

OSCAR NOMINATED SHORT FILMS
(Listed from most recent to oldest)

LIVE ACTION SHORT FILMS

OSCAR NOMINATED LIVE ACTION SHORTS 2021

As is our custom, we give the five short movies nominated for an Oscar an overall grade, instead of grading each one. All were thought-provoking and well done, but we didn't fall in love with any of the five. As MV reader Art S. said in his review, *Feeling Through* was the "only feel-good movie of the bunch." (I might add *The Letter Room* to that list. It wasn't exactly feel-good, but it was more positive.) The other three focused on problems facing the world today, and even *Feeling Through* was a plea to be more understanding of others.

GRADE B+

Feeling Through USA -- Tereek, an un-housed teenager living on the margins of society, comes across Artie, a deaf and blind man trying to get home. Reluctantly, Tereek decides to lend a hand, only to find himself bonding with his unlikely new friend. And, little by little, as the perfect strangers embark on a silent, night-long journey in the heart of the city, a life-altering transformation begins to take place. The film has already made history as the first to cast a deaf-blind actor, Robert Tarango, in a lead role. After a late-night chance encounter with a deaf and blind man on a New York City street, writer/director Doug Roland wrote the award winning short film..

The Letter Room USA -- At last, Richard (Oscar Isaac), a solitary and compassionate corrections officer, has been promoted to Director of Prisoner Communications. Richard quickly gets the hang of his new job as master of the letter room, scanning all the incoming and outgoing correspondence of the inmates for contraband. Richard leads a lonely life, and it becomes complicated when he gets too involved in the private life of a death row inmate.

The Present Palestine -- Each morning, Yusef, a doting father, has no other choice but to queue for hours and navigate the harrowing Checkpoint 300, an infamous, crowded Israeli crossing point between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, to get to work on time. But, on his wedding anniversary, Yusef has arranged to pick up a new fridge for his wife, Noor. Even though the store is in Jerusalem, he is determined to endure the dehumanizing process, to go shopping with his young daughter.

Winner: *Two Distant Strangers* USA -- The film uses the storytelling device of *Groundhog Day* to tell the story of a young Black man (actor/rapper Joey Bada\$\$) is trying to get home to his dog after a one-night-stand. His effort is thwarted by a recurring deadly encounter that forces him to re-live the same awful day over and over again. The film was made before George Floyd's death but the list of names of black men and woman killed by police that role over the credits is sobering in the extreme.

White Eye Israel – In this 20-minute movie, shot in one take, a man finds his stolen bicycle, which now belongs to a stranger. While attempting to retrieve it, he struggles to remain human. *White Eye*, by 33-year-old director Tomer Shushan, tackles an Israeli problem which should be familiar to Americans: Explicit or subliminal prejudice by much of the population and police against non-white residents, especially migrants.

OSCAR-NOMINATED LIVE ACTION SHORTS: (2019 Films; 92nd Oscars-2020)

(I have listed them in the order we saw them.) We enjoyed every one of these Live Action Shorts. We don't have a favorite, and would be happy if any of the 5 films won the Oscar. Rather than give them a grade individually, we've decided the grade them as a whole.

GRADE A

A SISTER--*Une Soire* (Belgium): An emergency services dispatcher must tap into all her professional skills when she receives a call from a woman in a desperate situation.

BROTHERHOOD: Mohamed is deeply shaken and suspicious when his estranged eldest son Malek returns home to rural Tunisia with a mysterious young wife in tow. The emotional complexities of a family reunion and past wounds lead to tragic consequences.

WINNER: THE NEIGHBORS' WINDOW: The life of a middle-aged woman with small children is shaken up when two free-spirited twenty-somethings move in across the street. But things are not always what they seem. This film was the most relatable, and I'm not surprised it won. **(THIS FILM WON THE OSCAR)**

SARIA: This short film is based on a real incident. Inseparable orphaned sisters Saria and Ximena are fighting against daily abuse and unimaginable hardship at the Virgen de La Asuncion Safe Home in Guatemala when a tragic fire claims the lives of 41 orphaned girls.

NEFTA FOOTBALL CLUB: In south Tunisia, two football fan brothers bump into a headphones-wearing donkey in the desert on the border of Algeria. Unaware that two men are waiting for the donkey and its hidden drug stash, the brothers take the animal back home with them. The younger brother thinks their stash is laundry detergent, but the older brother is wiser. The ending was humorous, and this is the only live action short that had a humorous overtone.

