**By PATRICK HALL**
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Since the 84th Annual Academy Awards are coming up on Sunday, Feb. 26, I’m looking at a few contenders for Best Picture, starting with “War Horse,” a film directed by **Steven Spielberg** and distributed by Touchstone Pictures.

I always make picks on who will win each category, and some years I do great, like in 2009 when I got behind “The Hurt Locker,” which won six Oscars. I also do poorly sometimes, such as 2008 when I was predicting “There Will Be Blood” would clean house, but only won two of its six nominations.

This year my favorite and who I’m hitching my wagon to is “War Horse,” a story of young Albert Narracott, played by **Jeremy Irvine**, and the thoroughbred horse he names Joey. The two forge a remarkable bond through Albert’s training of Joey and their determination to prove that Joey can carry his weight on the family farm despite not being a plough horse.

Joey is then “drafted” into the British Cavalry on the eve of World War I and later Albert also enlists. Although the war and many miles separate the two, the film depicts a friendship and determination in both Albert and Joey that was absolutely stunning.

The ability of any film to successfully characterize an animal is amazing. “War Horse” achieved that characterization at a level I have never seen thanks to the incredible script and direction.

When one of your film’s main characters can’t speak and is obviously not human, it takes something special to make an audience understand what that character is feeling and thinking. Throughout the film, Joey’s emotions and struggles are equally, if not more powerful, than anything his human counterparts experience.

Spielberg makes the audience vividly see and understand Joey’s every emotion, his devotion to friends, be they horse or human, and his strength, determination and fear in the face of something he cannot control or escape.

“Suddenly I'm faced with the challenge of making a movie where I not only had to watch the horse, I had to compel the audience to watch it along with me. I had to pay attention to what it was doing and understand its feelings. It was a whole new experience for me,” Spielberg told *E mpire Magazine* in October 2011, about the film’s focus on Joey.

“War Horse” was an amazing story and a gripping, intense and very emotional film that parallels Albert’s struggle through the war with his best friend, Andrew Easton played by **Matt Milne**, perfectly with Joey’s struggles with other horses he encounters along the way.

Many scenes are painful to watch, as Joey is truly a helpless character in the film, creating many gut-wrenching moments that should flood anyone with emotional overload. The attachment the audience is able to forge with Joey speaks to the feelings we have for the helpless animal, Joey as a character and people who are caught up in the realities of war both in the past and today.

Most of the horror, death and desolation of World War I is off-camera but is always heard or subtly there to remind the audience what these characters are miraculously surviving. Even during moments of reprieve where characters seem to escape those horrors, the film brings everything back, showing just how horribly World War I affected every living thing in Europe.

I give an incredible amount of credit to horse trainers **Bobby Lovgren**, **Bill Lawrence** and **Zelli e Bullen**. In total, eight horses were used to depict Joey through his life as a colt and an adult. Of course, no animals were harmed during the filming.

“War Horse” is up for six awards: Best Picture, Best Sound Editing, Best Sound Mixing, Best Original Score, Best Cinematography and Best Art Direction. I’m predicting “War Horse” is going to take home four of those six awards.

In the category of Best Sound Editing, “War Horse” is up against several worthy challengers, but I’m banking my choice on the fact that in the past, this award goes to movies with a wartime setting almost automatically.

In 2010 it was “Hurt Locker,” in 2007 it was “Letters from Iwo Jima,” in 2004 was “Master and Commander,” and I’ll just go back to 2003 for “Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers.”

When a wartime movie has been in the running, and I know “Lord of the Rings” isn’t a real war, but it had a lot of battle sequences, you can bet on those to win this category. Every other year, no war-film has been in the nomination so when one shows up, count on it.

Best Sound Mixing has only officially been a category since 2004, when “Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King” won. Since then, three films with musical numbers have won (“Ray” in 2005, “Dreamgirls” in 2007 and “Slumdog Millionaire” in 2009) and other than that, it has been films with guns blazing and bombs exploding. I’d be surprised if “War Horse” missed this award.

I’m also choosing “War Horse” as an underdog candidate for Best Cinematography. The work done for the film was stunning with incredible camerawork, focus and fantastic uses of color in many scenes, including the film’s finale that created an ambiance to each scene. There’s strong competition, but I’m picking this as an upset.

“War Horse” came in late, Christmas Day 2011, but is my pick as the best film that I had seen in 2011. I’m putting my money on “War Horse” to win Best Picture as well as the other three awards mentioned above.

If the eight horses could be collectively nominated for Best Actor, I’d gladly give them my vote as well.

Check back next week as I quickly review a few films also nominated for Best Picture and give you an idea on all my award winners.

*Although ‘War Horse’ is no longer in local theaters, expect it to be out for rent and on DVD in the next few months. The film is rated PG-13 and has a runtime of 146 minutes.*

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