

AND THE LOSER IS ...

A History of Oscar Oversights

Second Edition

Aubrey Malone

Series in Cinema and Culture



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Everybody is a critic. We can all be our own Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. We may not get to vote for who wins what but we can lay down our views. In that way we keep the debate going about who should have won what when. And who got the fuzzy end of the lollipop. Again.

Preface

There have been many books about people who won Oscars. This is a book about those who lost. Or, if they won, who lost in other ways, either by being stereotyped in their Oscar roles or filled with false expectations that their careers would rocket in the aftermath of their win. Instead, they had to face the prospect that it stultified them, or caused them to go rapidly downhill.

It's also a book about people whose mindset was changed by the Oscar hoopla, either due to giving them ideas above their station or, in the case of Gig Young, leading to a mental collapse that eventually resulted in a violent tragedy.

I also examine the often mysterious choices of winners and losers arrived at by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, in its quest for greatness. Are such decisions influenced by politics? By advertising? By nepotism and/or other concerns? The evidence would seem to be that they are, in varying degrees. No organization is perfect but the manner in which AMPAS has chosen to neglect great performances and reward lesser ones so often means the subject needs to be addressed in some detail.

This book really began in 1970. That was the year after I'd sat electrified in my seat as I watched Dustin Hoffman and Jon Voight acting each other off the screen in *Midnight Cowboy*. I then had to endure John Wayne being awarded the Oscar for the kind of cowboy film I would have enjoyed as a child at an afternoon matinee – *True Grit*. When I thought about it, I realized there were many other stars who'd been dealt cards from the bottom of the Oscar deck before and after these two. People behind the camera had been mistreated too, for all kinds of reasons. The idea took hold: Why not a book about all of them, from the inception of the ceremonies to the present?

Prologue

It's February 2017, the 89th year of the Oscar ceremonies. A 79-year old man comes out on the stage of the Dolby Theater to read the name of the Best Picture of the Year. He opens the envelope and takes out a card. When he looks at it he puts on a face. He doesn't speak. The name written on the card is Emma Stone.

He hands it to his co-presenter, a woman of a similar age who has appeared with him in a famous film years and years ago. She doesn't put on a face. She looks at the name Emma Stone. Then she looks under it. She sees the name of the film Emma Stone has been in. She is more interested in this. It is what she has expected to see.

She reads out the words that are written under Emma Stone. The words she reads out are "*La La Land*." It is the film everyone expected to win. There was no question about it. It was going to win everything. You could put your house on it.

A few moments later, the stage is stormed by the people who produced the film. They're full of excitement as they clutch their Oscars.

Then another man comes on stage. His name is Jordan Horowitz. He's a producer. He looks distressed. "Guys, I'm sorry," he says, "*Moonlight* won Best Picture. This is not a joke. There's been a mistake."

A mistake.

It's not the first one that has ever been made on Oscar night...



Introduction

For many thinking people the Oscar ceremonies aren't very much superior to a cattle mart in artistic terms. Sean Penn believes the people behind them can't find their butt with their hand. He says, "So what does their opinion mean? It's just an opportunity to be an extra in a TV show – twenty minutes more than that if you win." Maybe this is why George C. Scott refused the Academy's highest accolade when it was awarded to him in 1970. So did Marlon Brando two years later, for somewhat different reasons.

Brando hated the contrivance of the ceremonies. "I know people who plan what they're going to wear to the ceremonies six months in advance," he said, "If there's any chance they'll be nominated they begin memorizing their acceptance speech. If they win they pretend their words are spontaneous, but they've lain awake for months mumbling to the ceiling what they're going to say."

How does one win an Oscar? According to Marlene Dietrich, who didn't, the best way to do so is to make sure one plays either "Biblical characters, priests, or victims of tragic disabilities such as blindness, deafness, muteness or different varieties thereof, or alcoholism, insanity, schizophrenia and other mental disorders." The experiences of people like Ernest Borgnine (*Marty*) and Cliff Robertson (*Charly*), as well as countless others, would appear to confirm her theory. The more serious the malady, the Academy have implied, right up to Daniel Day-Lewis for *My Left Foot* and Anthony Hopkins for *The Silence of the Lambs*, the better one's chances. Why? Billy Wilder gave one theory: "Anyone who plays a hunchback has a better chance of an Oscar than a leading man. That's the revenge of the voters. They don't get the girls either."

In 1983, as if to prove the truth of Dietrich's dictum, the five Best Actor nominees - Michael Caine, Albert Finney, Robert Duvall, Tom Conti and Tom Courtenay - were all playing drunks of some description. Eight years later, of the five nominees for Best Actor, three played deranged and sadistic killers (Warren Beatty, Robert De Niro and Anthony Hopkins), one was a homeless and delusional psychotic (Robin Williams) and one played a depressed, unemployed and ultimately adulterous husband (Nick Nolte).

