

Roger & Me & the Pakistani

Behind the Scenes at the 67th Academy Awards

BY REBECCA KRAUS

Barone's pizza is square. It is a significant symbol of my youth because this square pizza was the food of choice year after year when my family would dust out those dreadful '70s t.v. trays, order for delivery, sit ourselves down in front of the tube and indulge in the Academy Awards show. This was in fact the only night of the year when my sisters and I were

to behold. And whether you are munching on crunchy crusts or beautifully catered coconut-covered bananas, the Oscar telecast is anything but square, for it aims to be as hip and slick as possible in the fantasy land of Hollywood.

On March 27, 1995, I ventured to the Shrine Auditorium to experience the 67th Annual Academy Awards in person. First are the Arrivals. It is a quintessential gorgeous day in South-

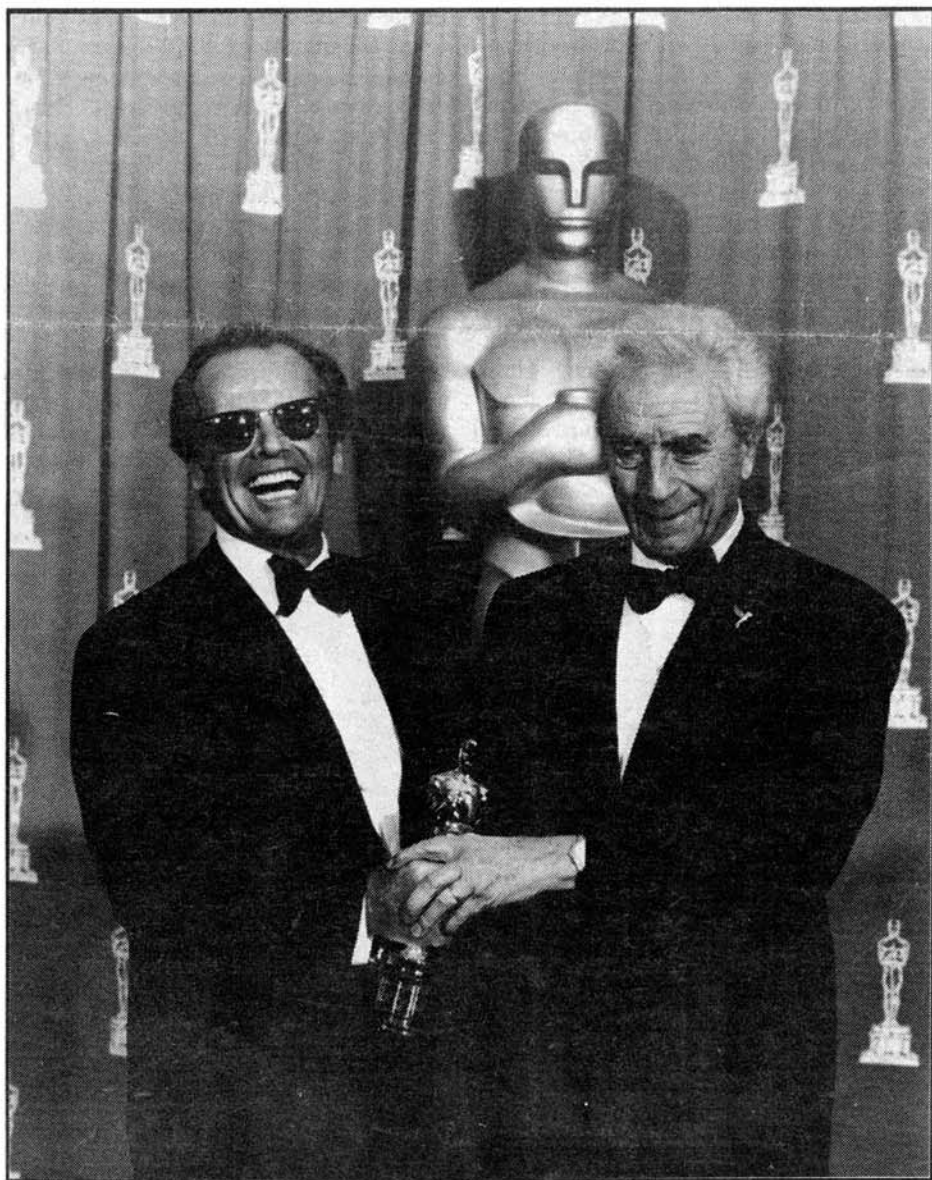
My long lace skirt covers it up. What was supposed to be reserved for the print media is swarming with 21-year old USC students sporting their formal attire. They have purchased those seats for \$25. I hear one boast, "This is the best way to spend Dad's money."

We all jockey for position. At 4:30 Jennifer Tilly is the first nominee to arrive. The high-pitched voice that made her role in *Bullets Over Broadway* so memorable is a resounding plus for us observers as we listen in on her excitement. Alas, it wouldn't win her the Oscar. I am situated right behind ABC-TV, where Roger Ebert is manhandled by his cameraman to face a certain way. As he has for three decades, Army Archerd grabs all industry notables up to his podium. He introduces most of them as so-and so "and his beautiful wife." It's a good thing all the wives are good-looking. He asks all the females who did their dresses. Jamie Lee Curtis quips, "We're in a world where all

people want to know is what we're wearing." But she concedes and names her designer.

The beautiful people, presenters and nominees, continue to roll down the carpet.—Sarah Jessica Parker, Tim Robbins and Susan

Rene Russo, Andie MacDowell, John Travolta. The fans ruthlessly shove anyone in line to get that perfect shot with their disposable cameras. Air kissing is spotted repeatedly (so as not to smudge one's lipstick, of course). High-



L.A. Cool meets Nouvelle Vague: Nicholson salutes Antonioni

actually encouraged to eat while watching television. The Oscars were, after all, the greatest show on earth.

