

# Uncle Oscar

*For over 60 years lucky people have been winning little gold statues. Adrienne McKibbons looks at the history of the Oscars and this year's crop.*

**It all started back in 1929 when, on May 19 in the Blossom Room of the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, Douglas Fairbanks presented 12 awards - the first Academy Awards presentation. Janet Gaynor, who won the first ever Best Actress award, commented: "As you danced you saw the most important people in Hollywood whirling past you".**

This first presentation was more like a private party presented by The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. It was only open to Academy members - no press, no audience. For the 1989 awards (presented last month, on March 27) there will be at least 22 awards and six special awards handed out by a multitude of presenters and seen by millions worldwide.

Since 1929 there have been controversies, startling omissions, continual surprises and an ever-growing media attention to an event that is, in itself, a business. (Receiving an Oscar can add huge returns at the box office.) As far back as the 'thirties people both inside the industry as well as commentators were learning not to take this event too seriously.

In 1931 Helen Hayes won Best Actress for a contrived tearjerker called *The Sin of Madelon Claudet*. This prompted Irving Thalberg (considered the boy genius of Hollywood), when considering whether to put another tearjerker into production, to say "Let's face it, we win Academy Awards with crap like *Madelon Claudet*". The controversy over art

versus commercial crap reigns to this day.

In 1934 the statuette was 'officially' given the name Oscar. When the Academy's librarian first saw the statue she claimed "it looks like uncle Oscar". This was considered a derogatory term until Walt Disney used the name in his speech, when winning the award for the creation of Mickey Mouse. The name stuck.

By 1940 an innovation had been introduced which, like the name Oscar, continues to the present day. All the



Jessica Tandy (*Driving Miss Daisy*)

surprise of the Awards having been lost when they were mistakenly published early one year, the Academy introduced the sealed envelope. It heightened the suspense and put in motion a ritual seen at almost every award ceremony.

In 1943 the Awards became a more public affair, the private industry party was coming to an end. 1944 saw the Awards broadcast in their entirety across America. The presentation had moved to the famous Grauman's Chinese Theatre.

The Awards have grown, been refined, categories added and taken away until we have what is seen

televised across the globe every year, to a seemingly ever-expanding audience.

There have always been more serious issues raised than the presentation format. During the 'fifties considerable ramifications arose over blacklisted writers being nominated. Carl Foreman was nominated for his script of *High Noon*. However, by the night of the Awards, in 1952, he had moved to England, considered unemployable whether he won or not. Foreman was not the only writer affected by the blacklist. The consequences were felt in Hollywood for many years.

In 1958 George Seaton, President of the Academy, announced that there would be no commercial interruptions to the ceremony, as the industry itself was sponsoring the show. Not surprisingly, this announcement gained more applause than any winner. (Consider watching the Awards without commercial interruptions today!)

There are, of course, as many fascinating details to recount about the Awards as there have been about the ceremonies: certainly every year has something to remember it by. What has been this year's moment?

The Best Film award of 1989 was really a tussle between three films: *Driving Miss Daisy*, with nine nominations in all; *Born on the 4th of July*, a total of eight nominations; and *Dead Poets' Society*, with four nominations. Despite *Daisy* gaining nine nominations, including Best Film, for some inexplicable reason director Bruce Beresford missed out on a Best Director nomination. A totally illogical move.

If the film can garner so much credit and its three lead actors are all nominated, it stands to reason that much of the credit must go to the director. It's not as if Beresford is



Kenneth Branagh, with his wife Emma Thompson, creating history in *Henry V*

Steven Spielberg, who the Academy seems to openly dislike.

Still, there was one Australian director in the running. The Best Director award was a close competition between Peter Weir and Oliver Stone. It was a very slim chance that either of the Britons, actor/director Kenneth Branagh or Jim Sheridan, were likely to go home with an Oscar. And Woody Allen is always a long shot, playing his clarinet in New York the night of the ceremonies.

The actor stakes this time had a couple of landmarks. Two black actors were nominated - Morgan Freeman for Best Actor in *Driving Miss Daisy* and Denzel Washington, for Best Supporting Actor in *Glory*. *Glory* is an ideologically sound film about the American Civil War with a predominantly black cast. Washington's graduation from TV to features combined with the content of the film would have stood him in good stead, as much to award the film as the actor. There was, of course, Marlon Brando in *A Dry White Season*, another ideologically sound film about South Africa.

But the last time Brando won an award (for *The Godfather*), he sent an Indian woman to announce that he could not accept the award because of

the treatment of Indians by Hollywood!

The other landmark was Kenneth Branagh's achievement of simultaneously being nominated as Best Actor/Best Director in the same year for the same film. This phenomenon has happened only three times: Orson Welles for *Citizen Kane*, Woody Allen for *Annie Hall* and Warren Beatty for *Reds*. Branagh had only a slight chance to succeed in either category, especially with Tom Cruise as competition for Best Actor in *Born on the 4th of July*.