In 1986 a virtually unknown actress called Marlee Matlin won the Best Actress Award for playing a deaf woman in the film *Children of a Lesser God*. Many people claimed this was a kind of collective sympathy vote doled out by a confraternity of people who may have had their hearts in the right place but

not their critical faculties. They were accused of confusing the performance (which was good, not great) with the cause.

Similar objections were raised the year Dustin Hoffman won the coveted statuette for playing an autistic savant in *Rain Man*. “Hollywood is going soft at the center,” the cynics proclaimed. The unctuous, on the other hand, dripped crocodile tears down their rented tuxedos. Then Al Pacino went blind in *Scout of a Woman*. Result? He won the Oscar. On his seventh attempt. Would he have won one sooner if he had an impairment of some sort? It’s highly possible.

Jodie Foster, a winner in 1988 and 1991, couldn’t resist telling everyone that “As much as I like the Oscar night pageantry, it’s a silly bingo game. It’s like five names in a hat and one gets pulled out. If they don’t call your name it’s not like you say: I wish I did that scene another way.”

Woody Allen made a related point. “I can’t abide by the judgment of other people,” he said, “because if you accept it when they say you deserve an award then you have to accept it when they say you don’t. It’s nice at the time because it means more money for your films but as soon as you let yourself start thinking that way something happens to the quality of the work.” Allen concluded, “When it’s your time they give it to you.”

George Burns would know all about that. He won one at the age of 80. Melvyn Douglas was just two years younger than that when he won a Best Supporting Actor for *Being There* in 1979, edging out the eight-year-old Justin Henry for *Kramer vs. Kramer*. The irony of the situation wasn’t lost on him. “If Justin loses again next year,” Dustin Hoffman mused, “We’ll have to give him a Lifetime Achievement Award.” An even more acerbic remark was made by Allen when he refused to attend the 1978 ceremonies: “I am not interested in an inanimate statue of a little bald man. I like something with long, blonde curls.”

Allen abjured the entire thinking behind the idea of favoring one film over another at the Oscars. “Who’s to say which is better?” he argued, “I think it would be better if the film industry met each year and in a dignified way just said, ‘These are our favorite films of the year. Not the best film, because all the films nominated are so different.’” Allen thought the Academy Awards were “grubby” because “Films and candidates are campaigned for and ads are taken... There’s no integrity or credibility.”¹

Oscar winners have been known to go downhill very fast after their time in the sun. This can be due to getting too big for their boots. Or it can be due to demanding excessive pay rises, being unable to find material as good as what they’ve just starred in, or being typecast in roles identical to those they won for. In each case, they’ve found it harder to stay at the top than to get there.

Luise Rainer won two Oscars in a row in 1936 and 1937 but did little of note for the remainder of her time in movies. Her case is exceptional but many stars failed to reprise the levels their careers reached on Oscar night. After Marlon Brando won for *On the Waterfront* in 1954, thereby capping four years of Oscar-nominated roles, he had a stop-go career for the next decade and a half before his renaissance in *The Godfather*. This resulted in an Oscar he refused. Apart from *Last Tango in Paris*, which he made the following year, and a few other oases in the artistic desert in future years, his career plummeted from this time onwards. He descended into various levels of self-parody, most notably in *The Freshman* which was a comic retread of *The Godfather*. An uneven fusillade of high-priced cameos followed as Brando sought new ways to make himself more unrecognizable (and often incomprehensible.)

Bob Hope used to say that the best acting one can witness on Oscar night isn't from the clips shown on the screen to announce the nominees but rather the benign expressions on the faces of the losers as someone else's name is called out in the category for which they've been nominated. This may be so, but there's always that split second of shock apparent before the brain clicks into gear and one realizes a smile is in order, and maybe a slight shake of the head in commendation - as opposed to a shriek of disbelief. Or the expression of a wish to throttle the winner. Or mow them down with a chainsaw.

Montgomery Clift was nominated four times without success. Kirk Douglas got three nominations, Peter Sellers two. Richard Burton was cited no less than seven times in his career. Peter O'Toole got eight nominations. None of these people ever won. Many stars seem to have taken to drink either to take their minds off this or to drown their sorrows. Joan Rivers joked, "Next year they're going to give Peter O'Toole's liver a Life Achievement Award." If there were Oscars for drinking, he would have been a multiple winner. "Life, for me," he said, "has been either a wake or a wedding." What was the difference? "One less drunk."