2018 OSCAR NOMINATED LIVE ACTION SHORT FILMS: (2018 Films; 91st Oscars-2019)

The theme for this year's films is "boys in trouble." All but one film follow this theme. **GRADE A**

WINNER: SKIN: U.S.A. An American Neo-Nazi gets his comeuppance in this drama of cosmic retribution. From a boisterous outdoor shooting exercise, the group heads to the grocery store, where the boy locks eyes with a friendly African American man. That simple exchange leads to a horrific act of racism, and sets the stage for the short's unnerving second half. Especially effective is the man's young son, who idolizes his dad but begins to feel the stirrings of a conscience as the true scope of his violent behavior comes into play. The majority of the short is told from the child's perspective. The film captures the contradictory mix of familial affection and extreme hatred.

DETAINMENT: (Ireland) This film is a fact-based drama about two 10-year-old boys who kidnapped, tortured, and brutally murdered a two-year-old child in 1993 Liverpool. The short film is based on the real transcripts of the killers' interrogations, and is largely set in the police stations where they confessed. It focuses on their dawning realization that they have done something truly unforgivable. The case shocked the United Kingdom and resulted in the two killers being tried and convicted as adults. The two young actors were excellent. Gary and I couldn't help but be moved by the anguish of parents who realize that their boys have done something monstrous.

FAUVE: (Canada) Two preteens are playing in an empty pit mine whose landscape could be a lunar surface. As the pair messes around, they stumble onto a sea of wet concrete. Their antics suddenly transform into a terrifying life-or-death situation. **Fauve** is suspenseful visual storytelling at its best.

MARGUERITE: (Canada) The only film in this category directed by a woman is a tender acting showcase for two of Canada's finest actors. Béatrice Picard is the elderly woman who contemplates a hidden past while bonding with her nurse, played by Sandrine Bisson. The loving care that the nurse gives her patient is expressed beautifully, and is very touching.

MADRE: (Spain) *Madre* is set entirely in one Madrid apartment, almost all of it in one take. A young single mother receives a call from her six-year-old son while he's vacationing with her ex-husband in France. The call takes an ominous turn when she learns that his father has vanished, leaving the boy to wander on a beach somewhere on the coast of France. The child is incapable of describing the place and his mother is frantic to find him. The director expertly taps into the fear of being far away and powerless to help a loved one in danger.

2017 OSCAR NOMINATED LIVE ACTION SHORTS (2017 Films; 90th Oscars-2018)

WINNER: THE SILENT CHILD - United Kingdom: This short was written by star Rachel Shenton (an outspoken advocate for the deaf community best known for her work on the series *Switched at Birth*). Shenton plays a social worker who is hired to help a profoundly deaf child. Young Libby (Maisie Sly) is the only deaf member of a hearing family, and as she readies to enter school for the first time, her parents have finally gotten hip to the fact that she needs extra attention. Joanne arrives to teach Libby sign language, finding a bright child, filled with things to express. Maisie's mother and father seem to want her to be "normal" and throw up roadblocks to her learning. They don't want her depending on sign language to communicate. This tender and heartbreaking short's ending credits offer educational stats on deaf children and calls for sign language to be more readily available in schools.

DEKALB ELEMENTARY - USA: The morning seems ordinary at the neighborhood elementary school when a young man walks in and pulls a semi-automatic gun out his backpack. Cassandra is the receptionist and she is forced to deal with a potentially lethal situation. As Cassandra attempts to talk the gunman down, the tension is almost unbearable. The young man is played in a realistic and understated manner by *Eastbound & Down* star Bo Mitchell, and Tarra Riggs is stunning as Cassandra. Like many of its fellow nominees, *DeKalb Elementary* was inspired by actual events — Van Dyk pulled material from a real 911 call placed from an Atlanta, Georgia school.

MY NEPHEW EMMETT – USA: This one is focused on the hours before the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 Mississippi, and is told from the perspective of Till's Uncle Mose Wright. L.B. Williams is compelling as Emmett's uncle. The focus on Mose allows the director to end with his story with the real Mose Wright talking to a reporter.

