



The Oscars vs. Anna Nicole's Baby Daddy

by Joal Ryan

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Stars will be present. Preshows will be hosted. Odds will be debated. But will Sunday's Oscars be *the Oscars*, preeminence and all?

Tough one.

"I cannot recall a time when the Oscars were less prominent in the days before the event," says Sasha Stone, editor of oscarwatch.com. "This year, no one really seems to be that interested in the Oscars, except those of us who obsess on them."

The problem? Tabloid circumstances beyond the Academy's control.

"The Britney and Anna Nicole stories are leading not only the entertainment news, but the local news programs as well," Stone says via email. "Nobody can really talk about anything else."

Elayne Rapping, professor emeritus of American studies at the University of Buffalo, agrees. Unhappily.

"It's depressing," Rapping says. "The Oscars will not get the attention that all these crazy stories are getting because the tabloids have pretty much taken over the news media."

To be sure, the Oscars have been confronted with bigger news events than the Britney Spears hair-and-rehab saga and the Anna Nicole Smith body-and-baby soap opera. In 1968, the ceremony was postponed following the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. In 1981, it was postponed following the assassination attempt on President Reagan. In 2003, it was interrupted periodically for updates from what was then the new battleground of Iraq.

In those times and more, the Oscars was as a diversion from the real harsh world. This weekend, its 79th edition will, in part, be a diversion from the diversions.

Says Stone: "I think the Academy can't win in this situation."

Another potential problem: The nominated movies.

Of the Best Picture contenders, only *The Departed* was a mass-appeal favorite, grossing over \$130 million. Each of the other four nominees was outdone at the box office by the likes of *The Santa Clause 3: The Escape Clause* and *Scary Movie 4*.

To Rapping, the disconnect between the Academy's prized films and the box-office's isn't so much a reflection on Academy voters as audiences.

"The Oscars are the old celebrity royalty," Rapping says. "It used to be people were really into the movies, and really cared a lot about movies. The trend has been to move toward different kinds of entertainment."

Perhaps if a different kind of movie—i.e., *Borat*—were a Best Picture nominee...

"If Sacha Baron Cohen was going to present that could draw ratings," Stone says, "but they'd really have to publicize it—get the word out that he might embarrass the Academy by making a scrotum joke."

But the Academy isn't going for the full monty. And it's not conceding anything in its quest to maintain its distinction as Hollywood's leading event, not to mention its ever-decreasing Nielsen edge over the *American Idol* finale show.

Ellen DeGeneres, who got laughs at the Emmys after 9/11, has been enlisted to host. George Clooney, Tom Hanks, Jodie Foster, Nicole

Kidman, Jennifer Lopez, Queen Latifah and Tom Cruise are among the scheduled presenters. (Sorry, no mention of Cohen.) Perennial losers and once-again nominees Martin Scorsese and Peter O'Toole are among the storylines to watch.

According to a recent Harris Poll, 43 percent of American adults say they plan to watch the live ABC telecast, which kicks off at 8 p.m. ET/5 p.m. PT.

Of course, more than half (54 percent) say they aren't planning to watch.

Regardless of poll results, it's a safe bet that red-carpet traffic outside the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood will be heavy. E! is planning 10 hours of live Oscar Sunday coverage, beginning at noon ET/9 a.m. PT. Rival TV Guide Channel signs on at 3 p.m. ET/noon PT. E! has Ryan Seacrest and Giuliana DePandi on arrivals duty starting at 6 p.m. ET/3 p.m. PT; TV Guide counters with Joan and Melissa Rivers. (E! and E! Online are divisions of E! Networks.)

According to gaming sites such as BetUS.com and Bodog, it's also still a safe bet that Helen Mirren will win Best Actress for *The Queen*, Scorsese will win (finally) for *The Departed*, which itself will win Best Picture. Forest Whitaker remains the oddsmakers' pick for Best Actor for *The Last King of Scotland*, although O'Toole is on the rise for *Venus*.

As for odds that Spears and Smith will be referenced during the telecast?

Stone thinks DeGeneres is, as she says, "classy enough to resist the urge."

Not that a viewer can't hope.

"If they really had balls they'd have Ellen open the show in a bald wig," Stone says.

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