America's attitude to the Vietnam conflict was almost a guarantee for *Born* to win a number of awards. Director Oliver Stone has become the new liberal conscience filmmaker of the day. (It is unfortunate that his films are so over-rated, because of their content.)

In the Best Actress category the real choice was between Michelle Pfeiffer for *The Fabulous Baker Boys* and Jessica Tandy in *Daisy*. Tandy has sentiment on her side because she has been around as an actress for a long time.

One category that never receives the attention it should is the documentary. An Oscar can mean a great deal - for example whether the film will be seen outside America. None of the

nominated films this year have had a release in Australia. It is therefore hard to speculate on the most deserving. The other category that often remains an enigma (as to what shaped the voters' choice) is the Best Foreign Language Film. The main competition was between *Cinema Paradiso*, from Italy, and the magnificent bio-pic *Camille Claudel*. *Cinema Paradiso* is a wonderful film, has the added advantage of being very sentimental, and its topic is cinema itself.

The bottom line in the race for Oscars is that the technical awards are more likely to go to those who genuinely deserve them, without other factors being a consideration. It can make a real difference, in the documentary and short categories, to a career and getting another film off the ground.

With actors, directors best films, music, etc, while the competition may be real to each individual nominated, to us the audience, it is more a case of who we like the best and whether the Academy will agree with our choice.

**ADRIENNE MCKIBBINS** is a freelance film writer/researcher, and regular contributor to *Filmnews*. She also produces and presents *On Screen*, a radio program on cinema on 2SER-FM, Sundays at 2pm.

# Summit to think about

*Ideas for a Nation*, by Donald Horne. Published by Pan Books. 1989. Reviewed by Tony Bennett.

In the note of warning which prefaces his latest book, *Ideas for a Nation*, Donald Horne recommends "a cheerful (but intelligent) Australian superficiality" in considering the role of ideas in national life.

What he means by this is amplified in a later chapter where, suggesting that the Australian reputation for superficiality should be intellectualised, he argues for a style of thinking that will be satisfied with the flat complexity of the surface of things. Such thinking, he argues, would limit itself to the pragmatic concerns of 'what' questions, secure in the knowledge that they are invariably more intelligent than the contrived profundities of 'why' questions.

Nor, he suggests, should the pragmatist who is concerned with such matters be too serious; a degree of playfulness and ironic distancing is always to be recommended. And she or he might just as well be cheerful.

Much of this - a nationalised version of Brecht's advocacy of crude-thinking - is conceived as a largely well-directed polemic against 1970s-style leftist obscurantism. Yet it also serves to set the scene for the final section of *Ideas for a Nation*. Here, in response to that most pragmatic of questions - What is to be done? - Horne addresses the question of Australia's future by raising a set of disconnected and incomplete observations, thoughts and interrogations. Rather than distracting attention by attempting to be too coherent, as he puts it, his purpose is merely "to throw up some ideas".

The ideas are advanced in a manner which - and, again, Brecht springs to mind - invites the reader merely to consider them. Advanced not as theses which have to be elaborately

argued and justified, the ideas are offered as simply 'good to think with'. And should the reader disagree, well, that's fine. Advanced as they are with the lightness of the ironist, not even Horne commits himself to the last-ditch defence of any of his ideas. Except, that is, for one: the conviction that ideas matter and that, as the primary agencies of change, they are especially important for nations.

This, in a nutshell, is the message of the book: that nations can be changed and that ideas are among the primary instruments of their transformation. It is thus that Horne, speculating on the forms in which the bicentenary of federation might be celebrated in 2001, closes on an optimistic note. Anticipating that, by then, republicanism will have triumphed, and sexism and racism banished - and offering this vision as a contrast to the doleful rhetorics of empire, race and sex which have marred past Australian celebrations - Horne's wager is that good ideas for the nation will win out over bad ones.

Yet *Ideas for a Nation* is not an especially nationalist book. Indeed, Horne's investment in the nation is largely a pragmatic one: he recognises the importance of nationalist feelings and sentiments simply because they are there. Taking issue with those critics who contend that transnational economic relations have diminished the force of nationalism, Horne contends that such critiques "require tunnel vision of demanding intensity" - citing recent developments in Eastern Europe to support his case. Horne, then, does not spiritualise nationalist sentiments but, rather, in recognising their considerable social force, stresses their role in establishing programs for action.

Shaped by its formation as a modern industrial nation of colonial origins, much of Australian society and culture, Horne argues, can be understood as a response to circumstances Australia has shared with other nations.

Even where a trait might be claimed as specific to Australia, this is not because it partakes of some general national characteristic, but is rather due to the particular circumstances prevailing in specific sectors of Australian society. There is not, then, as others have argued, a distinctive Australian accent. There are things Australian - but they are not all Australian in the same way.

In this respect, *Ideas for a Nation* turns out to be something of a graveyard for ideas of the nation as Horne puts more than one national holy cow - mateship, for example - through the mill of a critical denationalising argument. Nor is the future Horne wishes for Australia a particularly nationalistic one. Rather, his ambition is that Australia should be foremost among nations in its advocacy and implementation of the principles of liberalism, humanism, democracy and the Enlightenment. Its nationalism, he also suggests, should be cosmopolitan in its promotion of a multicultural pluralism and diversity.

