

The TV VARIETY AWARD SHOW SPECIAL

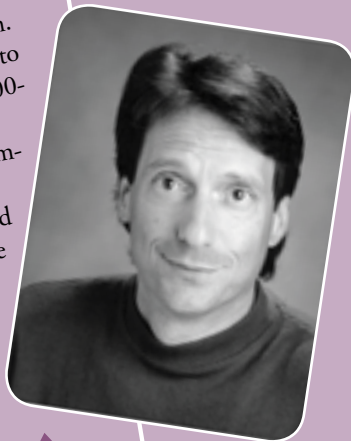
and the role of the writer in the making of THE OSCARS®
by Kate McCallum

From one-time college underwear model to a nine-time writer for the Oscars®! Who would have thought? "And the nomination is ... writer, Jon Macks," who will be leading us behind the scenes to describe what it takes to bring the Oscars to the screen from the writer's point of view.

Each November an election campaign commences that rivals, at least in Hollywood, the passions—and sometimes the excesses—of the quadrennial race for the nation's presidency. It's the race for an Academy Award® nomination. The race consists principally of attempts by studios, independent distributors and publicists to make sure that each of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' 5,800-plus voting members have the opportunity to view their films.

Academy members are provided with special screenings, free admission to commercial runs of a film, and the mailing of video cassettes and DVDs. The Academy aggressively monitors award campaigning, and has issued regulations that limit company mailings to those items that "actually assist members in their efforts to assess the artistic and technical merits of a film," according to Academy Executive Administrator Ric Robertson. "And we seem to have had a tremendous impact in the areas we'd hoped to affect."

Nomination ballots are mailed by the Academy in January, and members have two weeks to return their secret ballots to PricewaterhouseCoopers, the professional services firm formerly known as Price Waterhouse.





PAGE 28: (top right) **Michael Moore** at the 75th Academy Awards® giving his acceptance speech for Best Documentary. After the politically charged remarks, host **Steve Martin** (bottom left) told the audience, "That's nice. The Teamsters are helping Michael Moore into the trunk of his limo." (below right) Writer **Jon Macks**. PAGE 29: (above) A security guard escorts an Oscar® Statuette to its holding room at the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood, where it and the other statuettes will be kept guarded until they are handed to a winner at the Academy Awards Presentation. PHOTOS: Courtesy of AMPAS.

Then, from January on, Oscar fever begins to take over the town and builds to a climactic, star-studded annual televised presentation of golden statuettes when hundreds of millions of cinema lovers settle in front of their television sets to learn who will receive the highest honors in filmmaking.

The annual Oscar presentation has been held since 1929; and, when the first Academy Awards were handed out on May 16, 1929, movies had just begun to talk. That first awards ceremony took place during a banquet held at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel witnessed by approximately 270 guests. Tickets for members were free and guests paid \$5.

Since the earliest years, the world has been interested in the Academy Awards, but that first presentation was the only one that was not offered to a media audience. By the second year, enthusiasm for the awards was so great that a Los Angeles radio station actually did a live, one-hour broadcast. The awards have had broadcast coverage since.

The 16th Academy Awards ceremony was covered by network radio for the first time and broadcast overseas to American

soldiers. In March of 1953, the Academy Awards presentation was first televised. The NBC-TV and radio network carried the 25th Academy Awards ceremonies live from Hollywood with Bob Hope as master of ceremonies, and from the NBC International Theatre in New York with Fredric March making the presentations. In 1966 the Oscars were first broadcast in color, and from 1971 through 1975 the NBC-TV network carried the awards. ABC has telecast the show since 1976 and is under contract through 2008. The Oscars are now presented from the Kodak Theatre at Hollywood & Highland®, across the street from where the first Oscars were handed out at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel in 1929.

Shortly after the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was organized in 1927, a dinner was held to discuss methods of honoring outstanding achievements, thus encouraging higher levels of quality in all facets of motion picture production. Since this column is about the creative process, I want to add this interesting bit of trivia. A major item of business discussed at that dinner was the creation of a trophy to symbolize

the recognition of film achievement. MGM Art Director Cedric Gibbons designed the statuette, and Los Angeles sculptor George Stanley was selected to create it—the figure of a knight standing on a reel of film, hands gripping a sword. The Academy's world-renowned statuette was born.

From the initial awards banquet through the 77th Academy Awards presentation, 2,578 statuettes have been presented. Each January additional golden statuettes are cast, molded, polished and buffed by R.S. Owens and Company, the Chicago awards specialty company retained by the Academy since 1982 to make the statuette.

Initially, he was solid bronze; for a while, plaster; and today, gold-plated britannium, a metal alloy. He stands 13 1/2 inches tall and weighs a robust 8 1/2 pounds.

He hasn't been altered again since his molten birth except when the design of the pedestal was made higher in 1945.

