

Writer-Director, DP, Editor & Production Designer POVs

Insights into
Nomadland,
Minari, *Promising
Young Woman*, *One
Night in Miami*, *The
Trial of the Chicago
7* and *The Prom*

By Robert Goldrich, The
Road To Oscar Series, Part 3



Chloé Zhao is among this year's leading Oscar contenders as writer-director of *Nomadland* (Searchlight Pictures). Last month she earned Best Director honors from both the New York and Los Angeles Film Critics associations. In 2020, *Nomadland* also became the first film ever to garner the top prizes at the Toronto and Venice film festivals. *Nomadland* received the Venice Golden Lion and shortly thereafter the People's Choice Award at the Toronto fest. The latter honor is often a harbinger of things to come at the Academy Awards. Over the past decade, the People's Choice Award winner has gone on to earn a Best Picture Oscar nomination. In 2019, that was *Jojo Rabbit*. Earlier *Green Book* won at Toronto and wound up receiving the Academy Award for Best Picture. Among other People's Choice Award winners taking the Best Picture Oscar were *12 Years a Slave*, *Slumdog Millionaire* and *The King's Speech*.

Based on Jessica Bruder's book "Nomadland: Surviving America in the 21st Century" with Zhao penning the adapted

screenplay, the film *Nomadland* introduces us to Fern (portrayed by two-time Oscar winner Frances McDormand), an independent spirit who after the economic collapse of a small company town in Nevada packs her van and sets off on the road as a modern-day nomad, encountering unique places in rural America and even more unique varied characters including many played by real people (a staple of Zhao's filmmaking up to this point), the key exception being actor David Strathairn who emerges as a friend and a subdued potential love interest.

We meet older transient Americans living on the road in vans and recreational vehicles, taking on seasonal work when and where they can find it such as an Amazon processing plant where Fern has a regular Xmas-time gig. We experience both a sense of community and loneliness on the road, a dichotomy that is even present in Fern's van which carries feelings of isolation yet at the same time reflects an appreciation of a place to call home. There's a beauty and simplicity to

the nomad existence, in some respects showing that there's a shared humanity when you strip life down to surviving with limited resources while trying to connect with and help others--no matter how momentary or transitory those relationships may turn out to be. Some folks carry the weight of grief and loss yet there's a resilience that unites them all. There are many quiet, understated moments yet cumulatively they become substantive, underscoring Zhao's feeling that while politics and media portray us as divided, the reality is that people naturally have and can embrace "a spirit of co-existence." Getting the chance to delve into this helped satiate Zhao's long-standing desire to as she says, "make a road movie," an opportunity made richer by getting to work with McDormand "to create a character like Fern" who in turn was able to mesh, relate to and be at one with real-life nomads, bringing their lives to the fore, making for a remarkable performance.

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From top left, clockwise:
Nomadland writer-director Chloe Zhao; Frances McDormand in *Nomadland*; a scene from *Minari*; *Promising Young Woman*; *One Night in Miami*; *The Prom* production designer Jamie Walker McCall; *Chicago 7* editor Alan Baumgarten.