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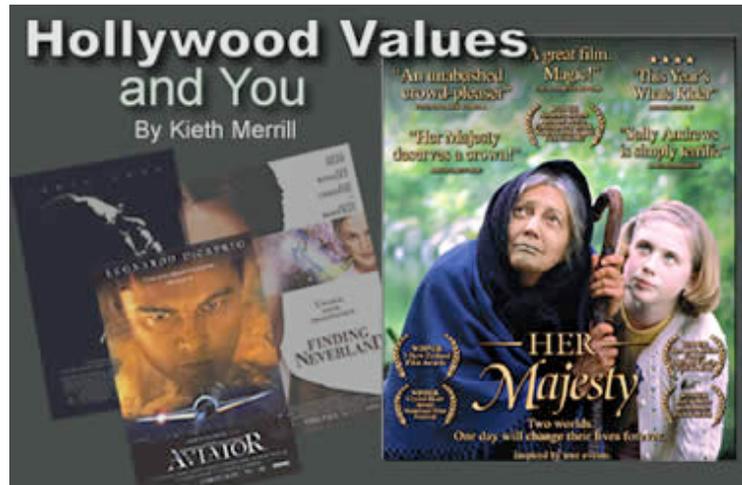
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Editor's Note: *Kieth Merrill will be teaching at Meridian Live!, our education and concert series, in Mesa, Arizona, on March 25-26. [Click here](#) for more information and to register for the event.*

As a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Kieth Merrill previews the films nominated for awards in order to cast his ballot.

The furor of Oscars is upon us. Are you out of touch with Hollywood? If you say "yes," you are not alone. In fact, you are part of a growing majority. Happily it does not mean that the days of conservative movie-lovers are numbered.

Read on to discover a movie you will love but one that Hollywood would never make. And why that happens.

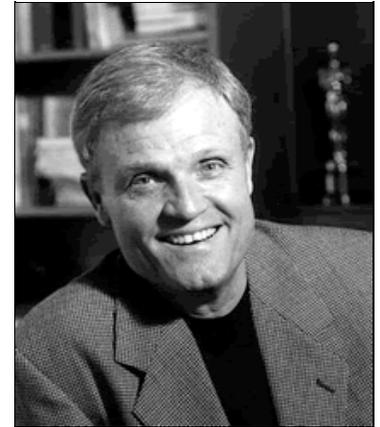
In response to the question, "Do Hollywood movie-makers share your values?" a whopping 70% of American's polled said "No." Another 10% said, "It depends." That means, of course, that since some good films like *Incredibles* and *Spiderman 2* are considered "Hollywood," their values "sometimes" coincide. Only 13% of the respondents gave an unqualified, "Yes."

In reality, you aren't out of touch with Hollywood. In fact, it is the other way around. Hollywood is out of touch with you! Most Christians, conservatives and Latter-day Saints in particular would agree that for the most part, Hollywood is out of touch with America.

According to former MPAA czar Jack Valenti, the Hollywood movie machine cranked out 750 films in 2004. He confessed with his inimitable twinkle that, "Some were so bad you had to subpoena the audience to get them into the theater."

According to this year's Reminder List for Distinguished Achievements During 2004 from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts

The Author:



Kieth Merrill, in addition to being a fulltime, Academy-award winning director, is Meridian Magazine's Film Editor.

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the movie
Kieth
Merrill
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"the most
family"



and Sciences, only 270 films were recognized as “eligible” for Oscar consideration.

How many movies did you see last year? How many “really good movies” do you remember? How many did you recommend to your friends? How many of the motion pictures that were “distinguished” by Oscar nominations did you ever even hear about before they were nominated?

If out of 750 movies there were only a dozen that you liked, it is fair to say that somewhere there’s a disconnect. Perhaps you should feel lucky to be out of touch with Hollywood. Those of us who make films struggle to reconcile what we do with who we are and how to make a difference “in” the system but not “of” the system. But that is for another day.



Unlike the memorable years when blockbusters like *Titanic*, (see end note) and *Lord of the Rings* were both critically acclaimed and popular favorites, 2004 was a lackluster year for great films if you draw conclusions from the Academy Award nominations. [With maybe one exception?]