THE ELEVEN O'CLOCK – Australia: The lone comedy in this year's Live Action Shorts concerns a psychiatrist greeting his eleven o'clock patient who, among other problems, believes he is a psychiatrist. As they become increasingly distraught, we have no idea which of the men is a psychiatrist and which is the patient who believes he's a psychiatrist. Especially amusing is the word association test that each man thinks he is administering to the other.

WATU WOTE (All of us) - Germany and Kenya: A young Christian woman named Jua is taking a long bus journey to visit her sick mother. Initially reticent to sit with a Muslim woman and her child, Jua is forced to confront her prejudices in order to get where she needs to go. As the bus makes its way across the Kenyan landscape and they find themselves without a police escort, the tension builds. It finally explodes in violence as armed men attack the bus threatening to kill the infidels. That this is based on a real incident is only revealed in the final credits and for Gary and me, increased the powerful message that we are all going through this life together.

2016 OSCAR NOMINATED LIVE ACTION SHORTS: (2016 Films; 89th Oscars-2017)

We were disappointed with the shorts this year. There wasn't one that stood out as special. Overall, we'd give them a B- to C+ grade.

WINNER: Sing, Hungary (25 minutes): This short film is supposedly based on a true story. A young girl, Zsofi, enters a new school that is well-known for its prize-winning choir. The principal proudly tells Zsofi's mother that he insists that anyone who wants may join the choir. But the choir director has a technique for including everyone, but still making sure that her choir stays on top. The film does a lovely job of showing the budding friendship between Zsofi and Lisa, another choir member. (*Sing*, won the Oscar for Best Live Action Short)

Silent Night, Denmark (30 minutes): Inger is a kindhearted homeless shelter worker whose sweet nature and ease with her work masks some serious personal problems, most of which stem from her alcoholic mother. She and an immigrant from Ghana named Kwame strike up a friendship which blossoms into a romance. But Kwame isn't quite the man he appears to be. The actors here are particularly appealing.

Time Code, Spain (15 minutes): Two workers in an underground parking garage find a way to escape the boredom of their jobs, in this fun entry from Spain.

Ennemis Interieurs-Enemies Within, France (28 minutes): The action takes place almost entirely inside the literally dim innards of an immigration office. An unnamed Algerian-born Frenchman hopes to procure official citizenship, but the immigration official has some questions to ask—questions the petitioner isn't sure he wants to answer. The tight focus on the two men builds the tension nicely in this very timely film.

La Femme et la TGV-The Woman and the TGV, Switzerland (30 minutes): Elise is a lonely woman who runs a failing bakery in a small French town. She has an interesting habit: every day she waves at a train passing her home. The train conductor throws a note into her yard one day to say that her waving makes him happy. A correspondence is struck up between the pair, one built on more tossed packages (stuffed with plenty of cheese) and carefully written letters in which Elise comes to terms with some of her biggest fears. The movie ends on a hopeful note, as Elise and her bakery undergo a renaissance.

2015 OSCAR NOMINATED LIVE ACTION SHORT FILMS (2015 Films; 88th Oscars-2016)

After our experience last year, we skipped the Animated Short Films and went to only the Live Action Short Films. Once again, they were all excellent. It would be hard for me to pick a favorite.

WINNER: STUTTERER: This charming entry from the UK was the shortest of the five but told an eloquent story of a lonely typographer with a cruel speech impediment, but with a poetic inner voice. He has had a six-month online relationship with a young woman, but, when she is visiting London and suggests they meet, he is terrified. It was amazing how they were able to tell this story

and create sympathy for the young man in only 12 minutes. We loved it. As one critic said, "The O Henry-style twist at the end will melt even the coldest hearts."

AVE MARIA: This was a delightful 15 minutes. In the opening scene, we see a young novice and four nuns partaking of a meal in total silence. Their vow of silence is disturbed when an Israeli settler family breaks down right outside their West Bank convent just as the Sabbath comes into effect. The film was a cooperative effort between Palestine, France and Germany.

DAY ONE: This USA entry tells the story of an Afghan-American woman serving as an interpreter for the U.S. military. Accompanying some soldiers on their quest to capture a bomb-maker, she's called upon to deliver the terrorist's wife's baby despite having no medical training, aided only by the verbal instructions of a male doctor who the observant Muslim husband won't allow into the room. The film offers a touch of humanity during the war in Afghanistan, and was inspired by a true story. Star Wars creator George Lucas had a hand in this film when he became a mentor to the soldier-turned-filmmaker Henry Hughes. Hughes became a student at the American Film Institute after serving two combat tours in Afghanistan. Hughes, who comes from a five-generated military family, directed *Day One* from a story that was suggested by his interpreter in Afghanistan.

