

# International Intrigue: Stakes Are High, But Tempers Are Higher, With Foreign Language Oscars® Voting

By Tim  
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ONCE UPON A TIME IN ANATOLIA

**M**ark Johnson, head of the Motion Picture Academy's foreign language committee, was standing in front of a chalk board with three movie titles on it.

Johnson and his colleagues had spent the last few hours arguing over which, if any, of these three movies should be added to the six that had already won the general foreign language Oscar® committee vote to determine which films would be considered for nominations at the 83rd Oscars.®

According to several people familiar with what happened at the contentious meeting earlier this year, those seated around the oval boardroom table on the top floor of the Academy's Wilshire Boulevard headquarters that Tuesday

night in January included director Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (*The Lives of Others*), screenwriter Michael Tolkin (*Nine*) and Steven Spielberg's regular cinematographer Janusz Kamiński. People had been arguing passionately about which movies they believed in for hours: Much like some kind of survival game, the 20 members of the executive committee had to decide which of 53 titles were about to be thrown overboard. The arguing narrowed down to three movie titles chalked

on the board: *Confessions* from Japan, *Inciendes* from Canada and *Dogtooth* from Greece. In the end, *Inciendes* and *Dogtooth* would make it through to the final five.

That *Dogtooth* was actually nominated for an Academy Award® incensed some members of the general committee. Even being nominated for a best foreign language Oscar® is a huge endorsement, while winning creates an audience for your movie in America; otherwise few subtitled movies are ever even seen in the U.S.

"*Dogtooth* was a disgrace. It was so despicable," says one general committee member, who, like so many others involved in the process, insisted on anonymity when talking about the volatile subject of the foreign language film committee. The executive committee was criticized for waving through this Greek entry, which some thought pornographic.

This year's inclusion of *Dogtooth* encapsulated what many general committee members feel: They are ignored by Johnson and his executive committee, which can add up to three films into the nine semi-finalists regardless of whether anybody on the general committee even liked them. One general committee member says: "If we see all these movies, what's the point? I hate to see my vote prostituted."

Johnson says that anybody who thinks their vote is being wasted is approaching the whole thing incorrectly: "They're not being overridden. They're coming up with six selections instead of five. Just because other people's votes are added to someone's vote doesn't denigrate that vote. I would think that all of us voters would welcome as much participation from the Academy members as possible. One of the absolute joys of this committee is seeing all these movies, not worrying about what your vote means."

The new system was refined in 2008 after the Academy grew tired of being ridiculed in the press for ignoring important foreign language films such as 2007 Cannes Film Festival winner *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*. To avoid the embarrassments of the past, where some world-class



MISS BALA

movies were passed over by the general committee, the Academy evolved a system where a coterie of people has the power to save three films. The feeling was that the general committee members — who, by and large, are older Academy members who have enough time on their hands to watch all these foreign films — were too conservative in their taste. Johnson says: "We had criticisms that the general committee choices tended to be slightly safer, while some of the more daring films both thematically and stylistically were overlooked."

This presumption has angered committee members, who accuse Johnson of running the foreign language section as his fiefdom and, worse, of feathering his own nest. Johnson, they say, snaps up remake rights to foreign language films because he sees them first, giving him an unfair advantage over other producers.

"Why does the general committee go through what they go through, knowing that a committee handpicked by the chairman is going to influence three additional choices?" one marketing executive asks. "Many times those choices end up in the five [finalists]. That's the discontent. Ultimately it comes down to 'We don't trust our members to do the right thing. We were tired of taking criticism from the press, so this is our solution.' It's really a dis and I don't care how you slice it."

Johnson rejects accusations that running the foreign language Oscar® section gives him an unfair advantage over rival producers when it comes to remake rights. Although he is developing an English-language remake of

Argentinean Oscar® winner *The Secret in Their Eyes* — and he makes no secret of wanting to work with this year's Oscar®-winning director Susanne Bier (*In a Better World*) and Israeli director Joseph Cedar, whose *Footnote* is already being talked about as making it into 2012's final five — Johnson says he sees films at the same time as everybody else. He has no inside track. Johnson notes he only optioned *The Secret in Their Eyes* a year after its U.S. release, long after any other producer could have jumped in.

Indeed, if more producers came to see these foreign films, they too would see what great actors, directors and writers there are out beyond the 310 area code.

