

Wooden manger relics heading from Rome to Bethlehem

Wooden relics said to be from the manger that held the infant Jesus will be returned from Rome to Bethlehem in time for the Christmas season, Palestinian officials said on Friday. Bethlehem's mayor, Anton Salman, told the Palestinian news agency Wafa the move followed President Mahmoud Abbas's most recent visit to the Vatican, when Abbas asked Pope Francis for the return of the fragments held in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.

Salman said the relics were taken from Bethlehem around 1,000 years ago, and are now likely to be placed inside Saint Catherine's Church, adjacent to the Church of

the Nativity in Manger Square, the reputed site of Jesus's birth. There was no immediate confirmation from the Vatican. But Amira Hanania, a member of Abbas's Higher Committee of Churches Affairs, said the relics would arrive on November 30, the day the Palestinian town traditionally lights its Manger Square Christmas tree.

"It is an historic move. It returns to its original place, and it will be a factor of attraction to believers from inside Palestine and to tourists from all over the world," she said. "To celebrate Christmas with the presence of part of the manger in which Jesus Christ was born will be a magnificent and huge event." Although the provenance of ancient relics is

often questionable, they are revered by the Christian faithful, among whom are the coachloads of pilgrims who squeeze through a narrow sandstone entrance in the Church of the Nativity all year round to visit the birth grotto that is its centerpiece.

The return comes amid a wider discussion over whether Western collectors and museums should return objects to their countries of origin. The website of Santa Maria Maggiore says the relics currently lie before the basilica's main altar in a crystal reliquary shaped like a crib that "contains pieces of ancient wood which tradition holds to be part of the manger where the Baby Jesus was laid".

It said that the crypt was constructed by Virginio Vespignani at the behest of the mid 19th century Pope Pius IX "to contain the sacred relic of the Holy Crib". Preparations for Christmas are under way in Bethlehem, especially for Christians who make up around one percent of the Palestinian population in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. While the security situation has eased around the town in recent years, Israeli checkpoints guard the entrances to Bethlehem, which lies just south of Jerusalem in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. — AFP



In this file photo entrepreneur/manager Scooter Braun attends the 6th Annual Save the Children Illumination Gala at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City.



In this file photo singer/songwriter Taylor Swift arrives on the red carpet for the Time 100 Gala at the Lincoln Center in New York. — AFP photos

Music exec reports 'death threats' amid feud with Taylor Swift

Music industry mogul Scooter Braun said Friday his dispute with megastar Taylor Swift over her music catalogue has left his family receiving "death threats." The 29-year-old pop artist famous for hits like "Shake It Off" began publicly sparring with Braun this summer over his company's purchase of her former label, Big Machine Label Group, which gave him a majority stake in the master recordings of her first six albums.

Last week, Swift-known for her calculating social media strategy-said on Tumblr that Big Machine heads were "exercising tyrannical control," claiming they were preventing her from performing at an upcoming awards gala and releasing a Netflix documentary including songs from her early catalogue. In the post she pleaded with her fans and fellow artists to back her cause.

Braun had not publicly spoken out on the matter, but early Friday dropped a lengthy Instagram post saying Swift's appeal had resulted in "numerous death threats directed at my family."

"I assume this was not your intention but it is important that you understand that your words carry a tremendous amount of weight," Braun wrote. "While disappointed that you have remained silent after being notified by your attorney 4 days ago of these ongoing threats, I'm still hopeful that we can fix this." Swift has not responded publicly to Braun's post. Earlier this week Big Machine had said it would allow Swift to perform some of her early hits at the American Music Awards on Sunday. — AFP

'Humor saved my life', says subversive director John Waters

Big smile flashing and pencil-thin moustache quivering, subversive director John Waters laughs heartily as he looks back at an improbable 40-year career that made him a trash film icon. "Humor saved me, saved my life," the 73-year-old sharp-dresser told AFP on the sidelines of the Thessaloniki Film Festival, where he was a guest of honor earlier this month.

From a homemade horror stage in his garage, Waters went on to tear down barriers with transgressive fare such as "Eat Your Makeup", "Mondo Trasho", "Multiple Maniacs" and the scatological classic "Pink Flamingos" in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These films also introduced his childhood friend and muse Glenn Milstead, aka Divine, as one of the world's first drag divas.

In the 1980s and 1990s, he became known to a wider audience with sixties musical homage "Hairspray". He also gave a young Johnny Depp an early break as a juvenile delinquent in "Cry Baby", and cast Kathleen Turner as a psychopathic killer in "Serial Mom". Looking back to that phase of his career, Waters has mixed feelings. "I became respectable... Suddenly the worst thing that can happen to a creative person has happened to me," the bad taste savant writes in his latest memoir, "Mr. Know-It-All: The Tarnished Wisdom of a Filth Elder".

Born into a middle-class Baltimore family, Waters was pretty clear about what he wanted to do from early on. A self-styled "disrespectful" child, Waters ran a horror house for neighborhood kids in his garage. "I remember when I was young, I never fit in right. I accepted that early. There was a world out there that I could find," he said. In school, he found that exaggerated behavior help shield him from bullies.

