

"Oscar" HOLLYWOOD LAUREL

Hollywood's Sculpture Industry consists in major part of the manufacture of a statuette popularly known as Oscar. He is the award which the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences presents each year to its favorite sons and daughters.

Hollywood's annual popularity contest is over. The achievements of the distinguished citizens have fittingly been honored, everyone who could get a word in edgewise has made a speech, people who hate each other have stood in the center of a great banquet hall and in extravagant words tried to convey to the world how much they revere and adore those who have been singled out. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in a burst of oratory and love held its annual award dinner some nights ago, an event that seems to have been epitomized by the comment of an inebriate who stood on the steps leading into the Biltmore Bowl at the height of the praise harvest and mumbled, "If a breath of sincerity got into this room a thousand people would fall dead."

While others have attempted to usurp the Academy's function, this Hollywood institution remains dominant in the award industry. So widespread has become the practice of selecting the screen's "bests" that this year the Department of Labor down in Washington considered adding the classification of Award Givers to its list of leading occupations. There is reason to believe that the sun never sets on an award presentation. Besides the Academy there are the New York Film Critics, the National Board of Review, the International Exhibition at Venice, the *Film Daily Critics' Poll*, the British Institute of Cinematography, the Paris Exposition, the Bernstein Poll, the Cinema Jump-sha of Tokyo, the Austrian Ministry of Education, the Board of Censors of Holland, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and hundreds—maybe even thousands—of newspapers and magazines and civic



groups that feel that they are the only ones competent to appraise Hollywood's product. The most laudable motives impel the actions of every group. The suspicion that the majority have balloted as they think they are ex-

"Oscar"²

pected to vote lingers with most of the awards. But not with the Academy. To analyze the reasoning behind the average Academy award would tax the resources of a committee composed of Boss Tweed, Mark Hanna, and innumerable astrologers, palmists, and crystal gazers. It is noteworthy that Mother Ship-ton did not attempt to cover the subject in her famous prophecy.

To deal in a little history, the awards were instituted ten years ago in the best of faith. The screen was struggling for recognition and there being no other institution into which this liveliest of the arts fitted, it was deemed wise to set up some standard by which the medium could be judged. It was not long



before the cynical began to suspect that politics had something to do with the annual selections. Looking over the results of past years, the thought occurs that perhaps some awards were influenced by the voting strength of the studios involved.

All went well until 1933 when, during the Bank Holiday, the Academy committed the grave sin of getting into a labor dispute. It sought to settle differences between producers and employees over wage cuts and was immediately accused by both sides—as all arbitrators have been since the beginning of time—of duplicity, unfairness, and self-service. It was even hinted that mayhem and arson entered the proceedings, so strongly did everyone feel. This animosity affected the awards and in the hatred of the various Guilds for the Academy the annual honors became an obvious target. In spite of the acrimony and the withdrawal of crafts and individuals, the Academy vote has remained the dominating event of its kind.

While the press is seriously impressed by the awards and the industry makes a pretense of regarding them as important, they do not mean so much today as they once did. They are sought largely for commercial reasons and at one time the acquisition of an Oscar meant a substantial wage increase. Their im-

"Oscar"³

portance has been minimized to such an extent that two of last year's winners were dropped by their studio within a few weeks after the banquet. If they are regarded lightly by the industry before the banquet and if each winner accepts his Oscar *cum grano salis*, a process akin to self-hypnosis starts working and just as the dream children believe their own publicity so does the Oscar take on the proportions of a Nobel award.

One of the reasons that credence has been given the suggestion that political manipulation may have entered the awards in the past



was that but 900 of the more highly paid workers of an industry employing 30,000 people determined the winners. But one-fourth of the vote was cast by actors and they were of the conviction that no one but an actor can judge another performer's work. As a result



of an upheaval last year, they took the whole show over and 4,000 members of the Screen Actors Guild and 10,000 extras moved in and determined the performance, production, and music awards this season.

The great spectacle which culminates in the annual dinner at \$25.00 or \$10.00 a plate, depending upon your preference for A or B tables, starts shortly after the holidays. The nominating machinery is set in motion and some time in February ten productions, five actors, five actresses, and sundry other individuals are chosen as candidates for the final honors. If a picture has been released more than six months, no one takes much interest in it or in the people who made it because it is a little late for an Academy award to do it much good at the box office. In a majority of

"Oscar"

cases, the drives are centered on attractions that are current. This year Twentieth Century-Fox whooped it up in behalf of *In Old Chicago*, although there is grave doubt in some minds that it belonged among the first ten.

