

Opposite personas attract Oscar's attention

By Susan Wloszczyna
USA TODAY

Oscar can be a fickle fellow. Sometimes he rewards performers for doing what comes naturally. Think Western legend John Wayne lassoing his first statuette as a cowboy in 1969's *True Grit*. Or prim and proper Julie Andrews being honored as the prim and proper nanny in 1964's *Mary Poppins*.

But Oscar also harbors a rather perverse need to applaud those who dare to deny the very essence of their personality that has made them famous.

Consider Denzel Washington and Halle Berry, who both made history last year when they took home their Academy Awards. Washington became the first black lead actor to win since Sidney Poitier for 1963's *Lilies of the Field*. Berry was the first black lead actress ever to be so honored.

The desire to break racial barriers may have been part of their victories. But both performers also caught the eye of voters with a movie makeover. Cover girl Halle went drab as the distraught wife of a death row inmate in *Monster's Ball*, while heroic Denzel transformed into a rotten-apple cop in *Training Day*. The image switch did the trick.

"When voters get comfortable with a star's persona, they take it for granted," Oscar expert Damien Bona says. "It's only when they step out of their persona that they think, 'Oh, he or she is doing a stretch.'"

Bring something new to the role

And don't think the performers don't know that a change of pace can be a boost. Chris Cooper earned high praise for his roles as tight-lipped, stoic types in *Lone Star*, *October Sky* and *American Beauty*. But in this year's *Adaptation*, the first-time nominee is an arrogant good ol' boy of an orchid thief who can't help but flap his gums. Especially since he is missing a considerable number of teeth.

"I've been looking for a character like this," says Cooper, who is up for supporting actor. "I do tend to be a kind of a lesser-spoken guy. I thought if I bring something new to the character, then maybe it will widen up the kind of jobs that come my way."

Or at least lead to a gold trinket. "Oscar has a history of rewarding those who take the challenge of playing opposite of what people expect," says Jeanine Basinger, head of film studies at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn. "In a town based on stars and star persona, the act of abandoning that seems hugely important and significant."

For instance, the academy has long displayed a rather strong predisposition toward glamour queens who go dowdy (but not when they tread the red carpet, of course). Besides Berry, winners who went plain Jane include Olivia de Havilland in *The Heiress* (1949), Grace Kelly in *The Country Girl* (1954), Elizabeth Taylor in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), Cher in *Moonstruck* (1987) and Susan Sarandon in *Dead Man Walking* (1995).

As Basinger notes, "I've always said that the way for a glamour girl

Breaking the mold in less obvious ways

They may not have worn fake noses, but four actors shifted career gear to earn Oscar nominations this year:

Renee Zellweger, *Chicago*



Cute couple: Zellweger and Tom Cruise in *Jerry Maguire*.

Who knew this chubby-cheeked charmer from *Jerry Maguire* could carry a tune and move to music? But what is really surprising is Zellweger's transformation from her usual sweetheart to a heartless tart.

Goody-goodies gone bad who were given an Oscar for their troubles include Donna Reed (a prostitute in *From Here to Eternity*, 1953) and Shirley Jones (a prostitute in *Elmer Gantry*, 1960).



Twin bill: Cage as Charlie, left, and Donald Kaufman.

Nicolas Cage, *Adaptation*

He already doubles his chances by playing twins. But Cage's return to more challenging fare after a seven-year stint as a highly paid action hero in blockbusters such as *Con Air* and *The Rock*, following his win for 1995's *Leaving Las Vegas*, provides bonus points.



Man of action: Cage in *Con Air*.



Razzle-dazzle in *Chicago*: Zellweger follows in the footsteps of Donna Reed and Shirley Jones as good girls gone bad on the big screen.



Supporting role: Latifah in *Chicago*.

Queen Latifah, *Chicago*

The hip-hop artist has been acting for years on TV and in film, so she tried a change of venue. Instead of her usual urban street style, she went bluesy and belted out *When You're Good to Mama* with a sass and class beyond the abilities of most rap stars. And Oscar heard her, loud and clear.



Music role: Queen of hip-hop.



Supporting role: Newman in *Road to Perdition*.

Paul Newman, *Road to Perdition*

Sure, the blue-eyed guy's benevolent Irish Mob boss is just another in his long line of lovable anti-heroes. But after eight acting nominations for lead roles, one win and two honorary awards, how do you capture Oscar's attention again? By downsizing. Newman was bestowed with his first supporting nomination.



Lead role: In *Nobody's Fool*.

to win an Oscar is, No. 1, play a nun, No. 2, play an alcoholic and, No. 3, take the eyelashes off."

Two current best-actress nominees play the frumpy game as real-life heroines.

Appearances can be rewarding

Last year, Nicole Kidman's debut as a singer and dancer wowed 'em in *Moulin Rouge*, and she earned her first nomination. But the fake nose that obscures her beauty as author Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* may prove even more fortuitous. Meanwhile, Salma Hayek similarly dons a unibrow and a slight mus-

tache to impersonate painter Frida Kahlo in *Frida*. But the hairy accessories hardly dim her lustrous glow.

Oscar also gets a kick out of when women dress in male drag, such as Linda Hunt in *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1983), Gwyneth Paltrow in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and Hilary Swank in *Boys Don't Cry* (1999).