Films nominated for Best Picture include the following:

The Aviator

“A biopic depicting the early years of legendary director and aviator Howard Hughes' career, from the late 1920's to the mid-1940's. Rated PG-13 for thematic elements, sexual content, nudity, language and a crash sequence.”

My take: Entertaining, epic but tediously episodic with a terrible ending. Scorsese’s fascination with Hughes’ movie, *Hell’s Angels*, distorted the balance and left too much of the inside story out. *[I know one of Howard Hughes trusted executive/confidants personally. He was with Hughes for a lifetime. We discussed the making of a feature film and Scorsese missed a lot. Too bad he was content to skim across the bigger bumps of a life that anyone who cares about Howard Hughes already knows.]*

Finding Neverland

“The movie details the experiences of *Peter Pan* author J.M. Barrie, which led him to write the children's classic. He got to know four children who have no fathers. Drawing from his time with the kids, he writes a story about children who don't want to grow up.” Rated PG for mild thematic elements and brief language.

My take: Recommended. It is the one probable “classic” in the slate of Oscar contenders. There is much to like about this film. *[But then some of us are happy to pay \$9.50 to watch Johnny Depp read the telephone directory]*

Million Dollar Baby

“A hardened fighter-come-trainer works with a determined woman in her attempt to establish herself as a boxer.” Rated PG-13 for violence, some disturbing images, thematic material and language.

My Take: I agree with critics and promoters that this as Clint Eastwood’s best work. But only after the film

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opened did the dark underbelly of the story roll into view, with a theme that shifts from shades of *Rocky* to a depiction of euthanasia as our hero commits murder in the form of assisted suicide. Conservative commentator, Debbie Schlussel, predicts that *Million Dollar Baby* will win the Oscar "because it's Hollywood's best political propaganda of the year ... it supports killing the handicapped, literally putting their lights out."

Ray

"The extraordinary life and career of the legendary popular music pianist, Ray Charles, a man who fought harder and went farther than anyone thought possible." Rated PG-13 for depiction of drug addiction, sexuality and some thematic elements.

My take: Taylor Hackford's best work to date. A memorable biopic for fans of Ray Charles, but tainted by depictions of drugs and sexuality. The flashback to his early childhood is stirring stuff but episodic in nature and primarily of interest to movie buffs and fans.

Sideways

"Two men reaching middle age with not much to show but disappointment, embark on a week long road trip through California's wine country in search of wine, in search of women, and in search of themselves. It is a sort of "final fling" only a week before one of them is to be married." Rated R for language, strong sexual content and nudity.

My take: Hollywood's darling movie of the year is proof positive that they are out of touch with America. This movie, "while artfully done" by some standards, is a distasteful wallow in the amoral mud and mindset of Hollywood. This "final fling" with old buddies is in truth a deceptive Hollywood euphemism for lust, lies, infidelity and fornication.

Vera Drake

"Abortionist Vera Drake finds her beliefs and practices clash with the mores of 1950s Britain – a conflict that leads to tragedy for her family." Rated R for depiction of strong thematic material.

My Take: Mike Leigh was the only nominee for Best Director for a film that was not nominated as Best Picture. Edging out Marc Forster who directed *Finding Neverland*, the nomination put this pro-abortion film in the spotlight.

Samuel Goldwyn said, "If you want to send a message use Western Union." Mike Leigh and US Distributor, Fine Line Features, opted to use this movie to send their message and promote their pro-abortion sympathies. It is finely crafted piece of propaganda. By the time we discover the good-hearted Vera Drake is performing clandestine abortions, she has endeared herself to us with selfless service.

Unlike Best Film winners *Titanic* and *Lord of the Rings*, the audience response to the films selected by this year's Hollywood

elite seem to emphasize the growing chasm between what Hollywood is determined to make and what people really want to see. The audience voices its opinion loud and clear. They plunk down money or they don't.

On the day the nominations were announced, the total gross revenue of all five films nominated for Best Picture put together was less than one audience favorite, *Spiderman 2*. Granted the Academy is "far too sophisticated" to recognize a fun-filled fantasy like *Spiderman* for its honors and accolades, but it does make one wonder.