Officially named the Academy Award of Merit, the statuette is better known by a nickname, Oscar, the origins of which aren't clear. A popular story has been that an Academy librarian and eventual executive director, Margaret Herrick, thought it resembled her Uncle Oscar and said so; and that the Academy staff began referring to it as Oscar.

Scribe Jon Macks has written for Hollywood's top television programs, including some of America's most prestigious award shows, late-night programs and television specials. Since 1992, he has been a staff writer for *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*. Macks has written for the Academy Awards since 1997, including for hosts Billy Crystal, Steve Martin, Whoopi Goldberg and Chris Rock. He was also lead writer for the 76th Annual Academy Awards. For the last 10 years, Macks has served as writer for

the Emmy® Awards. He was also a consulting producer for the HBO series *K Street*. His television credits include *ABC's 50th Anniversary Celebration*, *Hollywood Squares*, *CBS at 75* and *The Honeyymooners 50th Anniversary Special*.

Macks grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and put himself through Villanova University working as an under-wear model. After taking two years off to travel the country, bartend and fix bowling machines, he went to Villanova Law School. Bored from day one with torts, contracts and civil procedure, he spent his free time running political campaigns. After working with James Carville in a successful Pennsylvania gubernatorial race, Macks and Carville moved to Washington, D.C. Between 1987 and 1992, Macks handled the television advertising, debate prep, speech-writing and strategy for over two dozen U.S. Senate, gubernatorial and presidential campaigns in the United States. In addition, he was involved in elections in Canada and the Venezuelan presidential race.

Prior to moving to Los Angeles, Macks was one of Washington, D.C.'s top political and media consultants; even after his career switch to comedy writing, in January 2004 *Newsday* named Macks one of the 20 most influential people on television during the 2004 presidential election.

scr(i)pt: *Jon, how do you as a writer come up with that "great idea" for each year's Oscar show theme?*

JON MACKS: There are three components. First is the producer's vision for the show, the template he establishes that you use as a guide in planning out ideas for the show. The second component, and in a lot of ways this may be the most important one, is meeting with and listening to the host, finding out his take on the year, and matching that with his performance style. The third component has to be the nominated movies themselves. When you have big movies like *Titanic* or *The Lord of The Rings*, they will define where the jokes and copy leads, compared to a year where some great but small independent movies are the leading story.

scr(i)pt: *How does the writing staff work together, and from where do these writers come?*

JM: The producer hires a team to write the show, the presenter copy, and the tributes. The host hires his own team. The hiring process begins anytime from October to

mid-December, but by then both teams are in place and working toward the big night.

In each case, from Billy Crystal to Steve Martin to Whoopi Goldberg to Chris Rock, the host serves, if not in title then in practice, as the head writer for his opening and introductions.

I've been lucky to work with some great writers from my generation—Billy Martin, Ed Driscoll, Dave Boone, Marc Shaiman, Dave Barry, Andy Breckman, Bruce Vilanch, Carol Leifer and Rita Cash—and some of the legends, like Hal Kanter and Buz Kohan.

Some of them are sitcom writers, others are feature-film writers. Dave Barry writes books and columns. Marc Shaiman and his partner Scott Wittman are composers and lyricists; some of the writers are like me, a jack of all trades. Regardless, each has the ability to write funny or serious, depending on the need.

scr(i)pt: *It's about comedy, isn't it? Are all the writers funny?*

JM: All writers are funny. Look at Deepak Chopra—hilarious. But, for this show the key is for the producer and host to put together a team that can be funny, entertaining and, when needed, touch people about what movies and the people in them mean to us.

scr(i)pt: *How does the actual script document get written? Who does that?*

JM: The actual script gets written with a pen or pencil. Sometimes a PC or a Mac. Each year is different. To help the host put together his monologue, we turn in jokes and bit ideas; and the host picks and chooses and puts together what he wants. For the show, the producer assigns us intros to write and the material goes back to the producer. After approval it goes to the star who then approves, edits, makes a suggestion, or comes back with another version.

scr(i)pt: *You are also staff on The Tonight Show. How do you do both?*

JM: It's been a lot harder since they outlawed crystal meth. Double espresso shots are legal and a great substitute. But, it's really just a question of dividing up one's time; since the work is so different, it's not hard. One is a topical monologue. The other focuses on the movies and film events of the past year.

The meetings occur at night at the host's office—sometimes at lunch, a lot of times

on weekends. We meet two to three times a week minimum to go over material and bounce ideas around. When we're not meeting, we're working on lines and copy.

Apart from that, there is a phone call with the producer at least once a day to go over what's needed, and then we usually e-mail copy directly to the office.

This process can go on anywhere from four months out up through the week before the show. At that point, the production offices have moved to the Kodak. Our meetings are there in a writers room. The room isn't huge, just enough for the writers, our computers and 600 to 800 doughnuts.

scr(i)pt: *What's it like backstage on Oscar night? Do you have any rituals?*

JM: It's incredibly exciting. The producers are at a table backstage with a few writers plus the stage managers. The producer is the football coach calling the plays. On the other side of the stage is a small area with a TV, a few chairs, and a curtain where the host (the star quarterback) stays when he's not onstage. I like to be back there with the host. There's a phone hookup directly to the producer and to the teleprompter so any changes the host wants can be instantly made.

