

Entertainment

The awards are flawed because the system is flawed

Oscars are a wee bit tarnished

by Dean Bennett

The scene is all too familiar: Hollywood's finest converging to honour their own. It's all there: the excitement, the glamour, the envelopes, the interminable speeches. It's Academy Awards night. According to film professors Bill Beard and Peter Klovan and Edmonton Sun film critic John Charles, though, the ol' Oscar is just a wee bit tarnished.

"The Academy Awards has practically no relationship to what I think is an objective assessment of the value in a film," said Beard.

"The Academy Awards is Hollywood's annual pagan ritual in celebration of itself. The awards have little to do with quality and value and have everything to do with personality and politics," said Klovan.

As proof of their claims, the critics can merely point to the Academy's track record.

"If you make a list of Academy Award winners and a list of the films that are now perceived as the greatest movies, you'll find that there are very few connections," said Charles. "Cecil B. DeMille got an award for *The Greatest Show on Earth* (it won for Best Picture in 1952) because he brought a lot of money into Hollywood with his spectacles. Nobody ever thought it was one of the better movies of that year or even one of DeMille's greatest movies. Another example is Elizabeth Taylor. She won an award for *Butterfield 8* (Best Actress, 1960) for almost dying in a throat operation. It's almost a welcome-back-to-life-Liz award."

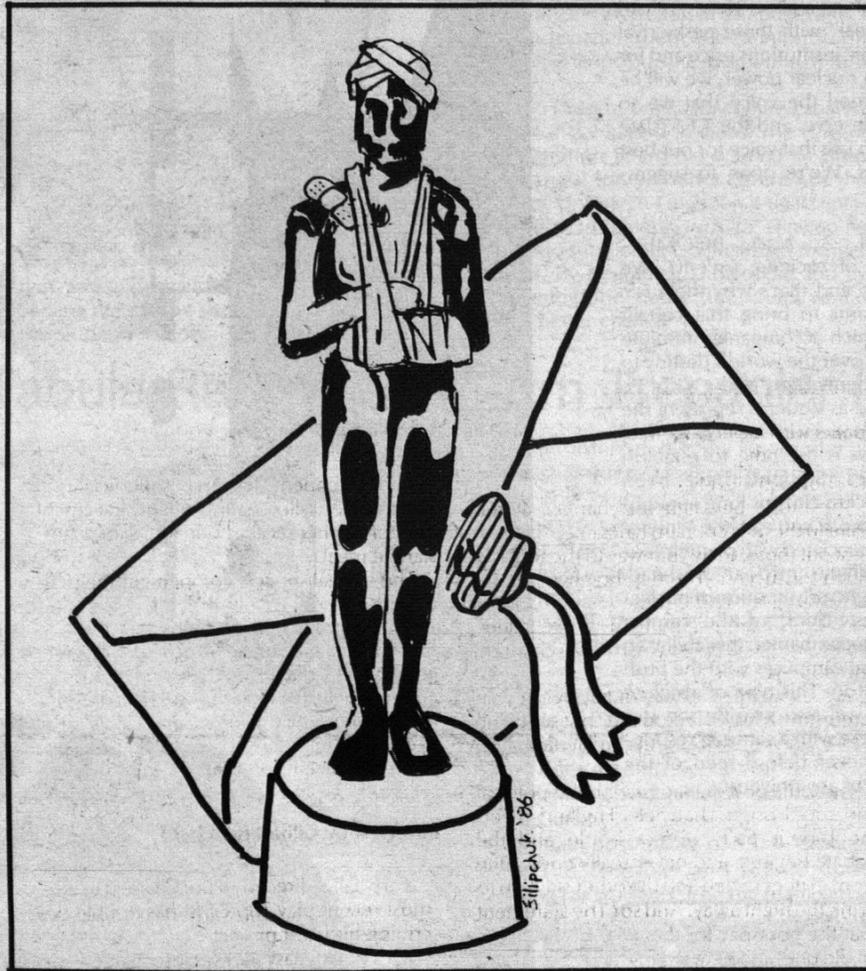
These sentiments are echoed by Beard. "The Academy Awards are retrospective," he said. "If somebody's at death's door he's a good pick. If he's dead he's a shoo-in."

Klovan feels that one reason the awards are flawed is because the system is flawed.

"There are thirteen actor and craft guilds in Hollywood," he said. "Each member selects the five most worthy nominees in his or her guild. The total membership of the guilds is about three thousand people. All three thousand then select - by secret ballot - the winner among all the nominees in the categories presented. That means people are voting on movies they probably haven't seen. Some haven't seen the majority of the things they're voting on. How can an editor know about the special effects in some obscure film? Also, the studios vote en masse. If a Paramount film is nominated, everybody at Paramount will vote for that film. In the studio era MGM was the strongest and guess which studio won all the time?"