For men who are straight, playing gay can be a bonus. Such a ploy led to wins for William Hurt in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1985) and Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia* (1993). That means a possible plus for Ed Harris, a supporting nominee in

The Hours, although Dennis Quaid's secondary role as a closeted husband in *Far From Heaven* went un-nominated.

If you're a clown, make them cry (Robin Williams in *Good Will Hunting*, 1997). If people take you seriously, then make them laugh (Glenda Jackson in *A Touch of Class*, 1973). This year, Jack Nicholson as the out-of-sorts retiree in *About Schmidt* snuffs out his devil-may-care attitude, while Meryl Streep's halo slips as she transforms into a wacky, lust-crazed druggie in *Adaptation*.

Hiding your true nature also may make you appear more trophy-

worthy.

"Oscar voters delight in seeing stars deny their public identity, and implicit in that is a humbling," says Tom O'Neil, host of the entertainment awards Web site *goldderby.com*. "Being humbled equals being deserving."

Judges must be impressed

Being different doesn't always work, however. A newly energized Richard Gere, not known for his musical talents, tapped, sang and did a legalse striptease in *Chicago*. But Oscar judges weren't impressed. It may be personal. "Peo-

ple who have worked with him think he's too aloof," Oscar expert Damien Bona says.

Of course, it helps when Oscar knows what type you are. The chameleonic Julianne Moore, who has been everything from a porn star in *Boogie Nights* to a scientist in *The Lost World: Jurassic Park*, apparently so confounds the academy that voters have ended up nominating her twice — for practically the same role.

She is an unhappy '50s homemaker in both *The Hours* (supporting) and *Far From Heaven* (lead). Looks as if they finally got her pegged.

Scenes from The Clash struggle

Survivors recall band's passion and pugilism

By Elysa Gardner
USA TODAY

NEW YORK — The soft-spoken, neatly dressed men seated in an office at Sony Music's midtown headquarters hardly look like guys who would be interested in starting a revolution.

Twenty-five years ago, of course, it was a different story. As core members of The Clash, guitarist Mick Jones and bassist Paul Simonon helped drag the musical and political rebellion of punk kicking and screaming into the pop mainstream, first in their native England and then here.

With frontman Joe Strummer leading the charge, the band took on issues ranging from racism to Thatcherism to the plight of Nicaragua's Sandinistas — and, eventually, each other. In 1983, Strummer and Simonon gave Jones his walking papers, and the group dissolved shortly afterward.

"That's why we were called The Clash, you see," Simonon explains. "We used to row a lot."

At times, the conflicts became physical. "And I always used to come off the worse," Jones notes. "I got the black eyes."

"I got the bruised fingers," Simonon quips. But Jones and Simonon, both 47, are making nice nowadays, and not just because they have a new project to promote. This evening, they will be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame at an annual ceremony that will air March 16 on VH1. On Tuesday, they will release *The Essential Clash*, a two-CD, 40-song collection of hits, B-sides and album and EP tracks.

The old colleagues had expected to com-

Hall of Fame bound: The Clash's Mick Jones, left, and Paul Simonon.



Rebellion on stage: Jones and Simonon perform in New York in 1979.

memorate this pair of milestones with Strummer at their side. But the singer, 50, died suddenly in December after an apparent heart attack.

"It's strange to be in this situation now, talking about our time together," Simonon acknowledges. "Maybe it will help us come to terms with the loss. But it's difficult, because we were like a family. We come from dysfunctional families, so (the band) really was our family."

For all their differences, Jones agrees. "We always enjoyed each other's company." He adds that Strummer was involved in choosing material for *Essential Clash* right up until his death, reviewing lists of songs and offering opinions with his usual candor.

"Joe was specific about what he didn't like. It would be, 'Hate it.' 'Hate it,'" Jones

says, laughing. "And of course, we wanted to have something that would honor Joe, make him proud."

It was also important, Jones and Simonon say, that the compilation reflect all the ground The Clash covered, not only thematically but also in musical approach, which expanded beyond the players' punk and garage-rock origins to incorporate aspects of reggae, soul, funk and rap.

"That's what our nature was: to listen to all sorts of music," Simonon says. "And each one of us individually brought something musically to the table, so we sort of cross-pollinated with each other."

Jones adds: "We took on all of what was going on around us as well. We weren't parochial. And even though we broke up a long time ago, we've still got a lot to say. All the songs are about something."

Jones maintains that The Clash's commercial success never interfered with the group's famously fierce ideals or compromised its integrity. "We may be sitting here in Sony's offices, but that was never the main event for us. We made a decision early on to sign to a major record company, because we thought that was the best way to reach as many people as possible.

"Then we struggled with that duality: 'What are we going to do now that we've got some money, but we've still got something to say?' We've had to deal with that contradiction through our whole career, and we're still dealing with it."

Neither Jones, who continues to work on different musical projects, nor Simonon, who now channels his creative energy into painting, expresses a desire to try to revive The Clash without Strummer.

"We're too busy moving on to dwell on what we did," Simonon says. "Now he wants to be Beethoven, and I want to be van Gogh."

Jones laughs, then nods. "We live in the present. But it's nice to do our heritage justice. It's strange to be here now, but we're glad we are."



By Todd Pitt, USA TODAY