


Will **Kate** beat **Anne**?
What about **Mickey** vs. **Sean**?
Thelma Adams and other
insiders weigh the strengths
and weaknesses of the actors
aiming for Academy Awards

BY BRADLEY JACOBS

RACE TO THE OSCARS



Winslet has emerged as "the Meryl Streep of her generation," says Adams. The Academy Awards will air Feb. 22 on ABC at 8 P.M. EST.

BEST ACTRESS

Kate Winslet, 33 *The Reader*

WHY SHE'LL WIN The frontrunner's role as a Nazi prison guard is "astoundingly complex," says *Us* film critic Thelma Adams. "She's physically and emotionally naked." Plus, this is her sixth nod — with no wins.

WHY SHE'LL LOSE Many disliked her Globes speeches.

Angelina Jolie, 33 *Changeling*

WHY SHE'LL WIN As a mother fighting for her lost son, "she gives a performance that says Big Acting in a way voters like," *Boston Globe* film critic Ty Burr tells *Us*.

WHY SHE'LL LOSE The movie earned mixed reviews.

Meryl Streep, 59 *Doubt*

WHY SHE'LL WIN The most nominated actor in history (it's her 15th) hasn't won since 1982's *Sophie's Choice*.

WHY SHE'LL LOSE Some deemed her wicked nun over-the-top. Says Burr, "She really twirls her moustache."

Anne Hathaway, 26 *Rachel Getting Married*

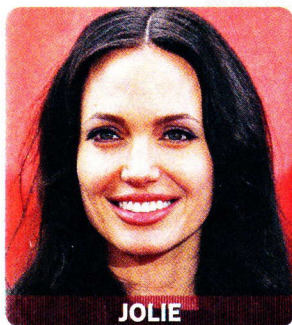
WHY SHE'LL WIN Playing a former addict, she wowed audiences, and "Hollywood loves a waif who gets serious," Reuters movie writer Bob Tourtellotte tells *Us*.

WHY SHE'LL LOSE Some critics soured on the film's indulgent moments, including long musical interludes.

Melissa Leo, 48 *Frozen River*

WHY SHE'LL WIN "She digs deep into her role as an angry bigot — and doesn't wear makeup!" says Adams.

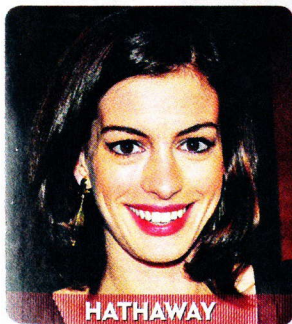
WHY SHE'LL LOSE The indie earned only \$2.3 million.



JOLIE



STREEP

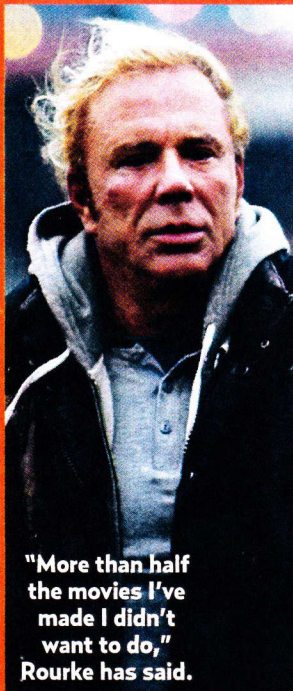


HATHAWAY



LEO

BEST ACTOR



"More than half the movies I've made I didn't want to do," Rourke has said.

Mickey Rourke, 52 *The Wrestler*

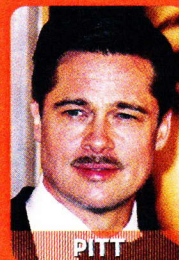
WHY HE'LL WIN "Everybody loves a comeback story, especially one about someone who was pop-culture road-kill for years," says Burr of the frontrunner, who won a Golden Globe for his role as an aging wrestler.

WHY HE'LL LOSE The drama has some gruesome scenes. (He gets stapled at one point!) And *Variety* columnist Anne Thompson tells *Us* Rourke's red carpet tude could hurt him: "He's a bit of a loose cannon."

Brad Pitt, 45 *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

WHY HE'LL WIN "It's a bravura Oscar role: He goes from old to young in an epic," says Adams. Plus, *Button* got the most noms of any film this year (13).

WHY HE'LL LOSE Some wonder what was acting, and what was CGI.



