



Two-time Oscar winner, Ring Lardner Jr., looks inside the Oscars.

To get a proper perspective on the Academy awards, you need to know a little about the institution that bestows them and how the voting works.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is roughly as old as talking pictures. It is, to use its own official description, "a professional honorary organization composed of more than 3,900 motion picture craftsmen and artists (work)? Might Giancarlo Giannini triumph members, which is less than 10 percent of the membership of the Writers Guild of America, West, but more than half of

those who are or have been directly involved in the creation of feature length theatrical motion pictures.

Membership is by invitation, the separate branches having virtual autonomy. One sure way to qualify is to be nominated for an Oscar, but any reasonable evidence of accomplishment will do. By and large the membership consists of people who have a secure place in the Hollywood establishment. Ten of the 12 branches represent fields in which annual awards are made: actors, art directors, cinematographers, directors, film editors, music,

producers, short films, sound, and writers. (The two other branches are executives and public relations. Costume designers, an award category, are a subdivision of art directors.) There are a small number of men and women who don't fit into any branches who are members-at-large. Most of the personnel of film crews and the people who work in studio offices and on the "back lots" are not represented in the Academy.

In January of each year reminder lists of all pictures released during the previous 12 months are distributed to the membership. Every member lists his selections (in order of preference) for the best picture of the year. All other nominations are made on separate branch ballots by members of that branch. Writers make selections in two categories: best screenplay written directly for the screen, and best screenplay based on material from another medium.

The music and short film categories have three separate awards apiece; all the others only one. Documentary films, a field unrepresented in the Academy or the Hollywood establishment, require a special procedure. Producers submit their films to a special Academy committee, which makes the nominations. Special screenings are arranged for the nominated films in all categories, but the documentary vote is limited to members who have seen all the candidate films.

►Award worth millions at box office.

An Oscar probably doesn't bestow any great economic benefit on the individual winner, but the best picture award is worth several million dollars to the producer and distributor. The awards (even the nominations) for acting and directing can also have tangible results, sometimes reviving a release that is already out of circulation. Even such esoteric awards as those for best achievements in sound and film editing contribute to a cumulative claim (e.g. "Six Academy Nominations" or "Three Academy Awards") that replaces all previous advertising slogans.

So the annual show is more than just a rite of spring to the film companies.

Up till about 20 years ago, when the major studios functioned as factories with large permanent payrolls, pressure of various kinds was frequently applied to persuade employees to vote for a particular picture. Thousands of dollars were spent

on advertising campaigns directed at the electorate.

Nowadays there is nothing on that scale, but voters are still propagandized in a number of ways. Although the Academy frowns upon any form of direct solicitation, you still see thinly veiled ads in the trade papers, inserted by an agent promoting the candidacy of a client. The bulletin of the Writers Guild, which ordinarily runs small ads for stenographic and copying services, suddenly blossoms forth with full page messages from the studios about the screenplay contenders. And I assume the same sort of thing happens in the publications of other guilds and unions.

