

Holiday flicks could move to forefront

BY SAMUEL MCKEYON

The golden Oscars, Globes and critics' awards are there for the taking.

That's the general attitude of the holiday movie season, which begins in earnest one day before Thanksgiving - Wednesday. It's time to roll out the art, the award winners.

Last year, 1999, was an anomaly as the critic grand slams ("American Beauty," "The Insider" and "The Sixth Sense") rolled down the movie carpet in late summer and early fall.

Fall 2000 was a dead zone - bad times plus a couple of flops, a basic mirror of the entire year so far after 1999, which might have been the movie year of the last two decades.

To date in the new century, few, if any, films have set a beeline for definite award pickups save "Gladiator," whose massive scope and sword-and-sandal epic revival play favorably into the hands of many voters. "Erin Brockovich," and certainly Julia Roberts' va-voom title role, will attract serious attention.

So these holidays are a real pressure cooker from here on, especially as an impending writers' strike and poor box returns to date have put studios on watch.

So here's a look at the contenders and the purely fun stuff (must-see rankings out of 4 stars):

Oscar heavies:

"Unbreakable" (Nov. 22) - Toward the end of his "The Sixth Sense," director/writer M. Night Shyamalan began to write his fourth movie. He scrapped the whole idea for a different tale, which will make it to screen here - an Everyman (Bruce Willis) survives a horrible train crash unharmed while a mysteriously brittle comic-book fiend (Samuel L. Jackson) attempts to discover why.

The premise seems outstanding, and Shyamalan's artsy style (What's with the long overhead shots and slow focus work?) creates a distinctive look. But the cocky 30-year-old director (he shoots sequence, he's basically guaranteed this as a masterpiece) is hit-and-miss. Could be a haunting wonder. Could be a brooding mess. ★★★

"Quills" (Nov. 22) - Phillip Kaufman's epic on the final days of Marquis De Sade, played by Geoffrey Rush, as he writes into a scandal from the loop house. Kate Winslet is his faithful nurse. ★★★½

"Finding Forrester" (Dec. 6) - And this year's entry in being full of blarney - Gus Van Sant's follow-up to "Good Will Hunting" (a lot of hot air that was) finds a budding writer searching out a reclusive genius (Sean Connery), who wrote the great American novel, then walked into a sliver flat in the Bronx. The kid can play basketball like a whiz, too. Another genius-in-making tale. ★★½

"Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" (Dec. 8) - Who isn't rooting for a martial-arts drama starring Chow Yun-Fat and

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KEYSTONE



UNL student Milvia Rodriguez is pursuing a doctoral degree in piano performance. Beginning with lessons in her native Cuba, Rodriguez later studied piano in Russia before moving to Lincoln.



Love of music helps musician past problems with homeland

Many accomplished musicians were born into musically rich families and were reared to perform music from the time they were small children.

They have parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles who have musical talent and who influenced them to pursue the art.

But not Milvia Rodriguez.

She began to play the piano simply because her grandmother was tired of listening to her sing.

Rodriguez said she was always singing as a small child growing up in Cuba.

In order to expand upon her granddaughter's expressive interests in music, Rodriguez's grandmother took her to a local piano instructor and signed her up for lessons.

Rodriguez was seven at the time.

Little did her grandmother know that 22 years later, Rodriguez would be an accomplished pianist working on a doctorate in the art.

"My grandmother gets all the credit," Rodriguez said in response to how she got started tickling the ivories.

As a child, she said she enjoyed the piano and practiced considerably, but music wasn't her sole interest.

"I concentrated on my academics and loved mathematics," she said.

But when she reached the ninth grade, she was forced to make a decision.

In Cuba's curriculum, when students reach ninth grade, they must choose a focus of study or major.

Rodriguez chose music, which sent her to a special music school.

"I decided to stay with piano because playing professionally is what I wanted to do," she said.

Her decision to stay with music would result in a ticket out of Cuba and eventual isolation from her home country.

After she was finished with school in Cuba, she was offered a scholarship to attend Gnesin Academy of Music in Moscow, Russia.

She went and said she was glad she did.

"Russia is a very prestigious place for musicians," she said. "I learned a lot."

She said she liked many aspects of the Russian culture that she had not been exposed to in Cuba.

"There are theaters everywhere and concerts all the time," she said. "Some of the best musicians in the world go to Moscow to play."

But in the midst of her Russian experience in 1991, the Cuban government wanted all students studying in Russia to return to Cuba.

Rodriguez refused.

"When they told me I had to go back, I said: 'I'm not going,'" she said. "I told them I have a right to finish my studies."

As a result of her decision, Rodriguez became an outcast in her home country.

She still returns to visit her family but cannot get a job or be involved in any other activities in Cuba.

Before her decision, Cuba had catered to its students who studied in Russia and provided such benefits as plane tickets for vacations home.

But after her decision, she was provided with nothing.

She said she was confused and angry at her government's actions.

"It's my country, and I've been told I can't go back," she said.

But Rodriguez said the positives of her decision outweigh the negatives.

She was able to complete her study in Russia and then had the opportunity to continue in the United States.

For Cuban students, the only study abroad option lies in Russia.

"Before, I never could have said I'm studying in America," she said.

She came to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as a result of prompting by friends she knew in Lincoln.

Since she has been here, she has played in numerous concerts and recitals.

Last year, she had the opportunity to play with UNL's symphony orchestra.

It was her first experience playing with an orchestra, but Rodriguez said she is open to many different types of music.

"I like to play a repertoire that is not very well-known," she said.

She said she is interested in obscure music from different time periods and also has taken an interest in 20th-century music.

"I'm very indifferent to what I play," she said. "But I do like to be challenged by pieces."

She said she likes to be challenged, but that doesn't mean she spends 10 hours a day hacking out a difficult piece.

"I'm picky about my practice time," she said. "When I do practice, I try to concentrate and be productive."

Ann Chang-Barnes, an assistant professor of music at UNL, said she has taught Rodriguez in a chamber-music setting.

"She's extremely talented and needs very little guidance," Chang-Barnes said. "She's a pleasure to hear play and to have as a student."

Chang-Barnes said Rodriguez's playing is "very advanced," and Rodriguez is capable of studying at the doctorate level at any school in the country.

She did not even consider her relationship with Rodriguez as instructor-student. Instead, she said, it is more of a mutual, give-and-take playing relationship.

Rodriguez said she hopes to teach piano and continue performing.

"She'd be a great teacher as well as performer," Barnes said.

Rodriguez said she could also see teaching eating up her performance time.

"In the future, I see myself in an office with a bunch of students, trying to find the time to practice," she joked.

But the reality is there will never be too little time for Rodriguez to play the piano.

"I'll always find time to play," she said.

"When they told me I had to go back (to Cuba), I said: 'I'm not going,' I told them I have a right to finish my studies."

Milvia Rodriguez
UNL pianist



Scott Eastman/DN