PITT

Sean Penn, 48 *Milk*

WHY HE'LL WIN Playing a gay-rights pioneer, "Mr. Tough as Nails shows a vulnerability that audiences have never seen," says Tourtellotte.

WHY HE'LL LOSE He took home a statue for *Mystic River* just five years ago.

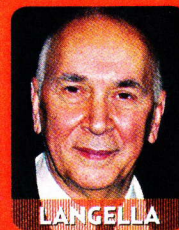


PENN

Frank Langella, 71 *Frost/Nixon*

WHY HE'LL WIN Says Adams of first-time nominee (and sentimental fave) Langella, who plays Richard Nixon: "He's obscene, wily — and a former president!" And Oscar loves historical roles.

WHY HE'LL LOSE *Frost's* buzz is fading.

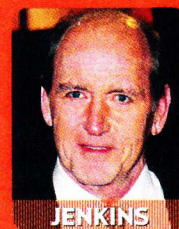


LANGELLA

Richard Jenkins, 61 *The Visitor*

WHY HE'LL WIN The longtime character actor (best known for *Six Feet Under*) "offers a quiet, detailed portrayal of a widowed professor," says Thompson.

WHY HE'LL LOSE For Jenkins, "the nomination is a win," says Adams.



JENKINS

JOLIE: FRANK O'NEILL/GETTY IMAGES; STREEP: JEFFREY MATTAR/GETTY IMAGES; HATHAWAY: JEFFREY MATTAR/GETTY IMAGES; LEO: JEFFREY MATTAR/GETTY IMAGES; PITT: JEFFREY MATTAR/GETTY IMAGES; PENN: JEFFREY MATTAR/GETTY IMAGES; LANGELLA: JEFFREY MATTAR/GETTY IMAGES; JENKINS: JEFFREY MATTAR/GETTY IMAGES

Burr calls Cruz's performance as a suicidal, egomaniacal painter "tempestuous and fully felt."



BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS

Penelope Cruz, 34 *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*

WHY SHE'LL WIN "Voters say she's a great actress in Spanish, but weaker in English," says Tourtellotte. "She speaks both well here. She's the frontrunner."

WHY SHE'LL LOSE Some *still* don't take her seriously.

Marisa Tomei, 44 *The Wrestler*

WHY SHE'LL WIN "She turns her stripper-with-a-heart-of-gold into someone real," says Thompson.

WHY SHE'LL LOSE She won for *My Cousin Vinny*.

Viola Davis, 43 *Doubt*

WHY SHE'LL WIN As a mother who makes a shocking decision, she outshines Streep in their pivotal scene.

WHY SHE'LL LOSE She has very limited screen time.

Amy Adams, 34 *Doubt*

WHY SHE'LL WIN She makes big hits (*Enchanted*) and small dramas (*Doubt*). "Voters like that," says Adams.

WHY SHE'LL LOSE Costar Davis has more heat.

Taraji P. Henson, 38 *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

WHY SHE'LL WIN The Academy loves to reward a character actress (*Hustle & Flow*) with a great résumé.

WHY SHE'LL LOSE There's no big Oscar moment.

BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR

Heath Ledger *The Dark Knight*

WHY HE'LL WIN "Even if he hadn't died, he'd be the frontrunner," Burr says of Ledger. "His Joker is far deeper and creepier than the usual comic villain."

WHY HE'LL LOSE No reason. It's the night's sure bet.

Philip Seymour Hoffman, 41 *Doubt*

WHY HE'LL WIN "He makes you believe a priest accused of child abuse may be innocent," says Tourtellotte.

WHY HE'LL LOSE He won three years ago for *Capote*.

Josh Brolin, 41 *Milk*

WHY HE'LL WIN With raves for his work in *Milk* and *W*, voters see him "in a new league," says Thompson.

WHY HE'LL LOSE Some say his role is underwritten.

Robert Downey Jr., 43 *Tropic Thunder*

WHY HE'LL WIN "Downey ended the year finally an A-lister, even after all his past issues," says Adams.

WHY HE'LL LOSE Voters may dislike his blackface.

Michael Shannon, 34 *Revolutionary Road*

WHY HE'LL WIN As a mentally unstable man, he steals scenes from Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio.

WHY HE'LL LOSE Um, Michael who?

"The Academy will also want to give Heath the award they didn't give him for *Brokeback Mountain*," says Tourtellotte.

