



THE CONTENDERS

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Cinderella Man

Released: June 3 / **U.S. distrib:** Universal / **Oscar alumni:** Brian Grazer (producer, "A Beautiful Mind"); Ron Howard (producer, director, "A Beautiful Mind"); Akiva Goldsman (adapted screenplay, "A Beautiful Mind"), Russell Crowe (actor, "Gladiator"); Renee Zellweger (supporting actress, "Cold Mountain"); Daniel Hanley (editor, "Apollo 13"); Mike Hill (editor, "Apollo 13")



They call boxing the sweet science, but the very same phrase could be used for overseeing a successful Oscar campaign.

As far back as Wallace Beery's 1931 actor win for "The Champ" (three noms, one win) through Brando's 1954 knockout for the ages in "On the Waterfront" (12 noms, eight wins), with stops at "Raging Bull" (eight noms, two wins) and "Rocky" (10 noms, three wins) to last year's "Million Dollar Baby" (seven noms, four wins), Oscar seems to like being in the ring.

The riches-to-rags-to-riches biopic chronicles James J. Braddock, a Depression-era fighter with a heart of gold and a will of steel. Braddock, played with quiet elegance by Oscar winner Russell Crowe, seems as close to a sure thing as anything else this season. *Variety's* Robert Koehler called it "an exquisite ode to a working-class hero."

Crowe is only one-fourth of the reunited Ron Howard, Brian Glazer, Akiva Goldsman (with co-writer Cliff Hollingsworth) quar-

ter that brought home eight noms and four statuettes for 2001's "A Beautiful Mind."

Renee Zellweger took home the 2003 supporting trophy for "Cold Mountain," and her turn as Braddock's loyal wife, Mae, might have a shot at getting noticed. Paul Giamatti, who plays Braddock's confidant and corner man, Joe Gould, was overlooked for both "Sideways" and "American Splendor." He might fare better in a film that he doesn't have to carry on his shoulders.

The Depression era is tailor made for Hollywood, and lenser Salvatore Totino and production designer Wynn Thomas deliver a richly hued re-creation of those lean, mean times.

If there are any drawbacks, it would be the film's summer release date and perhaps a sense of déjà vu too soon after last year's "Million Dollar" success and the Acad's desire not to laud ring-based pics two years in a row.

Then again, in Oscar as in boxing, anything can happen.

— Steven Kotler

The Constant Gardener

Released: Aug. 31 / **U.S. distrib:** Focus Features / **Oscar alumnus:** Claire Simpson (editor, "Platoon")

With his dense plotlines and Dickensian mass of characters, master spy novelist John le Carre has presented a daunting, often insurmountable challenge to the filmmakers who've translated his work to the bigscreen.

With "The Constant Gardener," helmer Fernando Meirelles and screenwriter Jeffrey Caine pulled off the admirable job of remaining quite faithful to the source material while making the adaptation very much their creation.

With its adult subject matter, well-known cast and ecstatic critical support — not to mention a decidedly liberal point of view — pic should appeal to Oscar voters who generally like their politics left-leaning. However, many had similar hopes for "The Quiet American" in 2003, and all that film ended up with was an actor nom for Oscar perennial Michael Caine.

The film tells the story of Justin Quayle (Ralph Fiennes), a midlevel English diplomat in Kenya, whose passionate, politically outspoken wife, Tessa (Rachel Weisz), has been mur-

dered. While the case initially seems to be a crime of passion, Quayle eventually discovers a vast international cover-up involving a drug company and the British government.

Meirelles, a commercials di-

rector in his native Brazil, burst on the international film scene in 2002 with "City of God," an enthralling glimpse into Rio's criminal underworld. With "Gardener," Meirelles and lenser Cesar Charlone — both

of whom earned 2003 noms for "God" — take a risk by applying much of the first film's visual feel to more nuanced source material. The gamble pays off, as the frenetic handheld camerawork and saturated

palette help to give the film an edgy, unconventional feel. Their approach, however, might be too arty for Academy voters, who have long shown a predilection for more classic, straightforward visual storytelling.

Scripting, however, has historically been given a little more leeway, as evidenced by Charlie Kaufman, Michel Gondry and Pierre Bismuth's 2004 win for "Eternal Sunshine of a Spotless Mind." By any standard, Jeffrey Caine did an admirable job in conveying the moral and ethical murkiness of marriage and international diplomacy in a narrative that is constantly shifting backwards and forwards in time. Editor Claire Simpson weaves the strands together with finesse.

Fiennes and Weisz, along with supporting thespians Danny Houston and Bill Nighy as heavies, all shine in roles that seem to have been written with them in mind and could be given serious consideration by voters. (Focus will be pushing Weisz in the supporting category.)

— Matthew Ross