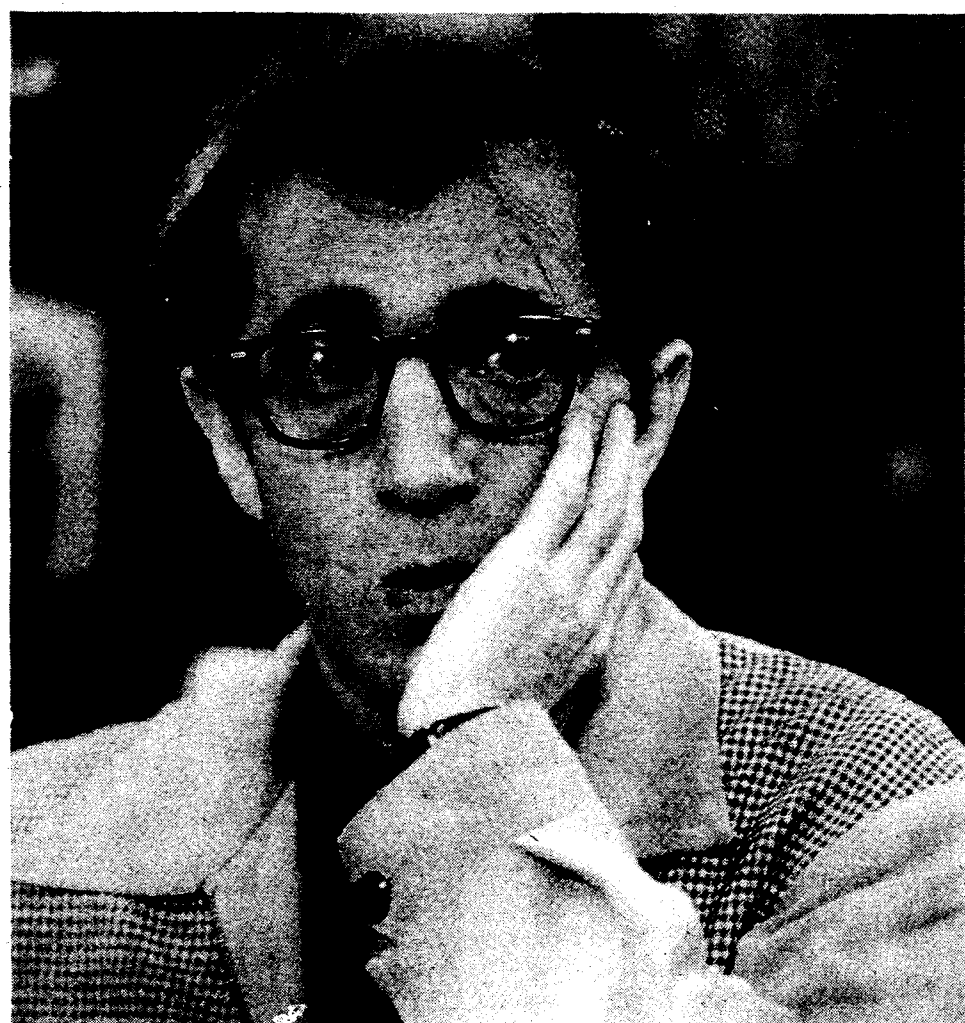
Members who live in New York and can't attend the screenings in the Academy's Beverly Hills theater are invited to special showings of nominated films in the projection rooms of the producing companies, or offered free admission (in voting season only) to theaters where they are playing commercially. Voters on both coasts receive handsomely printed compendiums of the most favorable reviews and free phonograph records of the nominees for best musical score or best original song.

Such services are provided more or less equally by all competitors and tend to cancel each other out. More important to the final results are the characteristics, tastes and preconceptions of Academy members.

►An American bias.

To begin with, we are an American organization, created as an adjunct to the American film industry. You won't see us come up with any xenophobic nonsense like the New York Critics Circle, which in 1975 gave best picture, best direction, best screenplay, best actress and best supporting actor awards to *Amarcord*, Fellini, Bergman, Ullman and Boyer, respectively. Film may be an international art, and foreign language pictures may be nominated for all categories of Academy awards. But win a major Oscar? Never; not once in 48 years!

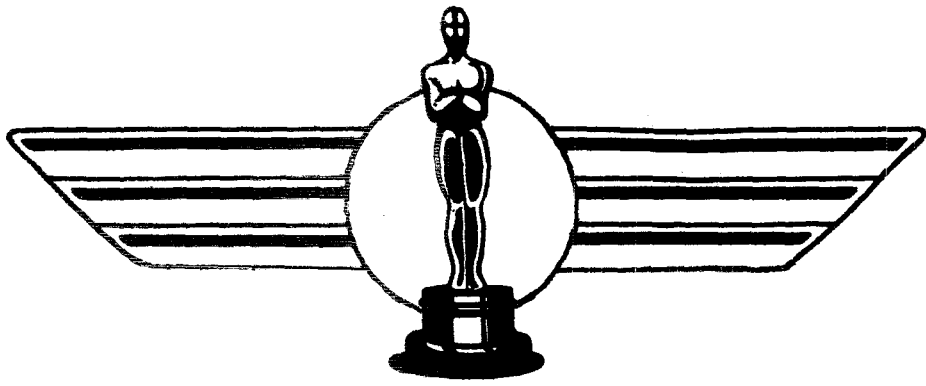
Partly to protect itself from any such setback to its purposes and yet avoid the appearance of absolute insularity, the Academy set up a separate award for the best foreign-language film, with a complicated nominating procedure (by nations, one nominee each) and final voting by a special committee instead of the



