



Search FAQ

Search
[Calendar](#)
[In Depth](#)
[People](#)
[Interviews & profiles](#)
[Columns](#)
[Charts & data](#)
[Save](#)
[Print](#)
[Email](#)
[Reprints](#)

'Man' could bring Plummer first Oscar nom

By Martin A. Grove

Nov 28, 2007

Plummer performance: It's a tough year for anyone hoping to land a best actor Oscar nomination since the field's packed with high-profile contenders and strong performances.

There's already a lively buzz going for Denzel Washington ("American Gangster"), Philip Seymour Hoffman ("Before the Devil Knows You're Dead"), Josh Brolin ("No Country For Old Men"), James McAvoy ("Atonement"), Daniel Day Lewis ("There Will Be Blood") and Tom Hanks ("Charlie Wilson's War"). And there's also talk about George Clooney ("Michael Clayton"), Ryan Gosling ("Lars and the Real Girl"), Johnny Depp ("Sweeney Todd"), Christian Bale ("3:10 To Yuma"), Frank Langella ("Starting Out in the Evening") and Emile Hirsch ("Into the Wild").

Is there room for one more? Well, I hope so having just seen Christopher Plummer's performance in Michael Schroeder's "Man in the Chair." Plummer's movie career goes way back to Sidney Lumet's 1958 drama "Stage Struck" starring Henry Fonda and Susan Strasberg. Over the years, Plummer's worked with other top directors and starred in such films as Robert Wise's "The Sound of Music," Michael Mann's "The Insider," Ron Howard's "A Beautiful Mind," Atom Egoyan's "Ararat," Stephen Gaghan's "Syriana" and Spike Lee's "Inside Man." Believe it or not, not only has he never won an Oscar, he's never even been nominated for one!

Academy members now have an opportunity to honor Plummer for his work in "Man." It's a film they're likely to enjoy, by the way, if they take the time to see it. "Man" revolves around a high school kid (Michael Angarano, who played the young Red Pollard in "Seabiscuit") who comes up with the smart idea of enlisting a group of long forgotten Hollywood veterans living at the Motion Picture Country Home or in dismal apartments around L.A. to help him make a student film about nursing home abuse that he hopes will win him a scholarship.

Needless to say, they may be old-timers who are no longer employable in today's ageist Hollywood, but they definitely know how to do their jobs and after some plot twists and turns they show they've still got what it takes. Plummer's character, Flash Madden, is an electrician who we're told worked on "Citizen Kane" and got his nickname from Orson Welles after an exploding light ruined a take. The first person Flash turns to for help on this student film project is screenwriter Mickey Hopkins (M. Emmet Walsh, whose many credits include "Blade Runner" and "Ordinary People").

Ads by Google

[Film School - Worldwide](#)
Film Degree & Film Workshops

[HP Film Contest](#)
Watch The Top 20 Films & Vote For



"Man," which is being released domestically by Outsider Pictures, is written and directed by Michael Schroeder, who produced it with Randy Turrow and Sarah Schroeder. It was executive produced by Peter

Samuelson and Steve Matzkin. Starring are Christopher Plummer, Michael Angarano, M. Emmet Walsh, Robert Wagner, Tracey Walter, Joshua Boyd, Mimi Kennedy, Mitch Pileggi and Taber Schroeder.

After enjoying an early look at "Man," I took the opportunity to focus with Michael Schroeder on how it got made and how he's trying to bring it to the attention of Academy members and other awards givers. "It's about screenings," he replied. "We screen almost every night in L.A. and New York. We have been for the past two or three weeks and we will continue through December. And then it's about screeners, the DVDs. We're sending out almost 10,000 to SAG, Academy members and the Hollywood Foreign Press. Our U.K. distributor, Transmedia (headed by) Simon Caplan, loves the film and he at his own cost burned 6,000 DVD screeners for BAFTA and they are already in their homes right now. The picture's going to open (in the U.K.), I think, Jan. 23. It has to be released before Jan. 31 to qualify (for BAFTA consideration).

"We're going to open in New York and San Francisco on Dec. 7. We're opening in Los Angeles on Dec. 14 and opening in Chicago and Montreal on Dec. 21 and going wider to various other communities after the beginning of '08. So we're doing everything we can. We're trying to place ads in the trades and do what we can. We can't compete (in terms of spending) with Fox Searchlight and Lionsgate, but we believe in our film. We certainly believe in Christopher's performance. Michael Angarano is great in the film and so is Emmet Walsh. Those three just really hit it out of the park, in my opinion."

