

The prestigious Academy Awards go a long way back

by Terry Dupuis
Last week, on Tuesday April 8th, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences presented its annual awards for the forty-seventh consecutive year for outstanding contributions to the art of film-making. Each year the Academy presents awards to various types of films, including documentaries, both short and full-length; short subjects, both live and animated; and foreign films. However, the emphasis is on American feature-length films, for which awards are presented in the areas of film editing, sound, photography, costumes, and art direction (i.e. sets, backgrounds, decor). As for writing, there are two awards given for screenplays: one for the Best Original Screenplay, and one for the Best Adapted Screenplay (i.e. a script which is based on an already existing work such as a novel or a play).

existing musical work (for example, the arrangements of the scores from stage musicals such as "Oliver!" or "The West Side Story"; another good example would be Marvin Hamlisch's arrangement of Old Joplin tunes for the movie, "The Sting", last year's winner in this category). The third music award is for the best song from one of the year's films (for example, back in 1969, the winner in this category was the Burt Bacharach song, "Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head" from the movie "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid").

These awards are mainly of a technical nature and although they are highly prized in the film industry itself, they are usually of lesser interest to the general public. Each year public attention is focussed primarily on six categories: those of Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best Supporting Actress, Best Director, and what is considered the big award, the Best Motion Picture of the Year. These

are the categories which most people are thinking of when they talk about "the Academy Awards" or "the Oscar Race".

In addition to these, the Academy occasionally presents an honorary Oscar to an individual for his or her outstanding contribution to the art of the motion picture. Recipients of these honorary Oscars in recent years have included Cary Grant, Charles Chaplin and Edward G. Robinson. There are also several special awards which are given out by the Academy from time to time, not necessarily every year; these include the Irving Thalberg Memorial Award, named after the dynamic M.G.M. producer of the 1930's, and the Jean Herscholt Humanitarian Award, named after the late actor.

The Origin of the Oscar
In 1927, the last year of silent films, the movie industry was thriving as never before in terms of box-office revenue. But the leaders of the industry felt that its reputation was not all it should be. Censorship was threatened, and the church was often antagonistic. Films needed a new, more dignified image and so 36 of the field's leaders got together to see what could be done about it.

Their answer was to organize the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, a non-profit organization dedicated to the ideal of improving the artistic quality of the film medium. Louis B. Mayer, one of the founders of the film industry itself, suggested that a yearly awards program would be one way to focus attention on outstanding achievements in films. This idea met with the approval of the others. Art director Cedric Gibbons sketched the figure that became the Awards symbol, and sculptor George Stanley molded it.

How "Oscar" got his name
The little statuette which was to become known as the film industry's supreme accolade depicts a strong man holding a crusader's sword and standing on a reel of film. It is 13 and a half inches tall, 8 and a half pounds in weight, and made of a combination of metals coated in 10-karat gold.

For the first few years of the awards, the figurine was nameless, being referred to officially as "the statuette". Several people have claimed the distinction of having given the award its name, but the most commonly accepted version is that it was Margaret Herrick, one of the Academy's librarians, who inadvertently christened the figurine "Oscar". When she first saw the Awards symbol she is supposed to have exclaimed, "Why, it looks like my Uncle Oscar!" A newspaperman happened to be there at the time and overheard Miss Herrick, the remark hit print, and "Oscar" it has been ever since.



Wins Oscar

Ingrid Bergman, above, won an Oscar at last week's Academy Awards night as the best supporting actress for her role in the film *Motion on the Orient Express*. This photo shows her performing in the six-year-old movie *Cactus Flower*, one of the many roles played by the skilled and beautiful actress over the years.

Photo by National Screen Service Corp.

How the nominations are made and the winners are chosen

The Motion Picture Academy is divided into various craft branches - acting, directing, cinematography, etc.

In selecting nominees for the Best Picture Award, the entire Academy membership (about 3000) is polled and the five films which receive the greatest number of votes are designated as the nominees.

In the case of the other regular Oscar categories, only the members of each branch receive ballots for the initial selection of nominees in their particular category - actors nominate actors, directors nominate directors, writers nominate writers, and so on.

Once the nominees are selected for each category, the next step is to vote for the Oscar winners. In this voting for the finalists, the entire Academy membership participates. Each member receives a ballot which then goes, unopened, to Price Waterhouse and Company, the international public accounting firm which totals and verifies the votes. The name of the winner in each classification is placed in a sealed envelope not to be

opened until that category comes up on Oscar night.

It is interesting to note that for the first ten years of the awards this secrecy did not hold and winners knew in advance that they had been chosen, although of course, it was not made public. In 1940, however, the 1939 winners' names were released prematurely by the press, leaving little interest in the actual event, and the sealed-envelope system was adopted the following year.