If studios see no chance of having their production labeled "best" (the Academy terms this classification the *Most Outstanding Motion Picture of the Year*), they try to get an Oscar for a contract star or director. The only performer a studio will expend any effort on is one with box-office worth, and it is significant to note that such players as Beulah Bondi in *Make Way for Tomorrow*, who do



not belong in the glamour circle, are never mentioned. Producers like to bet on sure things and when Metro learned that Robert Montgomery did not rate as high as he should with the extras because of his Guild activities and appreciating that the extras would determine the selection, the studio promptly lost interest in campaigning in behalf of *Night Must Fall*.

A month is given over to getting out the vote and until this year when those confounded extras upset everything each studio with a likely candidate acquired memberships or paid up the dues of everyone on the payroll eligible to ballot. It is reported that in 1936 when the Warners were trying to garner an Oscar for Bette Davis for her work in *Dangerous* (everyone in town felt that she should have had it for her performance in *Of Human Bondage* the previous year, and by way of compensation the studio centered upon the completely unworthy *Dangerous*) a studio executive phoned the Academy just as the polls were closing and ordered, "Hold up the tally. A messenger is coming in with the ballots from the plaster and plumbing shops."



5 "Oscar"

At any rate, the vote is counted by a firm of Certified Public Accountants in rooms adjoining the banquet hall while the dinner is in progress. This system complicates the awards no end, for ranking stars refuse to participate in a function in which a rival is honored. In Hollywood, at least, no actor likes to glorify another. So the Academy management generally leaves a few vacant chairs around the room so that the performers can slip in unobtrusively when their managers telephone them that they have won. Occasionally there is a hardy soul such as Victor McLaglen, who was so sure of victory that he arrived at the Biltmore at six o'clock when he knew that the result would be a secret until nine. Most of them stay away, however, until they know whether or not they have won.

The banquet is quite an affair. Although the press is advised early of the outcome, an attempt is made to keep the results a secret until they are announced from the floor. Like the conventional movie, the evening is constructed according to formula, with all events leading up to the chase in the last reel. Usually a distinguished speaker is invited but care is taken nowadays in his choice. A few years ago a Vice President was the headliner and after forty-five minutes of oratory, he turned a page of his script and without looking up from the table said, "I did not intend to speak so long. . . ." That just about broke up the evening and since then speakers have been chosen for brevity rather than for illustriousness. When Will Hays is in town, he always gives his Number Two Special which begins, "The screen has made great strides during the past year and I look for the new season to be the greatest in motion picture history." Once Mr. Hays, who rarely becomes confused, got a little mixed up and put in some of Speech Five-A which deals with the crop prospects in Sullivan County and this unnerved everybody who had never heard of Indiana.

Some of the oratory comes from absentee members. One year Marion Davies felt that the diners would be so saddened by her failure to attend that she sent a telegram which dealt with the Oriental menace on the Pacific Coast, the trend toward dictatorship by the New Deal, the danger of foreign entanglements, the sacred heritage that is America's, the iniquitous tax scheme of the Washington bureaucrats, and kindred subjects. No officer of the Academy would read it but it was printed in one of the local papers the next morning anyway.

After all the oratory, the awards are made. Each winner in a major division is presented with a statuette about twelve inches tall, bronze and gold-plated, which costs \$100. The statuettes were named Oscar by Mrs. Donald Gledhill, wife of the Academy secre-

6 "Oscar"

tary, who grew weary of saying "the little statuettes." In the Gledhill household was a mythical character called Uncle Oscar to whom all inexplicable things were attributed and once she appropriated his name for the trophies, it stuck.

No restraint is used by the speaker making the awards. The performance or the script or the direction or the production is always "the greatest in the history of the screen." If a winner is described as anything less than one of God's noblemen, he feels slighted. The screen could never have attained its high estate without him. Anatole France's eulogy at the bier of Zola was an ill-tempered criticism compared with the flowery language of an Academy presentation.

As the dinner ends and the thirteen hundred celebrants wend their way through crowds of fans still packing the hotel lobby and murmur among themselves, "I don't think that production should have got it," or "She certainly didn't deserve it," the winners slip their Oscars into their chamois containers and start for home in the realization that they have been hailed before the world as geniuses.

Of the Oscars? They are generally placed on the mantel at home or on the desk at the studio, depending upon which place affords the greatest audience. One actress uses hers for a doorstep. One celebrity never got home with his; he stopped at the establishment of one of Hollywood's better-known hostesses who contributed a moment of amusement the next day by phoning him on the lot and reminding him where he had left it.

One celebrity has given more thought, perhaps, to the disposition of his Oscar than anyone else in town. He had the tile wall cut away in one of the rooms of his home and in the niche that was created stands the little gold-plated stylized figure. Each morning he sits and looks at it and reads the inscription on a brass plate which is affixed below the shrine, *Sic transit gloria mundi*—"So passes away the glory of the world."



OldMagazineArticles.com

(Illustrations by Stuart Graves)