Three Billboards and a BAFTA

The BAFTAS are the British Film Awards, the equivalent of the Oscars, and in recent years with an increasing number of British actors and films featuring in Academy Award nominations have become more significant as pre-indicators of Oscar gold. The leading contender for this year’s Big Win at the Oscars is Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri, a thoroughly American film written and directed by Martin McDonagh who is Irish. The film scooped all my favorites at the Baftas, including Best Picture, Best Original Screenplay, Best Actress, and Best Supporting Actor. Will the same British acclaim play out in L.A. on Oscar night?

This year’s film nominations are very different to last year’s. There have been complaints that this year’s pick is kind of “bleah” compared to last year’s dazzling line-up. True, the romance between a mute and an amphibian sea creature in *The Shape of Water*  just doesn’t transport us to the stars like *LaLaLand.*  But there are still some very worthy films and performances that definitely speak to current issues and none more so than *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri.*

When Frances McDormand came up to the London stage to receive her BAFTA for Best Actress in *Three Billboards*, she was wearing a rather strange dress with a red lips and lipstick print. Everyone in the audience that night was wearing black as a symbol of solidarity with the “Me Too” movement against sexual harassment in Hollywood. McDormand gestured towards her outfit and said, “I have trouble with compliance.” Which is exactly the kind of person Mildred Hayes is, whom McDormand plays so brilliantly in the film.

You could say non-compliance is a strong theme that runs throughout all this year’s nominated performances, from Churchill’s refusal to do a deal with Hitler in *Darkest Hour* to news publisher Katharine Graham refusing to comply with a president’s efforts to suppress the truth in *The Post* to an emotionally damaged ice skating champion refusing to fit the mold in *I, Tonya*. What could reflect the “Me Too” movement more that films about characters standing up to systems they feel have failed them.

There is nothing compliant about *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. For one thing, it defies categorization so that one moment the audience is gasping with horror and disbelief and the next laughing out loud. What is this film about? On the surface, it appears to be a story about a woman who is determined to find out who raped and murdered her daughter. Frustrated that the police have not brought in any suspects and have seemingly lost interest in the case, Mildred vents her anger by advertising their incompetence on three giant red billboards lined up on the road outside town. In turn, they shout at all who pass by with the words:

**RAPED WHILE DYING**

**NO ARRESTS MADE**

**HOW COME, CHIEF WILLOUGHBY?**

But the film is not a thriller in which a lone woman goes in search of her daughter’s killer. It’s a film about what happens when a community’s expectations of one another’s support and compassion are seriously malfunctioning. The results are both comic as well as tragic because human beings trying to make themselves understood in a dysfunctional society are as deeply ironic as they are pathetic.

There’s a lot of anger going on in the film industry at present. Women are fed up with being forced into a Code of Silence in order to keep their careers on track. The “Me Too” movement has become a way of billboarding their anger. Three billboards outside Hollywood could read:

**RAPED WHILE AUDITIONING**

**NO ARREST MADE**

**HOW COME, HARVEY WEINSTEIN?**

As outrageous as Mildred Hayes’ actions are in *Three Billboards*, they are not hard to believe. The violent American is nothing new but a well established stereotype. Writer and director Martin McDonagh taps into the American writer Flannery O’Connor’s Catholic way of writing about a fallen world desperately in need of grace—*“to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures.”*

What does it take to catch a compliant, complacent world’s attention? School shootings have become so commonplace now, it would seem the only solution is to arm the teachers?? What if the schoolteacher goes nuts? Like Mildred Hayes when she starts firebombing the police station? Thank goodness she doesn’t have a gun!

One of the best scenes in the film follows Mildred’s fiery meltdown outside the police station. She thinks no one is in there, but while the flames gather momentum in the background, sitting totally oblivious to the danger is Dixon, the disgraced deputy reading with great emotion his chief’s final letter to him telling him he can only become the good man he’s capable of being if he learns to replace his anger with love. Of course, he’s not going to become anything at all if he doesn’t get out of the burning building. Instinctively, we want to shout, *“Get out, you idiot! Are you deaf? Are you blind?”*

Yes, the hard of hearing do need to be shouted at. Unless, of course, their hearing is gone altogether. In which case, they need rescuing. Dixon and Mildred both need rescuing from themselves. As do we all. We are all in need of grace and redemption. Whether Dixon and Mildred actually find redemption is unclear. But there is a slight hint they may be on the right path when they begin to acknowledge their own complicit guilt instead of blaming everyone else. I can’t help but wonder what Flannery O’Connor would have thought?