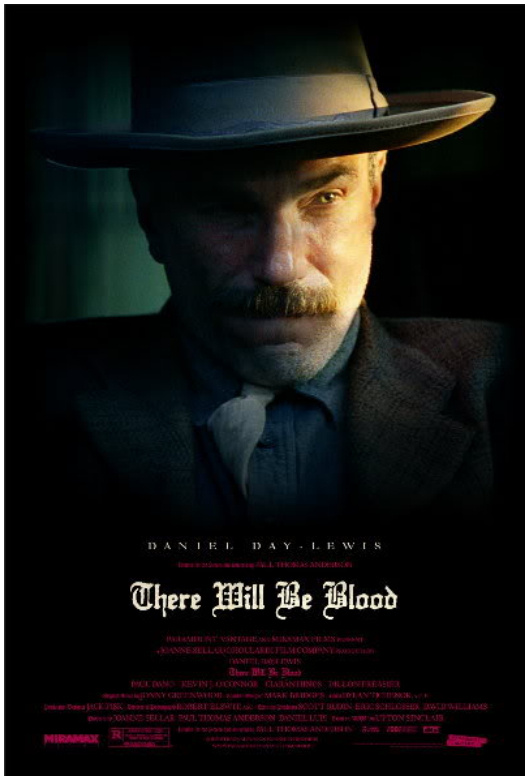
Mitch's reviews of the five contenders for Best Picture of 2007 at this weekend's Oscars rambles on tonight with thoughts on "There Will Be Blood", which stars Daniel Day-Lewis in a performance that Mitch says is a Lead Pipe lock for the Best Actor award. Lewis is brilliant as a morally bankrupt oil baron in a story of greed, corruption, and conflict in this film that many feel will rightfully earn Best Picture honors. Cannot wait to see this one ...



The nominees for Best Actor in this year's Oscar race features some of the finest performances I've seen in years. George Clooney in "Michael Clayton", Viggo Mortensen in "Eastern Promises", and Johnny Depp in "Sweeney Todd" gave arguably far better performances as we have seen over the last three years, with winners Jamie Foxx, Phillip Seymour Hoffman and Forest Whitaker all winning the award for their ability to do a good impersonation of Ray Charles, Truman Capote and Idi Amin. This is not to belittle their performances, but I feel it is much harder to make a fictional character stand out as something amazing than it is to mimic someone we've seen before.

Regardless of your opinion of MY opinion, the simple fact is that the three men I mentioned, plus Tommy Lee Jones for "In the Valley of Elah" (which I have yet to see) have all given memorable performances that are truly Oscar worthy.

And it matters not one bit, as Daniel Day-Lewis is the surest lock for Best Actor as I have ever seen for his performance as oil baron Daniel Plainview in Paul Thomas Anderson's fascinating "There Will Be Blood".

Day-Lewis has always been a meticulous actor. The polar opposite of a Jude Law, who will sign on to almost any project, this is only Day-Lewis' eighth film since his award winning break-out role as cerebral palsy suffering artist Christy Brown in "My Left Foot". But in those eight films, he has always stood out as an actor of extraordinary talent, whether it was as the macho Hawkeye in "The Last of the Mohicans", a repressed 19th century socialite in "The Age of Innocence", or the vicious Bill the Butcher in "Gangs of New York".

In "There Will Be Blood", Day-Lewis has created what may be a screen icon for the ages, a morally bankrupt man who nonetheless struggles for some level of humanity, all the while hiding behind his cynicism and greed, wanting deep down inside to find a sense of family and belonging, but keeping everyone at arm's distance. Daniel Plainview is every bit as Machiavellian as Michael Corleone or Charles Foster Kane; a ruthless of an oilman that would make J.R. Ewing look like a philanthropist in comparison.

Anderson's script is based upon the Upton Sinclair novel "Oil!", but that's using the words "based upon" very loosely. Sinclair's story was about the relationship of a young man and his oil baron father, but it's concentration was upon the social aspects, focusing on Sinclair's appreciation of communism, and disdain for corruption of the Teapot Dome era politics of the U.S in the early 20th

century.

Anderson takes a different tact, jettisoning the politics, and following the life of Plainview as he starts as a California prospector scrapping by with finding minute quantities of gold in a deep hole. The minor success he achieves allows him to hire a few men, and once he discovers some oil on his California claim, he works to perfect drilling techniques and build his empire.

The first 25 minutes of the 2 ½ hour film is done with almost no dialog. When the talking first begins, Plainview and his young son H.W. are at a town meeting, trying to negotiate lease rights with all of the landowners demanding their piece of the action. Put off by their collective bickering, Plainview is about to head elsewhere when he is visited by a mysterious young man, who tells him of a small town that may be sitting upon a huge oil reserve...but it is over 100 miles from any major city or transportation hub.

Plainview is intrigued, and heads up to the goat ranch inhabited by the young man, his parents, and two sisters. The land is indeed on top of a Midas sized fortune, but the young man, Eli Sunday, has ulterior motives as well. A fervent fundamentalist, he wants help from Plainview in establishing his church, and his power over the town folks, something Plainview is loathe to share.

Anderson does an excellent job in setting up the recurring conflicts between the two vastly different men. Paul Dano does an extraordinary job with his role of the faith healing, ambitious preacher, making him a male version of early radio evangelical Aimee Semple McPherson. You can see that there is true belief in him, but a great deal of charlatan as well. Dano keeps you guessing throughout the movie as to which aspect is the stronger in him.

But it is Daniel Day-Lewis who grabs a hold of the audience and never lets go with his portrait of ambition gone wrong. He is not necessarily an evil person, at least not early on; he just slides further and further down that slope as life goes on. He seems to genuinely care for his young son, but an accident leaves the boy deaf, severing Plainview's ability to communicate with him as he'd like, changing their relationship forever. Plainview also comes across a half-brother he didn't know he had, and he relishes in the reconnection to a past he had pushed away...at least for a time, until suspicion and greed once again take control of him.

This is a completely different type of movie than the other four films nominated for Best Picture. It does not tell an enclosed story per-se, but instead follows one man (primarily) through the journey of his adult life. It's not a perfect film, as it could have benefited greatly by some editing to take out at least 20 minutes, and a little character development for anyone other

than Plainview and Eli would have been good (Ciaran Hinds, a great actor, is completely wasted).

But it does give you a chance to see the best performance from an actor who is onscreen almost the entire film since...Daniel Day-Lewis in 1989 in the aforementioned "My Left Foot".

My Rating: Brian Sipe (3 ½ footballs)