The Academy Awards Ceremony itself is falling into disfavor. TV ratings have seen a steady and significant decline and the number of people who tune in to Hollywood's annual love fest of self-adoration is dropping. The inexplicable choice of badmouth bad boy Chris Rock to host this year's show promises to push ratings lower still.

Here are the most successful films of 2004, according to the audience response.

<u>Title</u>	<u>Gross Box Office [To Date]</u>
<i>Shrek 2</i>	436,000,000
<i>Spiderman 2</i>	373,000,000
<i>The Passion of the Christ</i>	370,000,000
<i>Harry Potter</i>	249,000,000
<i>Incredibles</i>	232,000,000

Only one of the most successful films of 2004 was nominated in a major category. *Incredibles* was nominated as Best Animated Feature.

The enormous success of this film may be evidence enough that being "out of touch" with Hollywood" is a good thing. Brad Bird, the writer, director and flat-out genius behind Pixar Studio's incredible *Incredibles*, is a kid from Kalispell, Montana, who cut his teeth in the movie business as an animator for Disney, moved to Pixar 500 miles north of Hollywood, and hasn't bothered to post his picture on IMDb. [Internet Movie Database]

When confronted by the apparent disconnect between the movies that America buys tickets to see and the movies nominated for Oscars, Jack Valenti defends his Hollywood cronies by arguing, "It is a business and studios greenlight movies they believe will make money." The facts do not support his contention that moviemakers cater to their audience in an effort to turn profits ahead of their own social and political agendas.

No matter how you slice the movie business – by star vehicles, by budget levels, by sequels or franchises – by far the best return on investment comes from the not-so-glamorous world of G-rated films On the flip side are the R-rated films, which dominate the total releases and yet bring easily the worst return on investment. A whopping 646 R-rated films were released in 2003 – 69% of the total output – but only four of the top 20 grossing movies of the year were R-rated films.

Only 3-4 % of the films produced in any given year are rated "G." In fairness I must confess that as a filmmaker I understand the curious anomaly of business and profit versus art and self-expression. Creativity is often sustained by powerful egos. The courage to create may not be possible without it.

There has always been an antagonistic dichotomy between "the

artists” and “the suits” in Hollywood. An executive at Disney told me that they plead with directors to give them G and PG rated films but that in the process the filmmaker’s egos, the need for approval among peers, a passion to be “cutting edge,” and a driving sense of social responsibility to share – or impose – their views and values on the world inevitably taint the products they create.

Hollywood and the audience are polarized to an even greater extent than the national schism between the political left and right. Some argue that the meaning of “conservative” and “liberal” when speaking of values differs from the traditional implications of “left and right” in a political context. That may be true in Nebraska, but in Hollywood the lines between outspoken liberal politics, Bush-bashing, and enshrining Michael Moore as the reigning high priest and the meaning of “values” is very blurred if it exists at all.

Whether driven by politics or the lingering legacy of the sixties Hollywood’s attitudes about religion, family, marriage, war, freedom, abortion, gay marriage, sexual promiscuity, adultery, infidelity, capitalism, socialism, business, civil rights, world government, global warming and the environment are decidedly left.

Michael Medved points out that while most movies are not political when a Hollywood film comes along flashing a message it is always a liberal point of view. Did you see *The Day After Tomorrow*? The film came to a slam dead halt to deliver the global warming message just in case the audience didn’t get it. I’m surprised they didn’t simply cut to Al Gore making a speech. In the remake of *Manchurian Candidate*, Hollywood changed the bad guys from Communists to a global corporation. In conservative writer, Tom Clancy’s novel, *The Sum of All Fears*, the bad guys are Islamic Terrorists. By the time Clancy’s story was filtered by Hollywood and Ben Affleck was assigned the starring role, the Islamic Terrorists in the book became white right-wing extremists – Neo Nazis on the big screen.

So what’s a conservative, religious, family-oriented, movie lover who embraces traditional values to do? There is a rising tide of conservative filmmakers who not only understand America but also embrace the traditional values of a huge audience largely disenfranchised by much of what Hollywood churns out. Many are from the proverbial heartland themselves ...whether actually or attitudinally.

