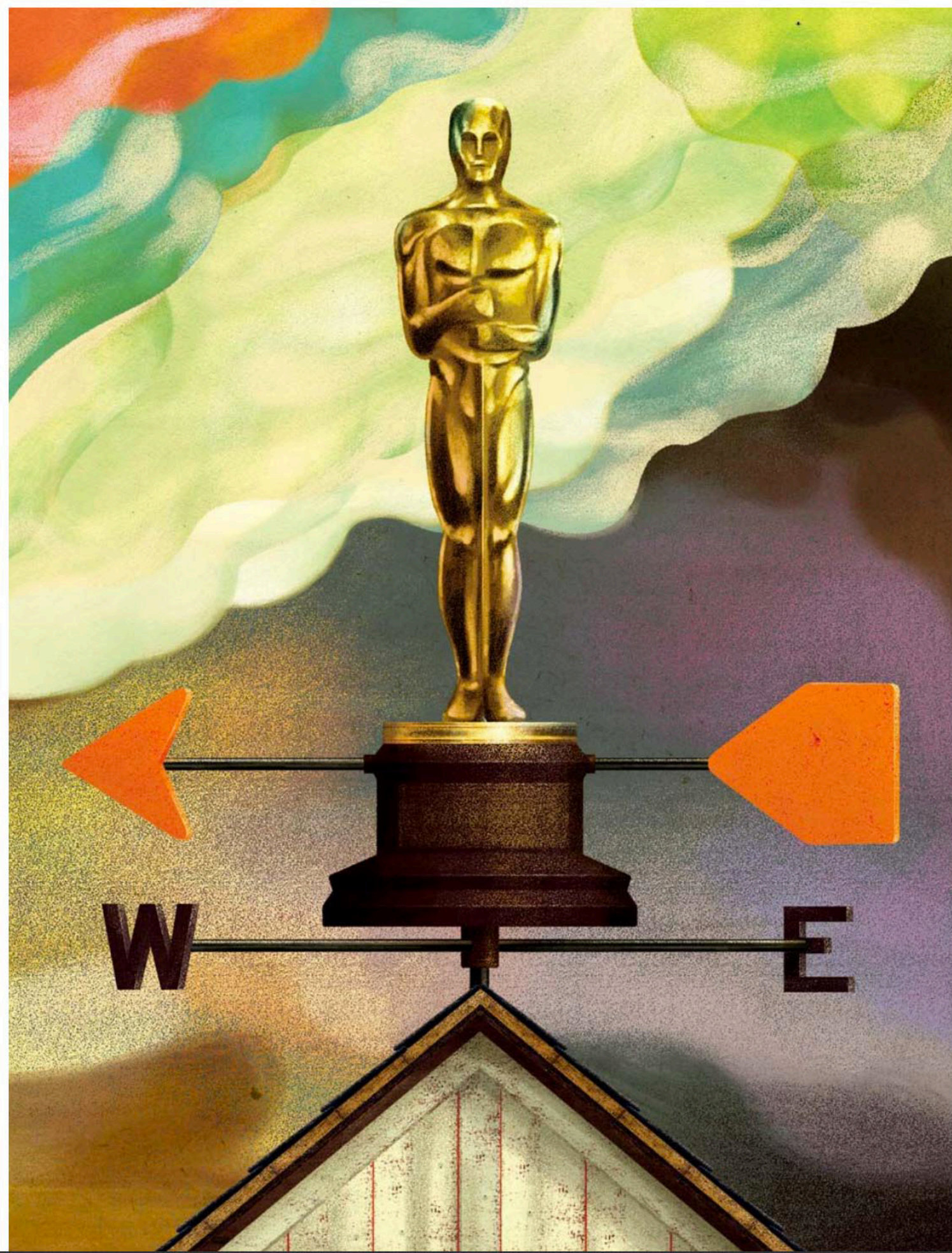


CONTENDERS

AWARDS SEASON WRAP UP

East Coast vs. West Coast vs. the World

The majority of recent best picture winners have been set along the Atlantic or Pacific. Will that be true again this year? Story by DIANE GARRETT | Illustration by GONÇALO VIANA



THE EAST COAST AND West Coast have been playing tug of war over the top Oscar the past dozen years, and this year the regional divide is especially pronounced.

"La La Land" and "Manchester by the Sea," two of the awards season's earliest and enduring favorites, represent each other's coastal opposite: Kenneth Lonergan's prototypically New England "Manchester by the Sea" is as wintry and repressed as Damien Chazelle's retro Los Angeles musical is sun-drenched and yearning. It's impossible to imagine either movie set elsewhere: the chill is palpable from the moment Casey Affleck's handyman starts shoveling snow at the outset of "Manchester by the Sea." "La La Land," by contrast, opens with a gridlock-defying dance routine on a freeway, establishing Emma Stone's Mia as a wannabe actress driving a Prius, the eco-friendly car popular with the city's creative class.