Other outside considerations determine what is and what is not Oscar material.

"The most interesting thing about the Academy Awards is what it tells you about the Hollywood mentality," said Beard. "At the awards, Hollywood tries to rise above crass commercialism. The awards go to movies which are perceived to be culturally respectable. Inspirational movies and movies attempting to deal with serious social problems come into their own. It's a time when Hollywood wants to prove to itself and to the world it does have a serious side. Now this isn't to say that the money-making criteria disappears on awards night. It's just rare that a box office flop will get anything but a minor award; maybe best costume design."



Beard also feels that Hollywood uses the awards night to show they care.

"What goes on on Awards night is an orgy of sentimentality where everyone feels purged of all their guilt. In 1978, Jon Voigt won Best Actor for *Coming Home* and it was the year of the handicapped person. Awards went out to documentaries on the handicapped. It's as if Hollywood is saying 'What wonderful people we really are. We're wonderful not because we're rich and glamorous, but because we worry about our fellow man.' Hollywood is always worried about the reputation that it has no heart. The Academy Awards is heart night."

Every year the nominations are not without some controversy and this year is no exception. The biggest controversy is that *The Color Purple* is up for, among other things, Best Picture, Best Actress, and Best Supporting Actress, yet its controlling force, Steven Spielberg, is not nominated for Best Director. Klovan feels this is due to an adverse reaction on the Academy's part to Spielberg's decision to make *The Color Purple*.

"Spielberg didn't get the nomination because *The Color Purple* is such a shameless ploy on his part," he said. "First Spielberg made *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and it made a lot of money. Then he made *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, but it was racist and sexist and made very little money so he

dropped the series like a hot potato and made a radical black feminist film to prove he's not racist or sexist. So the Academy said 'Okay, we'll nominate this picture, but not because of you, you putz'. *The Color Purple* is a shameless ploy. It's not a sincere film. All Hollywood movies manipulate the audience, but this was a shameless manipulation. It shows a poor black woman struggling stoically for two hours and then in the last ten minutes she inherits some money, kicks her husband out, and romps with her sister in a field of flowers. It has as much to do with life in the rural south as *Indiana Jones* has to do with life in India or wherever it was set."

Another controversy surrounds Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. He is nominated for Best Director, but his film, *Ran*, is not up for Best Foreign Film. "Each foreign country nominates one film from which the Academy selects the five nominees," said Charles.

"*Ran* cannot be nominated by the Academy because the Japanese film industry did not put it up. There are anti-Kurosawa feelings in the Japanese film industry right now."

The problems and contradictions in the Academy process are not limited to the above categories. There are problems in the acting categories as well.

"In terms of acting Hollywood loves and respects self-conscious performances where you never forget for a minute that a person is acting. For example, nice actresses who play whores or male actors who play drag queens are always dear to Hollywood's heart," said Charles.

"The Academy Award performance is a self-conscious one," agreed Beard. "It's a caricature of a performance. It's like Meryl Streep in *Sophies Choice*. She has a Polish accent so she must be acting. And the quiet performances tend not to get noticed no matter how good they are."

Beard also finds problems in the Best Supporting Actor category. "In 1980, Timothy Hutton was nominated as Best Supporting Actor for *Ordinary People*, yet he was the star of the film. They (the Academy) wouldn't nominate him as Best Actor because he was new and he was a teenager. This is unfair because he should have been nominated in the Best Actor category, but the fact that he had such a big part gave him an unfair advantage in the Best Supporting Actor category."

Despite the criticisms of the process, the prestige of the awards cannot be disputed - especially when that prestige can immediately be transferred into some more money at the box office.

"They're very prestigious awards," said Klovan. "An award for Best Picture can mean millions of dollars at the box office. Also, individual award winners gain greater bargaining power. For example, in 1969, *Midnight Cowboy* won for Best Picture and Dustin Hoffman was nominated for Best Actor. Even though he was only nominated, Hoffman went from being able to command \$100,000 to \$2 million almost overnight."

If one comment can summarize the feelings of all three critics, it's that beneath the glitter and glamour of the awards, there lies little substance.

"The Academy Awards is the essence of middle brow pretensions without any substance or depth," said Beard. "It's full of stoked up feelings which everybody believes are as deep as the Grand Canyon. There are only two ways I can watch the Academy Awards: with a bunch of friends so we can sit around and make wisecracks or on a VCR where I can fast-forward through those interminable speeches."

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