Woody Allen in *The Front*

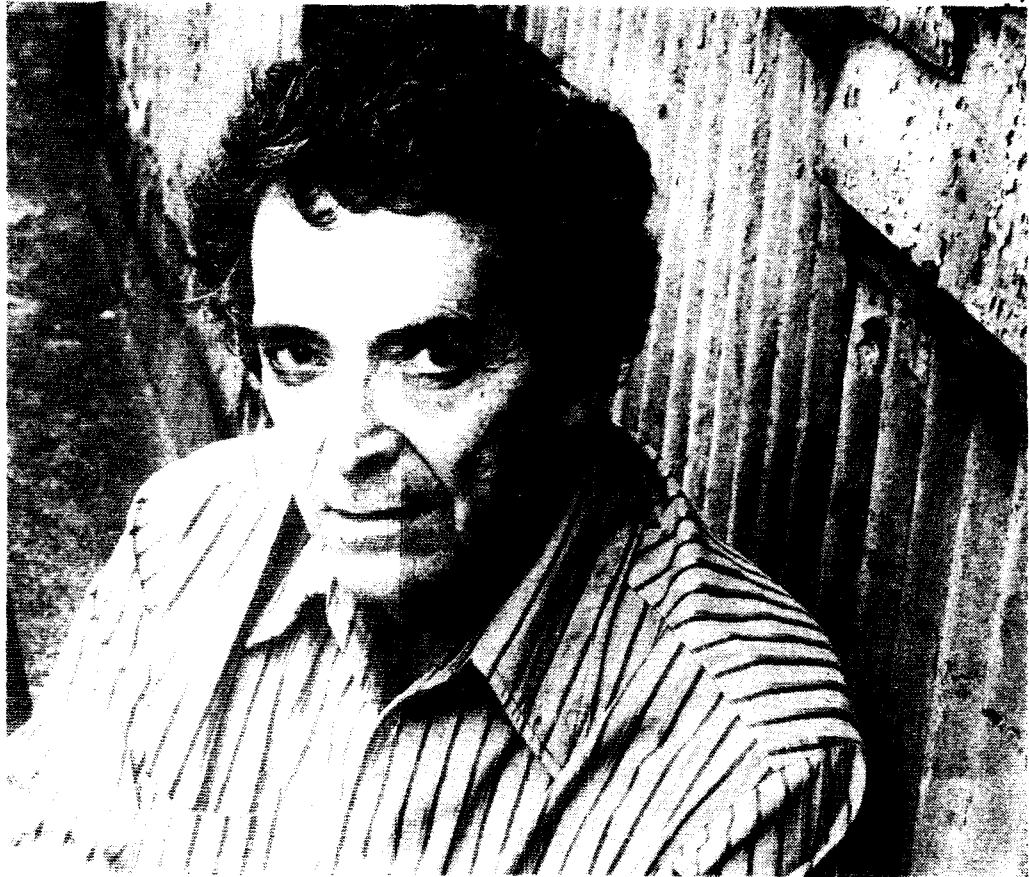


Giancarlo Giannini in *Seven Beauties*



Ring Lardner Jr.

Photo by Maureen Lambray



Academy membership. Foreign pictures are eligible in all categories except best picture. But to confuse the voters further, a foreign film not submitted by its government or other appropriate national organization can be nominated for the best picture award.