Worse than gay

"I was so disrespectful with the teachers that the guys that would beat me up had a little respect for me, they annoyed me but they thought I was crazy so they left me alone pretty much." "They didn't know what's the matter with me, they thought I was worse than gay." His family was "absolutely horrified" by his movies but his father got the worst of it, Waters recalls. "My father was named John Waters too, I was a junior so all these years I was

getting arrested he would have his name on the headlines, he would get my obscene phone calls, I was unlisted," he says.

Like a good father, Waters Sr bankrolled his son's early films-but even that ended up blindsiding him. "I paid him back with interest and he was so shocked to have his money back. He was the only investor that wished I hadn't paid him back," beams Waters.

Like Woody Allen and New York, Waters makes a point of including his home city in his movies-and he even enjoyed the backing of the local brass.

"Baltimore was a character in my movies," he says.

"I still live there. I grew up there. My oldest friends were there, my family was there...and the politicians, even when I made the most insane movies, they said keep making them."

Recently labelled a "national treasure" by the New York Times Book Review, Waters was a jury member at Cannes and proudly shows off his Order of Arts and Letters medal which he received from the French state in May.

"He's been doing films independently for many many years and even when he did Hollywood films he never lost his own touch and his independent spirit," said Thessaloniki Film Festival programmer Yorgos Krassakopoulos, who calls Waters "one of the funniest guys around."

A man of few-if any-taboos, Waters believes it's important to make people laugh, even on tough issues such as race and migration.

"You can make them change opinions. To me, they listen more, if you get somebody to laugh that disarms them for a moment," he says.

And he insists he only makes fun about things he "truly" loves and "never tried just being gross."

On the afterlife, Waters is unsure about the existence of God-"I haven't heard about him or her yet," he notes-but he's pretty sure on one thing: "I don't think I'll go to hell."

There's one thing however he'd definitely like to see before his time comes.

"I want the porn version of Hairspray," he says.—AFP

Marking 40 years, Simple Minds say touring 'keeps us going'

Forty years since releasing their debut album, Scottish rock band Simple Minds have no plans to slow down just yet, saying life on the road is "the thing that keeps us going" as they embark on a world tour next year. Formed in Glasgow in the 1970s, the group, whose name was inspired by a lyric from David Bowie's "The Jean Genie", has seen its line-up change over the years but is still fronted by founding members lead vocalist Jim Kerr and guitarist Charlie Burchill.

"We were surprised after a 10-year career and I certainly don't believe we would have been touring (in) this particular year," Burchill told Reuters in a joint interview with Kerr. "But as it turns out ... that's what we prefer to do most, is (to) tour. I think a lot of people stop because they can't deal with that side of it but for us, it's the opposite, that is the thing that keeps us going."

Simple Minds, who this month released compilation album "40: The Best Of - 1979-2019" and kick off the anniversary tour in February, are known for 1980s hits like "Don't You (Forget About Me)" from teen film "The Breakfast Club", which gave the group their first U.S. No. 1. "Whenever people ask us about ... what can we expect from

'Don't You (Forget About Me)' we point them to the fact that we didn't even include it on the album (which) came out a few months later ... We thought it's a great track but it's part of a movie soundtrack and very much a thing on its own," Kerr said.

"Even when they approached us to do it, we didn't fancy the idea of doing someone else's song as much as we made it Simple Minds' song." The band are known for addressing political issues in their music - song "Mandela Day" was written for a 1988 concert marking then still-imprisoned anti-apartheid veteran Nelson Mandela's 70th birthday while 1989's "Belfast Child" addressed Northern Ireland's "Troubles" conflict period.

"The issues are always the same. Racism, war, poverty, the geography changes. OK, apartheid ended, it was great to see that end for us ... It was great to see the Berlin Wall come down," Kerr said. "(These were) amazing things that we never thought we'd see in our lives ... but the subjects about walls, again, it (still) features on the news ... I still think the songs can be symbolic outside of the actual geography and time." — Reuters

Michael Jackson Hollywood movie reported in the works

Michael Jackson's story is headed for Hollywood from the producer who helped make hit film "Bohemian Rhapsody," industry media reported on Friday. Deadline, Variety and the Hollywood Reporter said producer Graham King had secured the rights, including music, from Jackson's estate to make a feature film about the life of the "Thriller" singer, whose legacy has been tarnished by allegations of child sex abuse.

The movie is expected to span Jackson's journey from child star to global icon that ended when he died in 2009 at age 50 of an overdose from a powerful sleeping aid just weeks before a planned comeback concert. Deadline, citing unnamed sources, said the film "isn't intended to be a sanitized rendering" of Jackson's life. King's production company and the Jackson estate did not immediately return calls for comment.

Jackson was tried and acquitted in 2005 on charges of molesting a 13-year-old boy. In 1994, he settled a sexual abuse civil lawsuit concerning another 13-year-old boy. — Reuters



US director John Waters speaks during a masterclass as part of the 60th Thessaloniki International Film Festival (TIFF) in Thessaloniki. — AFP