There is, in this regard, a symbiosis between the book's argument and its form. For it is clearly Horne's view that the more questions of nation are posed with the sort of intellectualised superficiality, ironic playfulness and optimistic cheerfulness he recommends - as opposed to deep ruminations on the national *geist* - the more likely we are to arrive at the destination he would have us reach.

On both counts *Ideas for a Nation* is welcome. As 1988 fades into memory and 2001 looms over the horizon, Horne has usefully sought to set the agenda for the debates which will, no doubt, grow apace as the prospect of both the millenium and the anniversary of federation draws closer. He has also, in his advocacy of a relaxed and somewhat detached approach, suggested a productive manner of conducting those debates.

This is enough for a book to accomplish; and it might have been ac-

accomplished better had Horne been content to do this and no more. Unfortunately, the conjunctural force of Horne's intervention is somewhat weakened because he encumbers his "ideas for a nation" with the weight of a set of more general arguments, mostly derived from his earlier works concerning such matters as the role of ideas in social life, the public culture, the changing fates and fortunes of class theory and so on. As a result, the edge is taken off those of his ideas which he is most concerned we should think about precisely because they get tangled up with more doubtful and, often, more poorly-stated theoretical positions and contentions.

Some of the difficulties I have in mind are occasioned by his use of the concept of 'the public culture' - a potentially useful term which, however, here and elsewhere Horne simply overloads in trying to make it do too many things. Similar difficulties attend his enthusiasm for the view that reality is a social construct and the stress he accordingly places on chang-

ing ideas as a necessary prelude to changing society. A program for change, in Horne's view, depends on seeing things differently.

It's not that this is wrong. Nor does Horne view ideas as *sui generis* or as all having equal access to agents capable of implementing them. Perhaps more insistently than in his earlier writings he stresses the manifold inequalities of power which make the notion of a free market in ideas ludicrous. What is missing, however, is any sense of the respects in which ideas, if they are to become effective, must be capable of being translated into systems of administration and machineries of government as well as programs of action.

And behind this is a more worrying individualism which manifests itself in his advocacy of the creativity of intellectuals - whether artists, writers, scientists or engineers - as the best means of Australia's economic advancement. Some of this is attributable to Horne's familiar advocacy of the economic benefits of the arts in his

capacity as Chairperson of the Australia Council. Yet it's also clear that he views it as the task of people with ideas - intellectuals and critics - to make up for the lack, as he sees it, of an autonomous Australian bourgeoisie capable of being economically innovative in the national interest.

While I find this unconvincing, I doubt Horne would regard the matters I have raised as contrary to his purpose in publishing *Ideas for a Nation*. Shortly after the book's publication the Australia Council announced that it would hold a National Ideas Summit (held last month).

How the process which Horne has sought to initiate will turn out will depend on the input of others. If these can echo Horne's enthusiasm, if not perhaps all his enthusiasms, and be offered in the same open, democratic and pragmatic spirit, his cheerful optimism may prove to have been justified.

TONY BENNETT teaches in Humanities (Institute for Cultural Policy Studies) at Griffith University.



## LETTERS

### Superficial

Michael Stutchbury's column on wages policy in (ALR 114) is sloppy and superficial, doing little credit to a left magazine.

He contends that low real wages under the Accords of the Hawke government and the ACTU in fact stimulated job creation and investment, entirely reversing the main assumption in the original Accord that wage cuts led to economic decline.

The evidence of the 'eighties is that huge overseas borrowings since financial deregulation have fueled expansion, and that only 40 cents in every dollar of profit was invested in productive assets. Stutchbury seems to believe that the Accord aim of reducing inflation has been achieved - a rate of 7.8% is hardly a success.

The profits have been largely wasted in speculation and conspicuous consumption. On the political description I think he's right. Most ACTU officers believe in conservative economics, that one person's pay rise is another's job, that the wage increases gained in 1981 caused a recession in 1982. And most ACTU officers have worked closely with Keating to allow the big transfer of wealth from wages to profits.

But the obvious economic disaster created by the deregulated speculative splurge of the '80s ought to suggest that the theory used by Keating and his admirers is wrong. A Left review should say more than the obvious - that a wage/tax deal will be used by Labor in the elections and

point towards a wages, tax and economic policy that can work for the majority of Australians.

Even less should it blandly suggest that we all agree with old-fashioned economic theory which so blatantly serves the interest of capital, and which rules that organised workers or community organisations have no role to play in the allocation of resources and the distribution of the benefits of economic activity. Had we got a Liberal government it would have been a clear test of the theory that wage cuts encourage bosses to hire more workers, to produce more wealth for all!

As it is workers will have to fight harder to ensure productive, ecologically-sound investment and a boost in social resources to ensure long-term economic viability.

Peter Murphy  
Surry Hills, NSW.

ALR welcomes letters. Please send them to: ALR, Box A247, Sydney South 2000.