Where all this leads is to the selection as the best foreign-language film of 1975, not of some widely circulated and acclaimed picture like *The Story of Adele H.*, but of *Derzu Uzala*, which—as far as I noticed—had no American distribution at all.

It is conceivable that this year's televised

ceremony on March 28 will break the solid streak of American awards to American pictures. Could Luv Ullman be declared a finer actress than Faye Dunaway (in *Network*)? Migh Giancarlo Gianinni triumph over Sylvester Stallone? What about the chances of Ingmar Bergman or even Lina Wertmuller being hailed as a greater director than Alan J. Paluka or John G. Avildsen?

►Economic interest involved.

My advice is don't bet on any of them. If you want a tip on how Hollywood will ac-

knowledge the existence of European filmmaking, put your money on Danila Conati to win best achievement in costume design with *Fellini's Casanova*. (Signor Fellini can content himself with being the only director in the world whose name is an integral part of the title.)

Arrant nationalism this may be, but it reflects the strong economic interest Academy voters have in the Hollywood system as it exists. We do not look fondly on experimental films or any serious departure from the commercial groove. When in doubt we vote for *The Sound of Music* or *The French Connection*. We have never chosen anything but a solid money-maker for best picture. It is rare (exceptions being Maggie Smith in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, 1969, and Jack Lemmon in *Save the Tiger*, 1973) that we acknowledge that a prize-winning performance can occur in a movie that isn't a box-office smash. More often than not, our choices are indistinguishable from those of the general public, as voted by their paid admission.

There are a couple of minor deviations from this rule. We are occasionally given to sentiment, especially in the acting awards, choosing to compensate some well-liked star for a run of bad luck by giving her or him and award that isn't really for the current performance for the purpose of redressing a grievance.

Just lately a new economic trend in the business has brought the first faint hint of class struggle into the nominating and voting process. As salaried workers with a high rate of unemployment in an unstable industry, we do not like the trend toward fewer, more expensive movies. When a company puts all its capital into one supercolossal, blockbusting basket, there are fewer jobs to be had. A larger number of modestly budgeted films would spread the work much more satisfactorily among a larger number of us.

So the "little" picture (especially the little picture that competes at the box office with *King Kong* and *A Star Is Born*) is something we will encourage with our votes. I believe that is why *Rocky*, and to a lesser extent *Network*, have dominated the nominations for 1976.

►Concentrated nominations.

One perennial feature of the voting, repeated again this year, is that the nominations in all categories are concentrated among a relatively small number of pictures. What this proves, I think, is that the people in the business are no smarter than the fans at distinguishing one kind of contribution to a film from another.

We never honor a performer for his or her valiant effort with a terrible screenplay, or a director for doing a brilliant job with an incompetent star. *Network*, *Rocky*, and *All the President's Men* are nominated this year for the best picture, best direction and best screenplay. They are also three of the candidates for best film editing, and they have 11 acting nominations among them. Granted that all the participating talents have to function on a high level to make a good movie, it's also true that the better a movie is, the more immersed you are in it and less able to separate the writing from the acting, the editing from the direction.

Left: The late Peter Finch in *Network*. Below: Dustin Hoffman and Laurence Olivier in *Marathon Man*.