Charlie Chaplin was nominated in various Oscar categories throughout his life but didn't win Oscars for either acting or directing. He received an Honorary Award (the so-called "poor man's" Oscar) in 1928 and another one 43 years later in 1971. Similar awards were conferred upon Cary Grant, Kirk Douglas and Barbara Stanwyck. Alfred Hitchcock was given the Irving G. Thalberg Award for outstanding achievements in film in 1967. Why did he not win an "actual" Oscar? He had his own explanation: "I don't look like an artist. I don't look like I've starved in a garret." These testimonials couldn't disguise the fact that they were consolation prizes for the fact that the people in question hadn't landed "the big one."

Many other stars were electoral outcasts for one reason or another, or maybe no reason at all. People like Dirk Bogarde, Robert Shaw, Lee J. Cobb, Robert Mitchum, James Mason, Marlene Dietrich, John Garfield and countless others never held an Oscar in their hands.

Stars who didn't even receive a nomination in their careers included Tyrone Power, Maureen O'Hara, Eli Wallach, Marilyn Monroe, Fred MacMurray, Ida Lupino, Joseph Cotten, Glenn Ford, Veronica Lake, Alan Ladd, W.C. Fields, Errol Flynn, Claire Bloom, Lucille Ball, Rita Hayworth and Al Jolson. Deborah Kerr was nominated six times without success. So was Thelma Ritter. Irene Dunne got five nominations but no Oscar. Agnes Moorehead and Barbara Stanwyck got four nominations each but that was it. Greta Garbo got three. Did they care? Perhaps more than they admitted. Frank Capra used to say, "It's become real fashionable to scoff at Oscars but these jesters would kill to win one." Maybe he was right.



Screen siren Rita Hayworth never received an Oscar nomination in her entire career.

"The Oscar," Marion Davis declared, "is a cruel joke hatched up by a cruel town and handed out in a cruel ceremony." Maybe she was right too. All too often the rightful winners were outpolled by those who "knew the right

people”, who steamrolled their way to success by sycophancy and the Almighty Dollar. Economy ruled art. In 1986 the critic Murray Weissmann declared, “No picture can be a serious contender in the Oscar race for under \$100,000.” This kind of economic prostitution was one of the reasons George C. Scott engineered his famous snub to the whole razzmatazz. “Actors are the world’s oldest minority,” Scott maintained, “looked upon as nothing but buffoons, one step above thieves and charlatans. These award ceremonies simply compound the image for me.”²



Peekaboo girl Veronica Lake never received a nomination either.

There’s also a pecking order of competitiveness. Gossip columnist Joyce Haber wrote in *The Users*: “Like everything else in Hollywood, the Oscars were categorized by A and B. Who wanted the Oscar for Best Score? Best Picture added a million dollars to the box office gross, Best Actor or Best Actress half a million. Beyond that, forget it. From Best Director on down, the awards mean nothing.”³

Francis Ford Coppola agreed with her. When he was looking for a cast for *Apocalypse Now* he was constantly rebuffed. Not many people wished to spend four months in the Philippines no matter how good the film was. He

went up to his house in Napa Valley one day, took all his Oscars out to the backyard and broke every one of them. They weren't much use to him for the job in hand. Not even these golden men could get a star to sign along that dotted line. They had no currency for him, so he destroyed them. It had a kind of logic to it.

Katharine Hepburn claimed she didn't believe in the worth of any prize except the three-legged race. She was a whizz in that. Michael Douglas says the award he won for Petrol Pump Attendant of the Month as a young man is equally important to him as his Oscar for *Wall Street*.

Three days after Anjelica Huston won an Oscar for *Prizzi's Honor* she was rejected for a part in *The Witches of Eastwick*. (It went to Cher instead.) Often all an award meant was that you don't work for eighteen months... because nobody felt they could afford you.

This makes it all the more incomprehensible that people crave Oscars so much, regarding them as the highlight of their careers when all too often they're the beginning of the end. Do people who win them deserve them? Sometimes. Do they know how to deal with them? Rarely.

If this book were to attempt some kind of conclusion, it would be to suggest that the Academy makes valid decisions only now and again, and even then not always for the purest of motives. Maybe its entire system of voting needs to be dismantled before a better one can be put in place.

Barry Norman made a good point when he said it works well up until the nomination stage but then it takes off in all the wrong directions: "The nominations are decided by people's peer groups. Actors vote for actors, directors for directors, cinematographers for cinematographers and so on. After that it's just a crapshoot with everyone, no matter how old, senile or inactive, free to vote in every category."⁴ The Academy stipulated that all voters should be active but that wasn't always the case.