Art reflects life. In the movies, the lives and values reflected are those of the people who make the movies. It isn’t rocket science. If you want movies that reflect your values, you’d better find and support the filmmakers who think the way you do.

There is much that can be done at the grassroots level to insure the success of this growing motion picture industry outside the Hollywood mainstream. In the months to come we’ll talk more about it. You can become involved in ways not possible before. You can make a difference. It is an exciting time.

Meanwhile, don’t miss the movies that Hollywood refuses to make. I am *not* talking about “Mormon Cinema.” I am talking about a handful of marvelous independent movies for the broad general audience created by talented men and women who think like you. I am talking about a growing number of “family-friendly films” that have been ignored by, overshadowed by or even rejected by Hollywood.

Let me introduce you to one I just discovered and encourage you to see it if you can. You won’t be sorry.

Her Majesty is a wonderful feel-good again movie inspired by a true story of a young girl in New Zealand who was named after the Queen of England. In this charming coming of age tale, our young Elizabeth is obsessed by all things "Queenly." When she hears that Queen Elizabeth is visiting New Zealand, she launches an intensive letter-writing campaign to persuade Her Majesty to come to her small rural town.



Hollywood was interested in the idea, but screenwriter Mark Gordon was unwilling to make requested changes because he felt the feeling and spirit of his story would be compromised. Hollywood passed. But the story was too good to remain untold. The project became an independent film.

Two remarkable women, Susan Lyon Hailey (who earned an MBA from Harvard) and Lisa Gordon (a graduate of Stanford with a law degree from Georgetown University), teamed up to raise the money and executive produce the film. They persuaded Hollywood veteran producer, Walter Coblenz [*The Candidate, All the President's Men, The Onion Field, etc.*] to help bring *Her Majesty* to the screen. In the end Mark became helmsman of the project in his directorial debut.

As is increasingly the route for independent films, *Her Majesty* was taken on the festival circuit and shown in more than 35 venues. The audience reaction was extremely positive. The script was honored at Sundance. The film was adorned with numerous accolades, including several Audience Awards for Best Feature, Best Film of Festival, Best Performances and Special Jury Awards.

The film stars newcomer Sally Andrews, who perfectly captures the sensitivity, silliness and innocent optimism of a girl on her way to becoming a young woman. Vicky Haughton in her role as the ole Maori woman became for me the title-right character of the film. The ending and resolution are heart-felt and satisfying.



Critics are raving. "Her Majesty deserves a crown." "Inspiring and entertaining." "Endearing and inspirational." "This year's *Whale Rider*." "A beautiful story of a special friendship." "A charming and beautiful film." "There's real integrity at its core." "All the ingredients of a crowd pleaser." "An exceptional movie, a must see." "Sally Andrews is simply terrific." "As royally charming as it is visually appealing. Your kids will like it and so will you." And the praise goes on.

The film opened in limited release on February 18. One of the venues was Salt Lake City, Utah. Imagine my surprise when Jeff Vice, film critic for *Deseret Morning News*, broke rank with a delighted audience, a long list of festival awards and a gaggle of film critics from around the world who loved the film by expressing his "royal disappointment." Perhaps Jeff's expectations were too high because so many of his critic/colleagues compared the film to *Whale Rider*, one of his favorite movies. But come on, Jeff. Of all the film critics in America, you should be celebrating this charming film that speaks to your constituent audience in a language familiar to them in almost open defiance to the movies coming from "the left coast."

Hollywood may be out of touch with America, but there is no need for America to be out of touch with wonderful films. The rising ranks of independent filmmakers who love their audience and share our core values means that with or without tinsel town there will be marvelous movies for us to cherish.

Her Majesty is certainly one of them. You have significant influence on the success of this and other excellent films ignored by Hollywood. The audience is the ultimate power in this business. If *Her Majesty* is not coming to a theater near you soon I urge you to organize a long list of like-minded families, contact the management of your favorite theater and request that they book the film. Trailers, images and information are available at www.hermajestythemovie.com/. The film is rated PG.

Next month: *Down and Derby*, a delightful new comedy from writer/director Eric Hendershot and producer John Stone. It not only shares your values it recaptures a marvelous memory from your life.

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