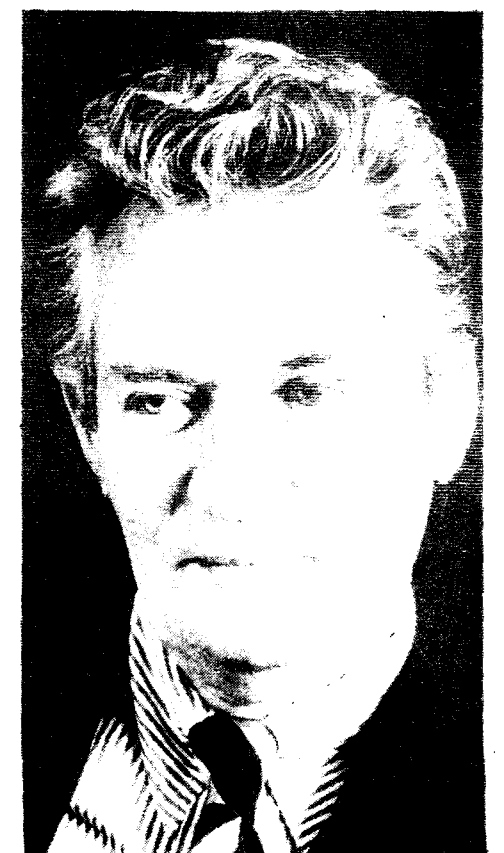
The fearless forecasts

There is no such thing as inside information on who will get the Oscars this year, but I can apply the observations I have made here about how the process works and come up with a few guesses that are guaranteed to be no less accurate than you can achieve in your own home with a hat and some scraps of paper. My fearless forecast, therefore, for the results on 1976 is:

- Best picture — *All The President's Men*
- Best director — Sidney Lumet for *Network*
- Best actor in a leading role — Peter Finch in *Network*
- Best actress in a leading role — Faye Dunaway in *Network*
- Best actor in a supporting role — Laurence Olivier in *Marathan Man*
- Best actress in a supporting role — Beatrice Straight in *Network*
- Best achievement in cinematography — Haskell Wexler for *Bound for Glory*
- Best screenplay written directly for the screen — Paddy Chayefsky for *Network*
- Best screenplay based on another medium — William Goldman for *All the President's Men*

Those are my predictions of the winners to be announced on Monday night, March 28. They are not, except in a couple of instances, the choices I made among the films nominated. To show complete fearlessness, I suppose, I have to violate the secrecy of my own ballot and allow the reader to draw what inferences he can about my own special, strong, built-in prejudices;

- Best picture—*Bound for Glory*
- Best director — Lina Wertmuller for *Seven Beauties*
- Best actor in a leading role — Giancarlo Gianinni in *Seven Beauties*
- Best actress in a leading role — Liv Ullmann in *Face to Face*
- Best actor in a supporting role — Burgess Meredith in *Rocky*
- Best actress in a supporting role — Beatrice Straight in *Network*
- Best achievement in cinematography—Haskell Wexler for *Bound for Glory*
- Best screenplay written directly for the screen—Walter Bernstein for *The Front*
- Best screenplay based on another medium — Robert Getchell for *Bound for Glory*



Lardner on how the Academy was driven to ending the blacklist

Ring Lardner Jr. is one of very few screen writers who have won the Oscar twice. In Lardner's case once (for *Woman of the Year*, 1942) before, and once (for *M*A*S*H**, 1970) after he spent a year—minus time for good behavior—in jail for contempt of Congress.

As one of the Hollywood Ten, Lardner resisted the incursion of the House Un-American Activities Committee into the film industry in the '50s. His observations on the workings of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences include this passage, which reflects his experience with the blacklist:

"One of this year's nominees in the feature-length documentary division is *Hollywood on Trial*, described in the official list of nominations for 1976 as a "reconstruction, through newsreel footage and recent interviews, of the American (sic) Activities Committee hearings and consequent blacklist in the film industry."

The strange mistake in the name of the committee, later corrected, may have some unconscious significance when you recall the active part the Academy played in maintaining the blacklist.

During the early history of that peculiar institution, two awards went to blacklisted writers for films they had written before proscription. That was embarrassing enough, but when *The Friendly Persuasion* was nominated for best screenplay five long years after its screen adapter, Michael Wilson, had been banished from filmdom, the Board of Governors hastily passed a special rule declaring non-cooperators with the committee ineligible for awards. The voters had to choose among four instead of five candidates that spring.

In the next three years, however, there were so many pictures up for awards that had been written by blacklisted writers under pseudonyms, and these facts were so much a matter of Hollywood gossip, that a publicity campaign (brilliantly orchestrated by Dalton Trumbo) threatened to ridicule the Academy right out of existence. Another hasty meeting of the Governors in January, 1959, rescinded the 1956 rule, and that was as close as any group representing Hollywood officialdom ever came to formally ending the blacklist."