EVERYTHING WILL BE OKAY: This German film tells the story of a divorced father spending the day with his 8-year-old daughter. At first the visit seems routine, with a stop at a toy store where he allows her to make some selections. But it soon becomes apparent that he has a more serious agenda in mind when he procures an "emergency passport," leaves his car at a local dealer and heads for the airport. Emotionally wrenching and the two leads were terrific.

SHOK: The story is set in Kosovo in 1998 and is based on real events. It takes place during the escalation of the Kosovo War when the country was occupied by Serbia. Two adolescent Albanian boys find their friendship and loyalty tested when they run afoul of brutal Serbian soldiers. The two young boys were very good and helped us see the chaos of war through their eyes. This is a first Oscar nomination for Kosovo. The title of the film means "friend."

DOCUMENTARY SHORT FILMS

2019 OSCAR-NOMINATED DOCUMENTARY SHORTS: (2019 Films; 92nd Oscars-2020)

(I have listed them in the order we saw them.) We enjoyed every one of these Documentary Shorts. Rather than give them a grade individually, we've decided the grade them as a whole. **GRADE A**

LIFE OVERTAKES ME: The film tells the story of Resignation Syndrome. Hundreds of refugee children in Sweden who have fled with their families from extreme trauma in their home countries have become afflicted with this life-threatening psychosomatic illness. Facing deportation, they withdraw from the world into a coma-like state, as if frozen, for months or even years. We had never heard of this strange disease. It is more prevalent in Sweden, although many other refugee children lapse into Resignation Syndrome.

WINNER: LEARNING TO SKATEBOARD IN A WARZONE (if you're a girl): Over the course of 15 years, a class of young girls from disadvantaged neighborhoods in war-torn Kabul, learn to read and write, and grow together in confidence through the joy of skateboarding. In Afghanistan, many young girls are not able to participate in sports mostly because of Cultural and religious norms. The name of the school is Skateistan, and the school has affected a new generation of Afghan girls who believe they can do anything. We were especially charmed by the faces of these young girls as they studied and learned to skateboard. **(THIS FILM WON THE OSCAR)**

IN THE ABSENCE: When the MV Sewol ferry sank off the coast of South Korea in 2014, over three hundred people lost their lives, most of them schoolchildren. The rescue efforts were horribly botched, and years later, the victims' families and survivors are still demanding justice from national authorities.

WALK RUN CHA-CHA: Paul and Millie Cao fell in love as teenagers in Vietnam but were soon separated by the war. Six years later they finally reunited in California. Now, after decades of working hard to build new lives, they are making up for lost time on the dance floor. Shot over a period of six years, the film is an intimate, beautifully-crafted story about immigration, transformation and the power of love.

ST. LOUIS SUPERMAN: Bruce Franks Jr., a leading Ferguson activist and battle rapper who was elected to the overwhelmingly white and Republican Missouri House of Representatives, must overcome both personal trauma and political obstacles to pass a bill critical to his community. His bill declares youth violence as a public health epidemic. It also declares June 7th as "Christopher Harris Day," in honor of his brother who was killed by gun violence when he was 9 years-old.

2018 OSCAR NOMINATED DOCUMENTARY SHORT FILMS: (2018 Films; 91st Oscars-2019)

This year's batch of contenders range in running time from 7 minutes to 40 minutes. Watching them in one setting is a sobering and uplifting experience. All are worth watching, but for me the most memorable of the group was the shortest. ***A Night at the Garden***. All the entries except ***Black Sheep*** are from USA. Most will never see these fascinating Academy Award entries and that is unfortunate.

GRADE A

WINNER: *Period. End of Sentence*: (USA-26 minutes) Set in a small village outside Delhi, the documentary opens with a simple question, posed to some of the community's residents: "what do you know about menstruation?" Men knew little or nothing while younger girls titter and giggle. Sponsored by The Pad Project, which aims to help girls in third world countries get access to sanitary pads so that they can stay in school. They not only get them, but make them and sell them to their fellow villagers. It may not sound like much, but I predict this entry will be the winner.