Over at the producer's table, they're busy making changes throughout the show. The writers there have to be ready to work with presenters as they rehearse preshow or, if they read the prompter backstage, one more time during the show. In addition, we sometimes need to make cuts for time in the presenter's copy just a few minutes before it is read.

Every writer I know has rituals. Mine involves a pair of midgets and bearnaise sauce.

scr(i)pt: *What are some of your more memorable moments from previous Oscars?*

JM: That's like asking me which of my Emmys I like best. Since I have no Emmys, I'll answer your question.

There are really three moments that stand out. The first is 1997, my first year working with Billy Crystal. It was his first year back after not hosting for a few years. He did that great opening film, and no one knew what was coming. The audience thought it was a tribute to *Star Wars*. When it was over, as the airplane chased Billy in the scene from *The English Patient*, he ran through the screen into the most amazing standing ovation I've ever seen or heard.

Another one would be right after Michael

Moore gave his acceptance speech. There was a pretty loud crowd reaction, and Steve Martin gave his great line, "That's nice. The Teamsters are helping Michael Moore into the trunk of his limo."

Another would be watching Billy go into the audience and joke with Jack Nicholson in the middle of his song medley. Right up there was getting to meet Jack when he came for the shoot with Billy for the opening film in 2004 where Jack was Gandalf in the *Lord of The Rings* clip.

scr(i)pt: *How did you break into writing? From politics to Hollywood. What's your story?*

JM: In 1990 I had just finished Paul Simon's campaign for U.S. Senate. After Paul won, he mentioned that he was doing the Gridiron speech, a twice-a-year speech in Washington, D.C. where elected officials and the press roast each other and the year in politics. Paul called me one day and said, "Jon, you're funny. Write some jokes." I wrote a few for him. I guess they worked because after that, Frank Mankiewicz, who put together Paul's speech, called to say they were really good, and I should do this for a living. That coincided with my getting tired of flying 200 nights a year to different campaign stops, the birth of child number three, the desire not to travel so much, and my seeing that Jay Leno was performing the next week at Wolf Trap outside Washington, D.C. I went to see him, thought he was amazing, read that he occasionally bought jokes from freelancers for when he was guest host for Johnny Carson. So, while I was on planes, I'd write and send the results in to him. About six months later, he called me to offer me a job for when he became host in May 1992. So, I made the career switch.

scr(i)pt: *What advice would you offer for a writer who wants to break into this format?*

JM: There's a great course at the DeVry Institute called Variety Show Writing and Sheet Metal Air Conditioning Duct Repair. But, if it's been discontinued, then the best thing is to work with the Academy, the producer or the host and hope your style fits what they're looking for. The host is generally looking for jokes. The producer is looking for people who can write for the clip packages and for stars.

scr(i)pt: *How does your political background help inform your work? Or doesn't it?*

JM: The truth is it really doesn't. Maybe

with one thing—the political ads I used to write are 30 seconds long, about the same as presenter copy. Of course, the difference is you can lie in a political ad for a president. I would never lie in Oscar copy.

.....

So, the race has begun.

These are the events that lead up to the 78th Annual Academy Awards, held on Sunday, March 5, 2006:

Thursday, December 29, 2005: Nominations ballots mailed.

Saturday, December 31, 2005: Awards year ends at midnight.

Saturday, January 21, 2006: Nominations polls close 5:00 p.m. PST.

Tuesday, January 31, 2006: Nominations announced 5:30 a.m. PST, Samuel Goldwyn Theater.

Wednesday, February 8, 2006: Final ballots mailed.

Monday, February 13, 2006: Nominees Luncheon, Beverly Hilton Hotel.

Saturday, February 18, 2006: Scientific and Technical Awards Dinner.

Tuesday, February 28, 2006: Final polls close 5:00 p.m. PST.

Sunday, March 5, 2006: The 78th Academy Awards will be presented at the Kodak Theatre at Hollywood & Highland and televised live by the ABC Television Network beginning at 5:00 p.m. PST, preceded by a half-hour arrival segment.

And the winner is ... ? Tune in March 5th. For more information visit Oscars.org. (i)

KATE McCALLUM is an independent producer/writer/consultant based in Los Angeles. She has worked as a development executive with Western Sandblast at Paramount TV and most recently in both the production of *Law & Order* and then in development with writer/showrunner Michael Chernuchin at NBC Universal Television. She specializes in transmedia property development and consultation and has several media projects in development under her company Bridge Arts Media: Bridgeartsmedia.com. Additionally, she co-founded c3, The Center for Conscious Creativity, whose mission is to explore the power of art and media's effect on society and culture: Consciouscreativity.org.

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