

Foreign Language Oscar Shortlist: A Preview Of Possibilities, Part 2

By Nancy Tartaglione | International Editor | December 18, 2014



Below is Part 2 of my annual look at the films that have a shot at making the Foreign Language Oscar shortlist. There are 83 submissions this year with some truly remarkable films in the bunch — and no 100% frontrunner. Here's a refresher on how the nine films are chosen for the shortlist which is expected to be revealed tomorrow: The phase one committee determines six of the candidates, and the other three entries are selected by the Foreign Language Film Award Executive Committee.

For the profiles below and yet to come, I spoke with the directors of the films about their inspirations and expectations. In many cases, I also checked in with the U.S. distributor about why they acquired the movies. Below is a look at the second group of four titles that have generated serious buzz over the past several weeks of screenings, Q&As and consulate lunches. For the first part in the series, [click here](#). The third edition will be released later today — and again, the films are in no particular order:

The Dardenne brothers, Jean-Pierre and Luc, are among the winningest filmmakers in the history of the Cannes Film Festival with two Palme d'Or Awards under their belts. They are also perhaps the best known Belgian filmmakers in the world and have previously repped the country at the Oscars three times. Yet somehow, these guys have never even made the shortlist. With *Two Days, One Night* they

may prove the fourth time's the charm. Luc explains that 1996's *La Promesse* and 2011's *The Kid With A Bike* "were the only ones that could have worked, and Belgium didn't choose them. This time we are happy."



Two Days, One Night premiered in Cannes and although it did not score any prizes, it won high praise. It's the story of a woman suffering from depression who returns to work and learns that her colleagues must accept giving up their bonuses if she is to keep her job. She has one weekend to convince them. Marion Cotillard is Sandra in the film which the brothers based on a real-life incident they learned about more than a decade ago. When the brothers met Cotillard, the Oscar-winning actress was shooting Jacques Audiard's *Rust & Bone* which they co-produced. At that meeting, "a cinematic lightning bolt struck," Luc says. "Everything fell right into

place, we had such a strong connection." But he also says they had trepidations because of her sheer star power. "We work with a lot of unknown actors, in the banality of things. We don't seek out stars, it's not our area." Cotillard would need to "lose her icon image — and that's what she wanted. She said, 'no problem, I must disappear.'" But not to the point that some moviegoers weren't drawn by her to see the film. This is one of the Dardennes' most commercially successful, and accessible, films and in territories where their traditional fan base is small, Luc is certain that's partly down to Cotillard.

Cotillard won the New York Film Critics Circle award for Best Actress, but her role has also touched people in different ways. While the movie is seen as a workplace drama about solidarity in Europe, audiences in the U.S. have responded to its treatment of depression. IFC President Jonathan Sehring recounts that after the film's AFI screening, "we had an entire family chase us a block and stop us. The woman had tears streaming down her face and said, 'I just want to thank you from somebody who suffers from depression for making a movie that is so resonant for me.' The whole family was crying." The Dardennes have a lot of other fans. Sehring says, "They are revered by every other filmmaker in the world. Darren Aronofsky came to the party at the New York Film Festival and hung out waiting for them, he just wanted to meet them." *Two Days One Night* opens on December 24 in NY and LA via Sundance Selects.

***The Liberator* (Venezuela), U.S. Distributor: Cohen Media Group**

A House With A View Of The Sea and *One Life And Two Trials* helmer Alberto Arvelo is representing Venezuela at the Oscars for the third time. But this year's *The Liberator*, a biopic of the military and political leader Simon Bolivar, is a departure. The previous movies were both "small, intimate, *auteur* films with an international career in festivals. *Liberator* is a completely different film, not only for its theme, but for its own process. Besides being an epic film (with all it entails), I feel that I have grown as a filmmaker since *A House With A View Of The Sea*," Arvelo says. Released in July locally, it's also a more commercial prospect. At a booming Venezuelan box office, the epic has taken nearly \$10M to make it the biggest local title of the year.

The story of Bolivar's involvement in Latin America's struggle for independence from the Spanish Empire is told from his point of view and traces his quests, military campaigns and vision to unify South America. A familiar subject to Venezuelans, Bolivar "is still unknown around the world, and surprisingly even in Latin America," Arvelo tells me. What interested him the most about making a film with this character at its center was "the humanity behind the myth; the man



underneath the bronze sculptures.” That humanity is portrayed by Edgar Ramirez with whom Arvelo was working for the third time. “I strongly believe in assembling a team that goes beyond just one film or one project.” Also starring in South America’s largest independent production ever are Danny Huston, María Valverde, Imanol Arias and *Billy Elliot*’s Gary Lewis. Overseeing a film that has so many international elements from locations to languages, “was really fun and weirdly coherent,” Arvelo says. What the fights for independence in South America have in common “is that they all got help from different parts of the world,” he notes. The decision to make *The Liberator* “in all those mother tongues, and the nature of the international co-production as it was, placed us within a curiously coherent reality in relation to the story we were telling.”