***A Night at the Garden*:** (USA-7 minutes) On February 20, 1939 an event took place in a packed Madison Square Garden that I am sure many would like to have forgotten. While Adolf Hitler's troops were building concentration camps in Germany, New York City was hosting a Nazi rally in the famed Garden. Twenty thousand white men and women attended with arms raised in Adolph Hitler's salute with swastikas in the background. It was riveting and revolting from start to finish and Director Marshall Curry didn't have to do anything but show the archival footage as it occurred with the briefest of statistical facts at the end to describe what else was happening at the time.

***End Game*:** (USA-40 minutes) As the title might suggest, this entry focuses on the work required to help people approaching the end of their lives. It highlights the misunderstandings that surround hospice care. All the entries but one are from USA.

Black Sheep: (UK-27 minutes) Cornelius Walker is an engaging, open, and charismatic black man who as a talking head tells an intriguing story, his story of leaving London with his Nigerian immigrant mother and father to escape the racist tensions of the city only to find even more racist attitudes outside the city.

Lifeboat: (USA-40 minutes) The film focuses on a non-profit group dedicated to helping thousands of refugees fleeing Libya in overcrowded, poorly constructed vessels. The film's director documents the humanitarian crisis while profiling several rescued migrants as well as Jon Castle, a longtime captain on Greenpeace sea missions. He helps you get to know both the migrants and the rescuers as people, not just symbols. Barbara was especially touched by the captain's comment that to understand, "you must learn to think with your heart, not your head."

2017 OSCAR NOMINATED DOCUMENTARY SHORTS (2017 Films; 90th Oscars-2018)

WINNER: HEAVEN IS A TRAFFIC JAM ON THE 405: This short is a stunning portrait of the artist Mindy Alper. In her on-camera interviews, her speech is stilted and slow and she wrings her hands compulsively as she details a lifelong battle with depression and mental illness. As she speaks, however, we are charmed by her sense of humor and her startling self-awareness. Her childhood memories are of a distant mother and a menacing father, and her many drawings express her inner life and fears. Alper works in paper mache a medium she learned at an early age from one of the art teachers her mother hired to help her. She creates giant faces and complex shapes that are both whimsical and haunting. Frank Stiefel's short is a fascinating look at a creative and difficult life. I will not soon forget this remarkable woman.

TRAFFIC STOP: In 2015, an African-American math teacher named Breiaion King was stopped for a minor traffic violation in Austin, Texas, and what should have been a routine ticket turned into a violent arrest. Footage of the encounter as captured by police dash cams is intercut with slices of King's life as a teacher and a dancer. King is a great interview subject and appears to be an inspired teacher. Filmmaker Kate Davis has created a deeply moving portrait of a woman whose life is turned upside down by callous police brutality and racism.

EDITH+EDDIE: Edith and Eddie met while playing the lottery and married at the ripe old ages of 95 and 96. Their elder romance is sweet, but one of Edith's daughters attempts to separate the couple out of fear that Eddie's medical care will diminish their mother's estate. Because her daughters can't agree on their mother's care, the court appoints a guardian to make decisions for Edith, a stranger who has never even met her. The touching evening they are separated for two weeks turn out to be permanent.

HEROIN(E): Huntington, West Virginia, has been dubbed the overdose capital of America, and in this documentary short, three women work to break the cycle of addiction one life at a time. The first is Fire Chief Jan Rader who spends her days reviving addicts from overdoses. The next is Judge Patricia Keller who presides over a court program that treats addicts with humor and tough love. She's a regular Judge Judy, doling out support and reprimands as she sees fit. The third heroine is Necia Freeman, of Brown Bag Ministry, who feeds and counsels women on the street. All three heroines are working tirelessly to help people change their lives. Chief Rader says that it doesn't matter how many times she has to save someone—if she saves the same person 50 times, that's 50 chances the person has at entering recovery.

KNIFE SKILLS: Filmmaker Thomas Lennon chronicles the opening of a world-class French restaurant staffed almost entirely by formerly incarcerated people, as well as an owner with a checkered past of his own. The film opens just six weeks before the restaurant, *Edwins*, opens in Cleveland, Ohio. The staff has a nearly impossible task: to learn the vocabulary of fine French cuisine as well as the skills to make each dish on the menu. Not all of the staff lasts the six weeks, but of those that do, few if any winds up incarcerated again. Given the national recidivism rate of 2/3 of those released from prison, the restaurant program is a success. And so is the restaurant.