Both movies hope to inherit best picture mantle from last year's winner, the decidedly Bostonian "Spotlight," but they're not the only coastal players vying for Oscar gold. "Jackie," "Paterson," and "Sully" are deeply rooted in the northeast, while Santa Barbara-based "20th Century Women" and Warren Beatty's "Rules Don't Apply" radiate yet more California sun.

The Miami in Barry Jenkins' crack-ravaged "Moonlight" provides a grittier counterpoint in the coastal matchups, while Virginia period trio "Loving," "Hidden Figures," and "Hacksaw Ridge" draw deeply on southeast settings in their storytelling; "Captain Fantastic" begins off the grid →

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CONTENDERS AWARDS SEASON WRAP UP

← in the lush Pacific Northwest before hitting the road.

There are plenty of worthy contenders outside these regions — consider “Hell or High Water” and “The Handmaiden,” for starters — but the odds favor coastal contingents, at least when it comes to the Academy Awards’ biggest prize: Over the past dozen years, the majority of best picture winners have been set along the Atlantic or Pacific corridor.

The presidential election may have demonstrated the voting power of people outside these regions, but the Academy has been tilting toward the coasts more often than not.

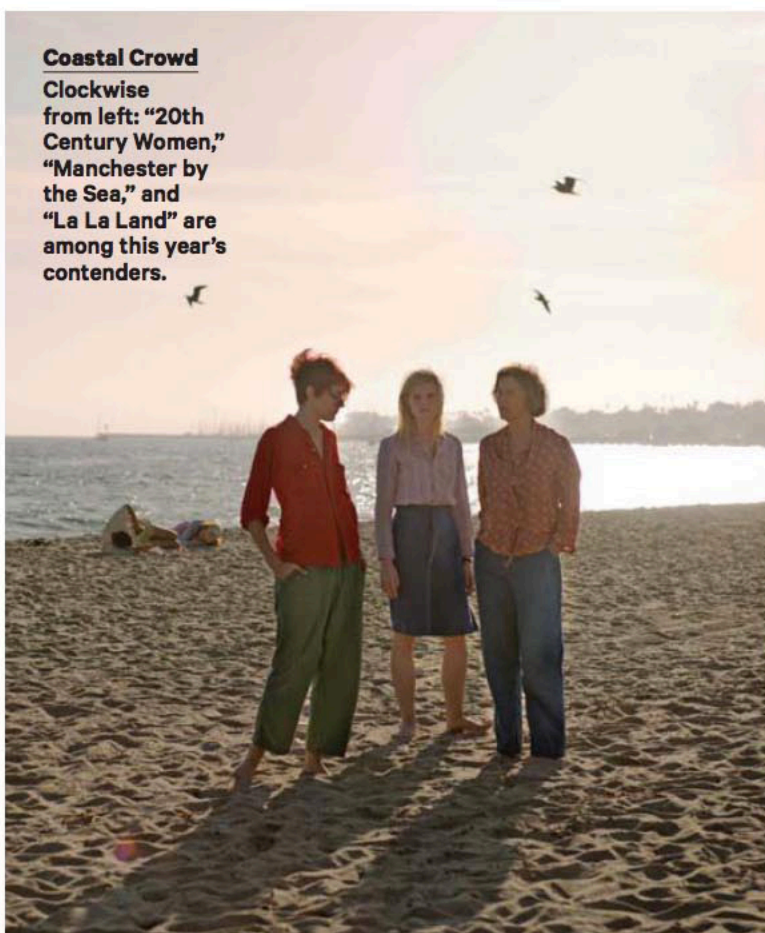
This year’s East Coast contingent has momentum on its side, thanks to back-to-back victories for “Spotlight” and Gotham-set “Birdman,” while the West Coast has the overall advantage: Four movies rooted in L.A. have won the best picture Oscar dating to “Million Dollar Baby” in 2004. “Crash” followed Clint Eastwood’s boxing tale in 2005, and Boston mob drama “The Departed” took the trophy for the East Coast in 2006. After a four-year break, Hollywood tale “The Artist” topped all contenders, followed by “Argo,” the 2012 victor whose rescue plot hinged on a fake Hollywood production.

L.A.’s recent command over the top spot is all the more noteworthy considering “Million Dollar Baby” is the first movie set in the city to win best picture. Movies set in New York and Chicago have won the top trophy over the years, but seminal movies about L.A., including “Sunset Boulevard,” “Double Indemnity,” and “Chinatown,” had to settle for best picture nominations before “Million Dollar Baby” finally broke through.