Are the Oscars Really Awarded to the Best?

The Academy Awards have always been and still are the most coveted accolades in the film industry, despite frequent criticism of them and the disdain in recent years of performers such as George C. Scott, Marlon Brando and Dustin Hoffman. The Oscars have been dismissed by some critics as mere popularity polls. Certainly it would be nice, although extremely naive, to say that the best performances each year are the ones which are always awarded. Unfortunately, the Academy Awards have never been able to be as objective as its founders would wish. In a contest

where you have more than three thousand judges deciding the winners, innumerable subjective considerations are bound to have an influence: popularity of the nominee, sentiment, nostalgia, revenge, studio loyalty and politics, amongst other factors.

The best example that comes to my mind when I think of sentimental emotions swaying the Oscar votes occurred in 1960 when Elizabeth Taylor, after serious illness and a close brush with death won the Academy Award for Best Actress for a thoroughly mediocre performance in "Butterfield Eight".

There have also been a number of examples in Oscar history, when the award seems to have been presented to an actress or actor as a sort of consolation prize for having lost the award the year before for another performance. For example, in 1934 Bette Davis lost the Oscar for Best Actress by a narrow margin for her striking performance in "Of Human Bondage". The following year she was awarded the Oscar for a less memorable performance in a minor film called "Dangerous". Another example occurred in 1940, when James Stewart won the Best Actor Oscar for his performance as the reporter in "The Philadelphia Story"; it is generally felt by most, including Stewart himself, that this was actually a consolation prize for his not getting the Oscar the year before for his role in Frank Capra's social comedy "Mr. Smith Goes To Washington".

An Analysis of this Year's Results

Now I would like to take a look at the results of this year's Academy Awards. Are the voters getting away from nostalgic and sentimental considerations, and becoming more objective in their choice of winners? In the category of Best Supporting Actor, the winner was Robert DeNiro for his performance as the young Vito Corleone in "The Godfather Part Two". DeNiro, a newcomer to films, beat out Fred Astaire, a veteran performer of over 40 years who was considered the sentimental favourite in this category for his role in "The Towering Inferno". Were the old nostalgia principle still in full force, this year, Astaire would most certainly have won.

Perhaps the Academy voters are maturing in their voting and are voting for the performance itself rather than the actor.

Ingrid Bergman's winning of the Best Supporting Actress Oscar might possibly be construed by some people to be merely a sentimental coice. Could a large number of the voters have chosen her because of

guilty feelings over the shameful way Hollywood had treated her 25 years ago? This is possibly what happened. But Miss Bergman's performance as the religious fanatic in "Murder on the Orient Express" is certainly good enough to merit the Oscar, so possibly the voters did vote for her because they genuinely felt she deserved it.

An interesting thing happened in the two top acting categories this year. Art Carney won the Best Actor Oscar for his performance in "Harry and Tonto" and Ellen Burstyn copped the Best Actress Award for "Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore". Both Carney and Burstyn won for their performances in minor films which weren't even nominated in other categories. If the Awards had been running true to type this year, one of the performers in one of the most-nominated films would probably have won, such as Al Pacino for "Godfather Part Two" or Jack Nicholson for "Chinatown", or Faye Dunaway for "Chinatown".

Many of the winners of this year's awards seemed to win justifiably. "Earthquake" won two Oscars, for Best Sound and Best Special Effects. Very few people would argue with that.

"The Great Gatsby" won what I felt were two well-deserved Oscars for Best Costumes and Best Adapted Musical Score.

"The Towering Inferno" won three Academy Awards, for the Best Film Editing, the Best Song ("We May Never Love Like This Again"), and the Best Cinematography. I'd go along with the first two awards, but my own coice for the best cinematography, if I had had a vote, would have been "The Great Gatsby".

"Chinatown" unquestionably deserved its award for The Best Original Screenplay. Unfortunately, this was the only category in which this most striking detective film won anything, although it was nominated in 11 categories.

"The Godfather Part Two" certainly fared better. It too was nominated in 11 categories and it won in six of them, including Best Director (Francis Ford Coppola) and the top prize, Best Picture of the Year. These were two awards which I felt should have gone to "Chinatown". Part Two of the Godfather is certainly a professional flawlessly crafted piece of filmmaking, but then so is "Chinatown". And "Godfather Two" merely gave us "More of the same" of what we were given in "Godfather One", whereas "Chinatown" was one of the most unusual and strikingly different films I had seen in years. So my vote for Best Picture would have gone to "Chinatown".

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