Asked how the film came to be, he explained, "A few years ago I'd directed eight films in eight years and I had a nice little house and a couple cars. I was doing all right, but I wasn't really feeling fulfilled in my life and what I could do in my career. I'd done some action movies and genre movies and thrillers. I discovered Angelina Jolie in 1992 and put her in a movie called 'Cyborg 2.' I just became disenchanted with what I was being offered so I had that Jerry Maguire epiphany moment where you know you can do more with your life. I sold my house and my cars and everything and I got a little single over on Detroit Street in the Miracle Mile area (of L.A.) and I started writing. I wrote four scripts and one was 'Man in the Chair.' Before I became a director I was a first A.D. I did 25 features and one of (them) was a little picture called 'The Long Shot.' Jonathan Winters was a day player on it. Jonathan told me he'd gone over to the Motion Picture Home and made 'em laugh and feel better."

Schroeder didn't know anything about the Motion Picture Home. "I'd been in the DGA for four years," he said, "and hadn't even heard of this place even though part of my pay goes to it. (Winters explained.) 'For lack of a better term, it's a rest home out in Calabasas where retired crew members and actors live. In fact, you could crew up a whole movie out of there.' I

smiled when I heard that and I said, 'What a great idea for a film.' Since I was looking for this change-my-life moment, I wanted to write something that wasn't a cyborg movie or an action movie. I thought I'd write this sort of coming-of-age kid story about a boy who casts (a movie project with) an unlikely source and an often ignored source in our world -- the elderly. As I started to write it, it became more serious. All the research you saw on the Internet in the film is the same research I saw when I was getting ready to write this script. I realized the nursing home neglect problem was epidemic. It was worse than I ever imagined.

"So then my script started to take on a little more of a somber tone and it became more layered about a lot of things. Every time the movie started to get too sentimental or too serious or started to bum you out, we'd shift into some humor. We'd move on to another scene and we'd style it up a little bit because I didn't want the film to be overly depressing. I wanted it to be entertaining, but I wanted somehow (for) the message, for lack of a better term, to get through -- not necessarily to reform nursing homes. I think that's a huge undertaking that a small-time director like me is not going to change overnight. But I basically wanted people to leave the theater and go home and call their grandparents (that) they hadn't talked to in six months. To call 'em up and invite them over and ask them about their lives and ask for their advice in your life because they're there to help and they've been down the path. It's just that, like Flash says, we live in a throwaway society and we're moving so fast we often forget those who came before us."

I asked Schroeder to share some insights about Flash: "I liked the name Flash for some reason and I had to design some kind of device for him to get that name. I thought it'd be interesting if he was an electrician and he flashed an arc or something. Then I played on the 'Citizen Kane' thing. I wanted to establish him as being in the film business a long time. He was in a group of New Yorkers -- stagehands who moved out here in the '30s to become grips and electricians. Also, I love 'Citizen Kane' and I love the whole paranoia that Orson Welles had while he was making the film (and) how he had extra security and all that. He was always afraid the film was going to be taken over or shut down.

"He was very paranoid about people trying any kind of sabotage (during) his production. So here's an opportunity for my lead guy to get his name from Orson Welles, which is pretty cool. And then I also wanted to show that he was a learned guy, that he knew how to read, that he quoted Winston Churchill and sort of busted Orson Welles when Orson Welles was poaching on (a Churchill) quote. But, again, everything is layered into the screenplay to support something else. If I worked on 'Citizen Kane,' I'd probably be telling everybody. I'd probably have a T-shirt that said, 'I worked on Citizen Kane,' but he didn't tell the boy that initially. Even when the boy asks, 'How'd you get a name like Flash?' he goes, 'None of your God damn business.' So he's not going to peel that layer yet."

When Welles mistakenly decides the light that flashed was intended to interrupt production, Schroeder continued, "they tried to fire (Flash) and he goes, 'Why would I try to lose my job? I love it.' And then Orson Welles sort of poached on that quote from Winston Churchill saying, 'If you love your job, you'll never work a day in your life.' And Flash sort of busted him on it (by saying), 'Yeah, right -- Winston Churchill.' And he walked away. And that's when (Welles) calls him back and realizes, 'Maybe I misjudged this electrician. Maybe he doesn't have an agenda to sabotage my film -- and I appreciate the fact that he knew that quote came from Winston Churchill.'

"He keeps his job and he finishes the film and he became a very good electrician and eventually a gaffer. But it's implied in the script that his wife was taken away by a producer (played by Robert Wagner) and that drinking and bitterness basically took over his life and he never did (reach the sort of heights) Welles thought he might. Welles was wrong about that."