Showbiz movies set in New York’s theater world, such as 1950’s “All About Eve” and 1929’s “Broadway Melody,” won best picture honors long before. As the recent Oscars for “Argo,” “Birdman,” and “The Artist” display, showbiz-flavored movies continue to resonate with Academy voters

Coastal Crowd

Clockwise from left: “20th Century Women,” “Manchester by the Sea,” and “La La Land” are among this year’s contenders.



regardless the coast. “La La Land” fits squarely in the tradition of movies about showbiz wannabes desperate for their big break. Mia wants to make it so badly she serves coffee on the Warner Bros. lot between auditions, while Ryan Gosling’s Sebastian visits jazz haunts between piano gigs.

Chazelle jams the movie full of iconic L.A. settings,

from Griffith Observatory to the Angels Flight railway. Up the coast in Santa Barbara, Annette Bening’s Dorothea is primarily concerned with making sure her son Jamie (Lucas Jade Zumann) finds his way in “20th Century Women.” Director Mike Mills wrote the movie, set in 1979, as a tribute to his free-spirited mother; her on-screen counterpart is depicted as a nurturing woman who creates an unconventional family in her constantly under-repair home.

Chiron’s circumstances are much more constrained in “Moonlight.” He’s gay, poor, and his mother develops a raging crack addiction in 1980s Miami. The elegiac coming-of-age tale follows him as he grows from a picked-upon little boy (Alex Hibbert) befriended by a drug dealer (Mahershala Ali) and his girlfriend (Janelle Monáe) into adulthood. He doesn’t have the same choices as the dreamers in “La La Land” or “Rules Don’t Apply,” but he finds a way to survive.

Affleck’s handyman is barely managing that in “Manchester by the Sea.” After tragedy draws Lee back to his hometown north of Boston, we learn why he is so haunted and angry. The hard-drink-

ing New Englander can’t forgive himself for bad choices made under the influence; nor can he fully express himself, even to his beloved nephew (Lucas Hedges).

The same chill permeates Pablo Larraín’s “Jackie” and Natalie Portman’s performance as the recently widowed first lady. The movie jumps around among Cape Cod, the White House, and a fateful trip to Dallas, recreating an elliptical meeting between the widow and a Life magazine journalist portrayed by Billy Crudup in Hyannisport, Mass.

Never mind that those scenes weren’t actually filmed in Massachusetts; they made me homesick for the East Coast and New England in particular.

“Sully” and “Patriots Day,” meanwhile, present a warmer view of New York and Boston, drawing vitality from first responders rushing toward disaster scenes. And Adam Driver infuses his “Paterson” bus driver with poetic grace as he goes about his everyday routines in the New Jersey suburb of the same name.

Other contenders don’t rely as heavily on location in their storytelling. “Fences” is ostensibly set in 1950s Pittsburgh, but Denzel Washington’s staging

of August Wilson’s Tony winning play does not overly rely on local flavor. It could just as easily be set in another East Coast city; its emotional power is not diminished by that lack of specificity.

Location isn’t key to “Arrival” either: the interplay between Amy Adams’ linguist and aliens is.

Besides, it’s not really clear how important these distinctions are. Location, location, location may be the mantra in real estate, but it’s no guarantee of Oscar gold. Other recent winners have fallen outside the East Coast-West Coast axis, including “12 Years a Slave” (Louisiana), “The King’s Speech” (England), and “The Hurt Locker” (Iraq).

Going local can be risky: If accents or particular details strike a false note, viewers may balk. But the rewards can be even greater. “Manchester by the Sea” and “La La Land” production teams researched their divergent settings heavily before shooting began, and it paid off handsomely in rich storytelling on screen.

We’ll soon find out whether these movies, so grounded in diverging coasts, win Oscar gold — or voters go in another direction entirely. **W**

Key Dates Remaining

January

12 DGA feature film nominations announced
13 Academy Award nominations voting closes
17 ACE Eddie Award voting deadline
23 Annie Award voting closes
24 Academy Award nominations announced
27 SAG final voting closes
27 PGA final voting closes
27 ACE Eddie Awards gala
28 PGA Awards
29 SAG Awards
30 WGA final online voting, screenplay and series

February

3 DGA voting deadline, feature films
4 DGA Awards
4 Annie Awards
6 Oscar nominees luncheon
12 BAFTA Awards
13 Academy Award final voting begins
19 WGA Awards
21 Academy Award final voting closes
25 Independent Spirit Awards
26 89th Annual Academy Awards