

77th Academy Awards ceremony—a miserable showing

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The 77th Academy Awards ceremony was a largely dreary affair. What stood out? The wealth and privilege of those involved, their self-importance and the essentially trivial character, for the most part, of what they do.

Clint Eastwood's *Million Dollar Baby*, in which a female boxer's commitment to individual success produces disaster for her and puts a scowl on her manager's face, took the best picture and best director awards. This unpleasant tribute to striving for the American Dream, even if it proves impossible and destroys you, is described in the press as a return to "more personal, intimate" filmmaking.

Million Dollar Baby's principal rival was Martin Scorsese's *The Aviator*. The latter sanitizes the early life and career of the monstrous Howard Hughes, routinely referred to in the press as an "eccentric genius." The film won in a number of categories, but once again veteran director Scorsese failed to walk away with any of the top awards.

The winners of the best actor, actress, supporting actor and supporting actress awards—Jamie Foxx (*Ray*), Hilary Swank (*Million Dollar Baby*), Morgan Freeman (*Million Dollar Baby*) and Cate Blanchett (*The Aviator*)—are all talented performers, but they were generally being honored (an Academy tradition!) for some of their weakest roles. *Ray* was not an offensive film, but its "true life" story of rags to riches success hardly broke new ground, nor did Foxx's two-hour impersonation of singer Ray Charles.

Chris Rock proved a generally tasteless and unamusing host of the ceremony. He began by taking a few shots at George W. Bush. He noted that the US president had been "reapplying for his job" during the recent election. "That's got to be tough when [Michael Moore's] *Fahrenheit 9/11* is playing in the theaters. Can you imagine reapplying for your job when there's a movie out showing all the ways you suck at your job?"

Rock went on: "Bush did some things you could never get away with at your job, man. When he came into office we had a budget surplus, and now we have a trillion dollar deficit.... Just imagine if you worked at the Gap. You're \$70 trillion behind on your register and then you start a war with Banana Republic because you say they've got toxic tank tops over there. You have the war, people are dying, a thousand Gap employees are dead, bleeding all over the khakis, you finally take over Banana Republic, and you find out they never made tank tops in the first place."

Undercutting his own essentially unserious jibes, or perhaps underlining their unseriousness, Rock proceeded to send greetings to American troops "fighting for freedom" all over the world. How can US forces be pursuing such an aim when the reasons for going to war, as Rock acknowledges, have proven to be a pack of lies?

Other than that, Rock distinguished himself by mean-spirited and pointless comments about a group of actors he characterized as less than "stars" and crude remarks about two female presenters. On the whole, a miserable performance.

Truly deserving winners and honorable moments were few and far between.

Hilary Swank is a gifted and hard-working actress, but she is only the latest to come off poorly in her acceptance speech, telling the crowd, "I'm just a girl from a trailer park who had a dream," before continuing on to thank her agent and her lawyer. The emptiness or worse of the films finds expression in the vacuity of the artists' comments.

The height of controversy, aside from the host's easy jokes, was reached by Sean Penn defending fellow actor Jude Law from Rock's earlier comments. Penn kept his mouth shut about the political situation, as did Tim Robbins, who Rock introduced, in any event, as someone who "bores us to death with his politics."

Neither Sidney Lumet, the director of numerous liberal-

minded and socially conscious works, including *12 Angry Men*, *The Pawnbroker*, *Serpico*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Prince of the City*, *The Verdict*, *Daniel* and *Running on Empty*, who received a lifetime achievement award, nor Al Pacino who presented him with the honor, made a single reference to the contemporary situation. Lumet rather blandly declared, “What it comes down to is, I’d like to thank the movies.”

If the conformism of the ceremony needed to be highlighted, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences President Frank Pierson dedicated the show to men and women in the armed services “wherever they serve, with gratitude for the sacrifices they’ve made. We want you all to know we have not forgotten you.”

At last year’s event, as we noted in a comment after the fact, “The general political subtext of the affair was: the Democrats have a chance against George W. Bush, so no one must do anything to make waves. And no one did, including the so-called Hollywood left.”

Now, with the election out of the way and their candidate defeated, Hollywood’s liberals are thoroughly cowed, resigned to Bush and convinced, in any case, that the American population is hopeless. The Academy membership’s failure to nominate *Fahrenheit 9/11* for a best picture award defined this year’s event long before the actual ceremony. The refusal to recognize Moore’s film was an unmistakable signal that Hollywood was prepared to slide its antiwar and anti-Bush positions back into its fine Italian leather briefcase and forget all about them.

Under such conditions, jewels, clothes and related triviality come to the fore. It is hard to imagine an emptier ritual than the interviewing of the various stars on the “red carpet.” Television ratings were apparently slightly higher this year, pleasing ABC, but it is not immediately clear why this should be the case. Presumably people tune in to watch celebrities because celebrities are supposed to be fascinating. Even if they aren’t in fact, they’re still celebrities.

A February 26 *Los Angeles Times* article underlined the cynical character of the awards process, this supposed recognition of “excellence in cinema achievement,” in the Academy’s words. The article noted that studios now spend tens of millions of dollars in the effort to woo Oscar voters.

“Maybe only the naive consider the Academy Awards to be an evenhanded referendum on the best films,” write the authors, “but rarely has it devolved into such a marked battle between the haves and the have-nots as it has with

this year’s motley crop of large and small contenders.”

The piece points out that “well-heeled studios now spend as much as \$15 million promoting the award chances for such movies as *The Aviator* and *Million Dollar Baby*.” John Daly, executive producer of *Platoon* and *The Last Emperor*, both best picture winners, told the *Times*, “It’s gotten out of control. And the costs have become prohibitive for a smaller film. You may be cutting into the profits. You may not even *have* any profits.” Nominees *Maria Full of Grace* and *Vera Drake* came away entirely empty-handed, while *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* won an award for best original screenplay.

The *Times* notes that the studios consider the money well spent, if it results in an award: “Winning an Oscar still means a spike in theater ticket sales. And with DVD sales and rentals now representing more than 60 percent of a studio’s revenue, spending even as much as \$15 million on an Academy Award campaign can be a good investment. In this 15-minute culture, Oscar is one brand that lasts.”

The entire business is rather nauseating.

Nor should anyone be impressed by claims that Rock’s hosting, the victories of Foxx and Freeman and the omnipresence of Beyonce Knowles represent a great step forward for African-Americans. They represent rather a further step forward for a privileged layer of the black upper middle class, who quite rightly see no connection between their fate and that of the black working population.

In 1964 when Sidney Poitier, accepting an award for *Lilies of the Field*, declared, “It has been a long journey to this moment,” it came out of something, the civil rights struggle, and it meant something in a limited way. Today, frankly, Foxx, Freeman, Oprah Winfrey and their ilk lead an existence fit for royalty, an existence utterly remote from the lives of ordinary Americans, black or white.

All in all, if this is the best the Hollywood establishment can do ...



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