Daniel Battsek, President of [Cohen Media Group](#), which acquired the movie in Toronto, was struck by how “impressive” the film is, and the “phenomenon of Edgar Ramirez, a crossover star in both Latin American and English-language which gave it a different spin and it’s those things that set it apart.” At screenings and Q&As in LA, the UTA-repped Arvelo says he’s been moved by the “curiosity and interest of people in South American history and in figures such as Bolivar... What has

surprised me the most about those Q&As is people’s thirst to know more about that historical event.” Having been close to the altar before, Arvelo says an Oscar nomination would be a very big deal. “I can’t imagine someone who doesn’t celebrate such an honor. Making films is a highly complicated craft that always entails great sacrifices. After completing the usually hard and demanding journey of a film, receiving an award or a nomination will always be a reason for celebration. I must confess that it is already a huge honor and award for me that the film has stirred up so many emotions and beautiful reviews.”



Ida (Poland), U.S. Distributor: Music Box

Pawel Pawlikowski’s *Ida* originally came out back in the fall of 2013, but it’s top of mind among awards bodies this year. After garnering a Golden Globe nomination last week, it went on to scoop five European Film Awards over the weekend. The director of such films as *My Summer Of Love* and *The Woman In The Fifth* tells me “I’ve never had this before, this long run of excitement and visibility... I’ve had to change my body clock.” The black-and-white shot film is the story of Anna, a young novice nun who learns she has a living relative she must visit before taking her vows. Her aunt Wanda informs the girl her real name is Ida and that she is in fact Jewish. The two then embark on a life-changing journey in the 1960s just as Poland was itself transforming. The film has done well in its European releases and went out

Stateside earlier this year to a \$3.7M gross. Pawlikowski says, “I always theoretically knew if you believe (in the movie) and it excites you, it should hit the chord. But this time, the theory came true.”

The story of *Ida* came about over a long period. “I started with a ‘Jewish nun situation’ a long time ago... then put her together with Wanda, based on somebody I once met. Suddenly there was this brilliant relationship and a forward momentum and it lurched forward and then just this urge to make the story of the 60s was under my skin. I feel very strong and nostalgic about (the period). Some people think it’s just a grim, ugly Polish tragic movie. But it’s beautiful too. The period of the early 60s, recovering from war and Stalinist terror was suddenly full of possibilities.”



Music Box Films released *Ida* in the U.S. after acquiring it in the fall of 2013. President Ed Arentz tells me, “What I saw in *Ida* was a story I hadn’t seen before; about the legacy of the Holocaust, set in 1962 and also about the failure of the Communist dream... That’s to me what was really fascinating, what Poland and what Eastern Europe looked and felt like in 1962 with tiny little buds of future change.”

The choice to make *Ida* in black-and-white with a camera that hardly moves came from the helmer’s recollections about the past. “My family albums from the period are in black-and-white. I wanted it to feel timeless and abstract... By not moving the camera and using a certain type of framing, I was trying to lift it to a timeless fairy tale and a hard hitting disaster.” Co-lead Agata Trzebuchowska was discovered in a café in Warsaw. “After looking high-and-low for months and months, in the end Agata was reading a book in a café. We approached her and she wasn’t terribly interested (in acting) but she had seen some of my previous films.” With the Oscar shortlist approaching, the CAA-repped Pawlikowski says he had very positive feedback during his Academy screenings and Q&As. “People love the film and I love them back.” The possibility of a nomination or an award is “important because it’s great that this film which I love is being liked and appreciated, and the whole team is being elevated — these beautiful actresses and a young DOP on his first job. It’s great for all of us and for Polish cinema.”

Winter Sleep (Turkey), U.S. Distributor: Adopt Films

A Cannes fixture who has won myriad prizes, it took Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s *Winter Sleep* this year to finally nab him the Palme d’Or. The Turkish filmmaker has been his country’s representative three times previously at the Oscars, and was shortlisted with *Three Monkeys* in 2008. Known for his expansive, yet intimate dramas that can run three hours and more, Ceylan says of those that criticize him for that, “I understand them. But I prefer to walk my own way.” *Winter Sleep*, at 196 minutes, is a Chekhovian drama set in an Anatolia hotel run by Aydin, a retired actor. As the snow begins to fall, a sort of cabin fever ensues for Aydin as he tends to a stormy relationship with his wife and arguments about rich vs poor with his recently divorced sister.



Ceylan says the starting point for the film was the Chekhov story *The Wife*. For 15 years, he “wanted to make a film based on that. It is only after (2011’s *Once Upon A Time In Anatolia*) that I felt confident enough to make it. Each time I read it again during those 15 years, I felt deeply affected by it once more.” Chekhov has been a big influence on the filmmaker, but not solely based on the Russian author’s talent, it’s also “his personality and his vision of life” which have been

important. “I find him very wise first of all. And I believe, on the contrary to what he often says in his works, he is extremely pessimistic and a desperate person deep inside.”

Winning the Palme d’Or for Ceylan was a great feeling, but he says, “I know that such praises are like the fireworks in our lives. They create lots of lights. But after the fireworks, generally a deeper darkness

comes in.” He’s also realistic about the Oscars, “People talk and write. I am just watching it from the outside like somebody else. It is a popular award. And Turkey is never nominated. Perhaps that makes it more important for my country than its importance for me.” Adopt Films principal Tim Grady is a bit more sanguine, “Our passion for *Winter Sleep* is boundless,” he tells me. “We hope the film clears every hurdle from now through February 22.” It’s “a magnificent film and we can only hope Academy members watch the entire film... It will be a rich and rewarding experience.”

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