Getting back to when he was writing "Man," Schroeder noted, "I felt that I was working (and) taking modest budget features and genre material just to pay for my mortgage and just to keep going. But I had come to a time in my life where my children were raised and I was sort of on my own and I thought, 'You know, I can do this.' I was collecting checks from residuals on several films that I'd (worked on). I'd been in the DGA since '81 so I'd made a lot of movies and was already vested in the union. It's not like taking early retirement. I can't do that (because) I'm too young. But I basically got my 'nut' way down so I could live off the residuals and direct or A.D. an occasional commercial just to keep my insurance going. But it was more about getting the 'nut' down so I could spend my time writing and not trying to pay for my house."

How did it wind up getting made? "The screenplay really touched a lot of people," he replied. "Then I ran into another hindrance -- they didn't want to make small movies. Everything had become remakes and TV spectacles. The studios changed in the eight years that I had this transitional period and even the independents wanted big movies. So now I found myself with a pretty good script and no way to fund it. So I went out of state. I started contacting some of my friends. I went back to Idaho. My sister, Sarah Schroeder, is a very successful mortgage broker (there). I was sort of complaining to her one day that I have this movie that could work and now I can't get anyone to do it and it's so disheartening. She goes, 'Well, how much money do you need?' I said, 'Well, I need about \$2.5 million.' And she goes, 'I think I could get that.' She called around and within two years she was able to raise that money."

"When we were all funded we went right to the front door at ICM for Christopher Plummer and we went right to all the unions. We're DGA. We're SAG. We're Teamsters. We're IA. We did everything we're supposed to. I said, 'Look, I don't want to take this to Vancouver. I can't. I need Hollywood Boulevard. I need the Sepulveda Dam. I need the Motion Picture Home. So we went on all the low budget arrangements with every union. They all have them now, which is great, and we were able to hire (everyone) and stay here and shoot this in 25 days."

Schroeder also benefited from people liking his project: "Bob Harvey at Panavision really responded to it and he gave me the equipment at a really discounted rate. My camera package should have cost \$25,000 a week. It cost \$6,000 a week. And just people responding to the material and what we were trying to say (was a big help). (Cinematographer) Dana Gonzales, who had shot 'Crash' and was an operator on 'Swordfish' and 'Man on Fire' and a whole bunch of stuff, and his crew was so amazing. Peter Banks, my prop guy, did 'Erin Brockovich.' These are people I probably couldn't afford, but they felt something from the script that made them say, 'I'm not going to get paid much on this movie, but I still want to do it.'"

Shooting began in November 2005, he said, "and wrapped just before Christmas. We had Thanksgiving during our shoot two years ago. This picture was shot on Super 35mm film, but I put it in a digital intermediate to finish it. We did that at IO Film, who had done 'Crash.' When 'Crash' won Best Picture, IO got a lot of business so they moved from North

Hollywood to Hollywood, but that move -- moving all the computers and the scanners and the film printers and everything -- took a month. So we were down a good part of '06 and then we finally finished it at the end of '06. We had our cast and crew (screening) at the Directors Guild on Jan. 14, 2007. I went to Santa Barbara the next day. We won Best Picture there. And then a week later I was in Berlin. I've been on the road with 17 festivals that we've done in the last 10 months. We won seven of them."

Encouraged by "Man's" festival showings, Schroeder anticipates a good response from awards voters who see the film: "You know, when 'Venus' came out, it opened in 12 theaters and Peter O'Toole got the (best actor Oscar) nomination. It went to 165 theaters the next week. We're hoping that SAG and the Academy will recognize Christopher for this (performance). He's made 88 films and has never been nominated for an Academy Award. He's been nominated for Golden Globes and SAG Awards and things like that and Emmys, but the Oscar has eluded him -- even the nomination.

"And you think about 'The Insider' where he played Mike Wallace (opposite Al Pacino and Russell Crowe and gave) a fantastic performance. And you think about (John Huston's) 'The Man Who Would Be King' (opposite Sean Connery and Michael Caine) and you think of 'Sound of Music' (opposite Julie Andrews). So maybe 'Man in the Chair' will be the one for him because he carries this movie. He does all the heavy lifting in 'Man in the Chair.'"

Looking back at the challenges of production, Schroeder recalled, "I had a real ambitious shot list because I wanted to make a complex, really quality film. I didn't want it to look like a low budget movie. Sometimes you go into a theater or you watch a DVD (and you think), 'Oh yeah, these guys had no money.' We squeezed about a 40 day shoot into that 25 days and that's from just being very organized from the production end. The shot lists were done months before we ever shot. It wasn't an experience where we were out there trying to figure out where to put the camera. We decided that a long time ago. We'd already decided on the movie we were going to make and (when we started shooting it was) let's just execute that vision.