Norman once attended a showing of a film that had been nominated for Best Picture only to see that within fifteen minutes over three-quarters of the audience ("By God they were old") had fallen asleep. He suspected many voters didn't even bother turning up to many of the showings. He thought it more likely that some kind of consensus prevailed along the lines of, "I see Tom Hanks has been nominated. Good ol' boy, Tom. And then there's this Nigel whatsisname. Who the hell is he? Never heard of him, I'll vote for Tom."⁵ Norman was referring to Hanks' win for *Forrest Gump* over Nigel Hawthorne. He thought Hawthorne gave a better performance in *The Madness of King George* in 1994.

There's been interference in voting since the Oscars began. All that's changed is the way it's done. In the old days, it was carried on by covert

means, by gladhanding and “gentle persuasion” at functions and dinners. With the collapse of the studios, the onus for campaigning shifted to the publicists, the production companies, sometimes even to the stars themselves. If they were wealthy enough, they could bankroll their own campaigns. They could “big up” their product even if they knew, at base, it was worthless. Victory on Oscar night sometimes resulted from the simple fact that, as in politics and law, the longest purse won.

Hollywood is estimated to spend between \$100 million and \$500 million in its Oscar campaigns each year. A conservative estimate of the money needed to run a successful campaign for a given film is \$10 million. This is to fund billboards, ads in trade magazines, media interviews, etc. Is such an outlay justified by the revenue an Oscar-winning film is expected to generate? Hardly.

A Best Picture Oscar is said to add less than \$3 million to its box office takings, as opposed to the extra \$14 million a Golden Globe-winning film is expected to earn. The discrepancy is caused by the fact that the Oscars come at the end of a long awards season. If a film has been on release prior to the ceremonies and people have seen it – unlike the Globes – they can’t be expected to go to it again. Timing affects the voting too. Around 9000 members of AMPAS (The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) vote but final voting takes place just two weeks before the ceremonies, so a lot rests on who’s hot at the time.

Gender is a factor too. An Oscar is supposed to boost a male star’s earnings by up to \$4 million but that of an actress by less than \$500,000. It’s also a fact that the average age of Best Actresses is ten years younger than that of Best Actors.

One shouldn’t discount the element of bribery either. We’ve gone beyond the payola/brown paper bag culture but there’s more than one way to solicit votes by charm offensives. Voters frequently tell us they’re swamped by (mostly useless) gifts in the run-up to the Oscars. Bribers schmooze Academy members at functions and parties. The flipside of this coin is the number of smear campaigns that take place each year.

In the heyday of the Oscars, the studios held sway. Of the 102 Best Picture nominees in the first twelve years of the ceremonies, 28 were produced by MGM, 17 by Paramount, 10 by 20th Century Fox, 15 by Warner Brothers, eight by Columbia, seven by RKO and four by Universal. A sea-change came in 1946 when independent producer Samuel Goldwyn swept the boards with *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Three Best Picture winners were made outside the mainstream in the fifties: *Marty*, *Around the World in Eighty Days* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. In 1967 Mike Nichols won Best Director for *The*

Graduate. It was the first time an American-made film took the award without any help from the major studios. Two years later *Easy Rider* became one of the most financially successful films of all time. It was made on a shoestring outside the system.

In 1986 four of the five Best Picture nominees came from outside the Hollywood mainstream: *Platoon*, *The Mission*, *Hannah and Her Sisters* and *A Room with a View*. In 1989 Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape* won an Oscar nomination for Best Original Screenplay. It also won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. It cost \$1 million to make but grossed over \$25 million, making it one of the most profitable films of the decade.

Three independent films from 1992, *The Player*, *The Crying Game* and *Howard's End*, won 18 nominations between them. Neil Jordan won an Oscar that year for Best Original Screenplay for *The Crying Game*. Quentin Tarantino won the same award two years later for *Pulp Fiction*. A year on from that, Tim Robbins' *Dead Man Walking* earned four nominations as well as a Best Actress award for Susan Sarandon. Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* also created a sensation that year and won a Best Original Screenplay award for Christopher McQuarrie. The following year four of the five Best Picture nominees were "indies": *Fargo*, *Shine*, *Secrets & Lies* and *The English Patient*.

Do we regard Oscars too seriously? Maybe we should take a leaf out of a book called *Movielists* written some years ago by John Koski and Mitchell Symons. They advised us of ten things to look out for on the average Oscar night:

- Cher's outfit will reveal even more than it did the previous year.
- Woody Allen won't turn up.
- Someone very old indeed will shuffle on to a standing ovation.
- Steven Spielberg won't win anything.
- Someone will make an embarrassing political speech.
- Nobody will have heard of the Best Foreign Language film.
- Every winner will thank at least three people.
- Every loser will smile and clap vigorously when the winners are announced.
- Britain will be able to claim some link with the Special Effects award.
- There'll be a special tribute to someone whose films appear only on BBC2 on Saturday afternoons. ⁶

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