"I'm very careful about not overstepping my bounds as a chairperson or abusing my position. But it's part of the joy of this committee. Some of the best filmmaking in the world is done outside of Hollywood. Selfishly for me as a producer, it's a way for me to discover new people to work with," says Johnson who has just one vote alongside everybody else on the committee.

Johnson also plays a strong part in picking 20 of the 30 committee members who sit on two final panels watching the nine shortlisted films and boiling those down to the five nominees. That leaves just 10 members based in New York and Los Angeles who come from the general committee; the rest are invited personally by Johnson. This year's final committee members included actors Anne Hathaway and Ryan Gosling and directors Michael Mann and Julian Schnabel. Says Johnson, "Philosophically, it's about what's best for the movies and I don't think the general committee

is representative of the working Academy at large, which is why we brought in these other stages."

Ultimately, the conflict between the general committee and the executive committee boils down to a matter of taste. The general committee appears to prefer films that are emotionally charged, whereas the executive committee seems to go for award-winners, ensuring nothing that has done well on the festival circuit has been overlooked.

So, given that the general committee dislikes entries that contain excessive violence, strong sexuality or are overlong, there are five titles on the semi-finalist list for the 84th Oscars® that could ignite a new round of protests, say the handful of insiders I spoke to.

## Beauty

SOUTH AFRICA

Oliver Hermanus, director of *Beauty*, has said that his film is meant to divide people. It's certainly stirred up the Academy, with one insider describing it as "gay and graphically violent." A general committee member told me that *Beauty* is "definitely pornography." *Beauty* follows a South African lumber mill owner, who falls in love with his nephew-in-law. The film explores the gay subculture of Afrikaans farmers, which some Academy members think should have stayed rightfully hidden. "I don't care if anybody is gay but the masculine rape was horrible," says this voter. Still, if your thing is big beards and bellies going at it in a homosexual orgy, this is the one for you.

TLA Releasing has picked up *Beauty* for U.S. release next summer.

## Miss Bala

MEXICO

The problem that the Academy may have with *Miss Bala* is that it is such a bleak account of man's inhumanity to man: Voters watching the screening found themselves as much in the dark about what's going on as the film's heroine — an innocent who inadvertently gets caught up in a violent drug war on her way to compete in the Miss Baja California beauty pageant. It's not that much violence is shown on-screen, it's the way director Gerardo Naranzo builds nauseating, gripping fear using long unflinching takes that is so unsettling.

"*Miss Bala* is not a film for an average 70-year-old Academy member," says one insider. "The violence was overwhelming," agrees another committee member.

Fox International Pictures will release *Miss Bala* in the U.S. on Jan. 20.

## Once Upon a Time in Anatolia

TURKEY

The problem with *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* from the Academy's point of view is its sheer length. *Ancientline* columnist Pete Hammond found the film heavy going when he saw it in Cannes where it won the Grand Jury Prize, calling the 160-minute film "a contemplative minimalist art film with no music and no real plot beyond anything a typical episode of *CSI* covers in its first five minutes."

Cinema Guild will release *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* in the U.S. on Jan. 4.

## Pina

GERMANY

The Academy's problem with director Wim Wenders' 3D tribute to the late Pina Bausch, a groundbreaking modern-dance choreographer, may be that it is a documentary. "There's always been a prejudice against documentaries, and remember the actors' branch is the

largest branch in the Academy," explains one insider. This is despite Wenders having been nominated in the feature documentary category before with *Buena Vista Social Club*. Wenders credited the German choreographer with making him unafraid to show emotion. Wenders said that Bausch's work connected with him much more than anything he had seen on stage and almost anything on screen: "A body moving in space. It is the essence of being alive."

Sundance Selects will open *Pina* on Dec. 23 in New York before rolling nationwide in January.

## The Turin Horse

HUNGARY

Béla Tarr's film is inspired by the true story of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who flung his arms around an old horse in Turin that was being beaten. Tarr wondered what happened to the horse. *The Turin Horse* follows a father and daughter holed up in a ramshackle cabin, while outside a ferocious wind presages the end of the world: There are long black-and-white shots of potatoes being peeled, while father and daughter stare out of the window at the desolate landscape. That Tarr has declared this to be his last film only adds to the funeral gloom. Again, Academy members may balk at the 146-minute running time. Not that Tarr much cares. The Hungarian director recently described Academy Awards® as "stupidity."

Cinema Guild will release *The Turin Horse* on Feb. 10 stateside. ■