"What I found was that the actors were so good -- Angarano and especially Plummer -- (that) I rarely printed a third or a fourth take because the first two were awesome. And then I had my camera crew. Glenn Brown was my first A.C. He did 'Collateral' and 'Ali.' This is Michael Mann's first assistant cameraman. This guy does not miss focus marks! Everything was really great technically and (with) the acting so we were able to within just a few takes get the scene and then move on to another angle or move on to more work. I had really good department heads that just stayed ahead of us. The challenge was that we were dealing with elderly cast (members). Just walking (one of them) from the honey wagon to the set takes 20 minutes. You can't give a five-minute warning to bring the actors in, you have to give them like a 25-minute warning. Christopher Plummer worked 20 of the 25 days. He worked like a champion and he was so prepared and (was) there every morning.

"I guess the challenge was to not miss the opportunity because we had a great cast and we worked so hard. We had this hand cranked camera effect that you see in the film. We would shoot the movie normal and then we'd bring in the hand crank, which was the Panaflex camera that we'd stripped the motor out of and put a little hand turning crank on it. That added more of a poetic feel to some of these scenes. So that was just more shooting we had to do. But I love how that camera makes you feel. I believe that cinematography should have its own emotional through-line

just like your script or your characters. I really believe, like Wong Kar-wai (director of 'My Blueberry Nights') does, in style as content not style over content. I really wanted this to be an unforgettable film (and) that when you watched this imagery it would sort of seduce you (and) maybe get you through the rough spots so when you're dealing with a very sobering subject emotionally you're still connecting with it and you're not overwhelmed by it and at the end you walk out and go, 'That's not a movie you see every day.' I wanted it to always sort of be a poem, if you will, a really special film."

Filmmaker flashbacks: From April 11, 1990's column: "The intricate business agreement announced earlier this week by Warner Bros. and Pathe Communications whereby Warners will arrange for a \$650 million bank loan to MGM/UA seemed short and sweet but in reality packed an enormous punch. It doesn't take much reading between the lines to see that, as distributors, MGM and United Artists will essentially disappear after that deal helps facilitate Pathe acquiring MGM/UA..."

"Given the fact that MGM/UA's present distribution and marketing operations reflect that company's decision to tread water until a sale is arranged, it's a safe bet that MGM/UA product would be in stronger hands at Warners. That would be good news not only for MGM/UA but also for Warners. From Warners' point of view, the arrangement will provide it with additional product to pump through its distribution pipeline without having to put any more production dollars at risk.

"Of course, what's good for MGM/UA and Warners may not be good for the industry in general. In fact, from exhibition's point of view the news is probably quite alarming. Although MGM/UA hasn't been a strong distributor for many years now, it has remained a continuing source of major studio quality product. For it to disappear as a separate distribution entity and become a brand label coordinating with Warners for so-called 'support service' means that exhibition will lose a long-established supplier.

"At the same time, exhibition will also be losing Pathe's Cannon operation as a leading independent distributor of product. As part of the same agreement between Warners and Pathe, not only MGM/UA films but also Cannon's product and films from the new Pathe production unit headed by Alan Ladd Jr. will all go out for worldwide release via Warners.

"At times over the years various studios have wound up distributing several streams of product in addition to their own. Warners, itself, did just that for a time when it was handling films from the old Orion Pictures and from the Ladd Co. Lorimar, which was ultimately acquired by Warners, was distributed at various times by United Artists, Paramount, Universal and 20th Century Fox. Ironically, in the early 1970s, when MGM decided to get out of distribution, it made a deal for its product to be released through United Artists. In 1981 MGM acquired UA and created MGM/UA, whose new distribution company then handled product made by both production units..."

*Martin Grove hosts movie coverage on the broadband television channel
www.UpdateHollywood.com.*

Latest news »

Save

Print

Email

Reprints

[Entertainment News](#) | [Movie News](#) | [TV News](#) | [Music News](#) | [Entertainment Industry News](#) | [International Media News](#) | [Home Entertainment News](#)
[Celebrity News](#) | [Film Festivals / Awards](#) | [Academy Awards](#) | [Weekend Box Office](#) | [Movie Reviews](#) | [Entertainment Newsletter](#) | [Media Research](#)
[About us](#) | [Advertising](#) | [Licensing](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Site map](#) | [Make us your homepage](#) | [Site tour](#)
© 2007 Nielsen Business Media, Inc. All rights reserved. [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#)