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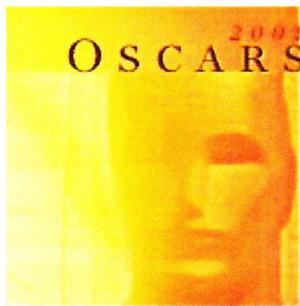
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"So many people talk about how much they love it," says Ebert of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon." "Hardly anyone ever talks about how much they love 'Gladiator'."



Thumbs Down

**Roger Ebert slays
"Gladiator"**

By B. J. Sigesmund

NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

If you're feeling a little lethargic about this year's nominees for best picture, you're not alone. Roger Ebert, the Chicago Sun-Times movie critic and co-host of "Ebert & Roeper and the Movies," is absolutely grimacing over "Gladiator," the favorite to win Sunday night. He gave it a thumbs down when it first came out—and he's only angrier about it now. NEWSWEEK's B. J. Sigesmund chatted with the critic about his disdain for the Russell Crowe star vehicle and which film he thinks should

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NEWSWEEK: You didn't think much of "Gladiator." Tell us about that.

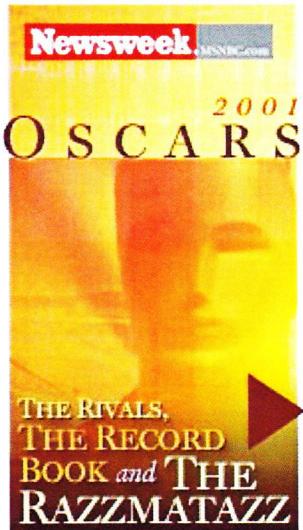
Robert Ebert: If it were to win, it would go down in history as one example of temporary madness on the part of the Academy. It just doesn't measure up with films like "Spartacus" and "Ben-Hur." The most unbelievable nomination it got was for best visual effects, because the visual effects are so noticeably bad! The Roman Coliseum was very badly handled. I'm at a loss to understand why it got 12 nominations. It may be an indication that members of the Academy may work in the movie industry, but many of them apparently are no better at judging movies than those who work manufacturing cardboard boxes or refrigerators.

Can you give us a couple other examples of temporary madness among the Academy?

There was the year "How Green Was My Valley" won instead of "Citizen Kane" [1941]. Then there was the year "In the Heat of the Night" won instead of "Bonnie and Clyde" [1967]. Another good one was the year "Out of Africa" won instead of "The Color Purple" [1985].

Did your opinion of "Gladiator" change over the year?

No. I gave it two stars and a thumbs down when it first came out.



Were you in the minority among critics?

Not really. A good many of the better critics have not taken it very seriously. The Boston Globe, the Kansas City Star, the Village Voice, the L.A. Times, Salon. Well anyway, who cares? That's the way I feel. And I've received a great deal of e-mail from people who were astonished it got so many nominations.

You think "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" actually has a good chance of winning, right?

Yes, I do. It's an exhilarating film. It uplifts the audience and thrills them. It's the only film this year that audiences interrupted with applause. I think when the Academy goes for an Oscar picture, they vote for the picture that was the most transcending for them, the one that lifts them out of who they were when they walked into the theater and elevated and exhilarated them the most. "Crouching Tiger" might be that picture among the five.

But could it *really* beat "Gladiator?"

So many people talk about how much they love it and hardly anyone ever talks about how much they love "Gladiator." Of course, it might split its vote between best foreign film and best picture, since it's nominated in both categories. So some people who might be tempted to vote for it for best foreign film might say, 'Well, since it's nominated in the best foreign film category, I'll vote for it over there. I'll vote for a different film in this category.' But if you want to vote for an epic, certainly it's an epic that's much more poetic and visually inspired than "Gladiator."

But "Gladiator" is the favorite to win. If it's so mediocre, how did that happen?

I don't know. Oddly enough, I think if "Crouching Tiger" didn't get nominated in the foreign category, it would be the favorite. "Chocolat" has no chance at all. Voters are already feeling remorse for having nominated it. "Erin Brockovich" will get its Oscar in the best actress category.

That leaves only "Traffic." You're a big fan of that film.

It's the best of the nominated films. It's the most cutting edge, the most original stylistically, the most accomplished in terms of dealing with a complex social issue. It's stimulating. It's a little more daring.

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Why did "Traffic" never

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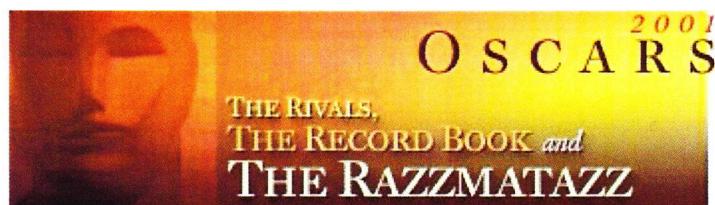
emerge as the front-runner? Did it lack the emotional resonance the Academy likes to reward?

There are two strikes against it. One, it's not a feel-good picture. And two, it's about a controversial,

negatively charged issue: drug addition. The Academy tends to want to vote for sunnier movies.

Then again, they picked "American Beauty."

That was the exception that proves the rule. It's astonishing that they could pick "American Beauty" last year and this year they would nominate a really conventional film like "Gladiator." I don't understand that. Maybe the support for "Gladiator" reflects the new Bush era, where we're back in the mainstream again.



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