Two decades later, the show has only grown in scope and glamour. From t.v. trays to press tents, the Academy Awards are still something

ern California. Most celebrities are slated to stream out of their stretch limos and cruise the red carpet around 5:00, so, wanting to get a decent seat in the bleachers, I arrive around 3:00. At 3:15 I rip my nylons trying to climb over some bushes to the press area. No matter.



Jamie Lee Curtis decides to drop in on Oscar

powered executives like Paramount chairman Shelly Lansing and mogul David Geffen hardly get a double take from the crowd, but when the Best Supporting Actress nominee for *Pulp Fiction*, arrives, chants of "Uma! Uma!" are heard in stereo. John Aston goes out of his way to hunt down and greet nominee Jodie Foster. They all seem so small in person.

The clock ticks towards show time and host David Letterman is nowhere in sight. The press scurry into the tents in the parking lot behind the Shrine. With TV monitors, wireless headphones, laptop computers, phones and modems, this is our makeshift office for the next four hours. It is like a colony of worker bees. Hardly anyone makes eye contact with one another as we all settle into our assigned seats. There is a veritable feeding frenzy at the caterer's table: sandwiches, fruit, chicken fingers and caffeine are on hand.

While I watch the opening number, and the

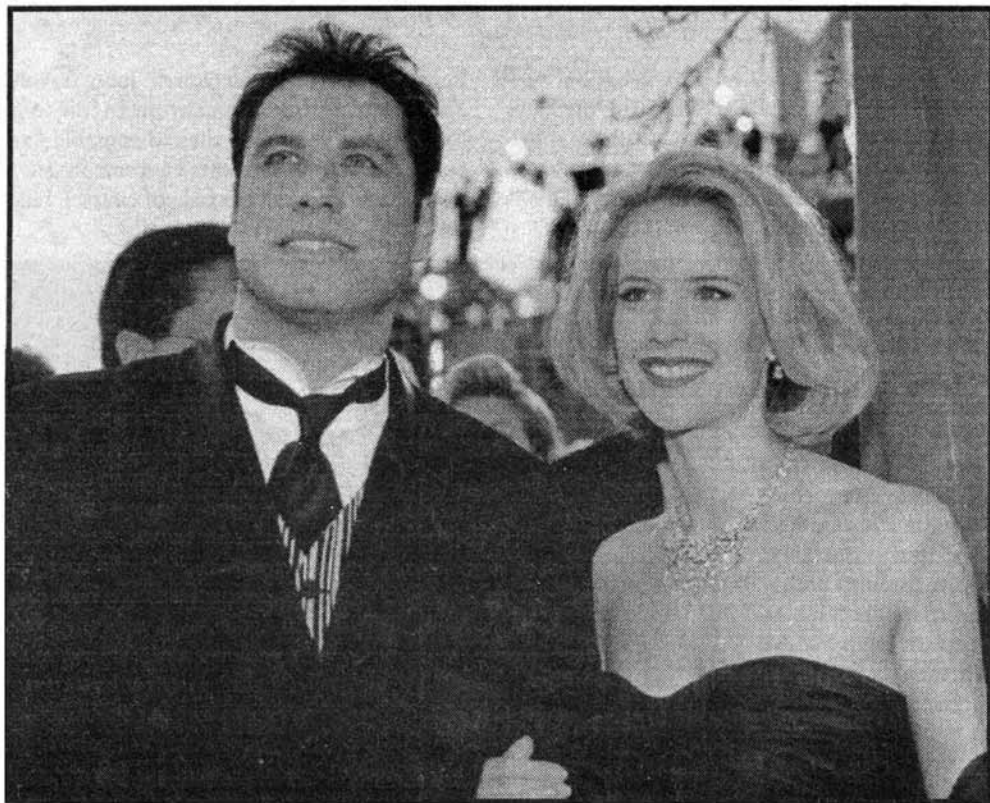
THE GLAMOUR:
"Wanting to get a decent seat in the bleachers, I arrive around 3:00. At 3:15 I rip my nylons trying to climb over some bushes to the press area."

Sarandon, Sylvester Stallone, Sharon Stone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Morgan Freeman,

Continued on Page 14

Continued from Page 13

first of many clever Letterman-esque dialogues, I am surprised to see how few people are actually paying attention to the monitors. In the perfunctory reference to the candy formula extolled by the film that will be the big winner this year, Letterman says, "Well you know Forrest Gump said 'Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get. Unless of course you're sitting next to Roger Ebert, and then you know you're not going to



Nominee John Travolta and wife: *Pulp Fiction* shot down

get any!" I notice a few minutes later that Mr. Ebert is sitting in the row behind me. He is pecking away at his laptop, churning out a story for his Chicago newspaper. I ask him if he's working as a TV and print representative. He, a 27-year veteran of the Oscars, points to his computer and says "Yes, but this is more fun." How does he feel about Letterman's job? "Deeply complimented."

THE GLORY:
The Pakistani radio man asks Eastwood, "You spend a lot of the time in the saddle. Do you ever change your bottom?"

The show - and rapid typing - continue. The hilarious film montages cannot break the intensity and concentration of the reporters. I laugh out loud unabashedly when Letterman does his bit about New York taxi drivers.

Dianne Wiest wins for Best Supporting Actress in Woody Allen's *Bullets Over Broadway*. She has been the overwhelming pick for this category, and gives a warm acceptance speech. The press asks what this second Oscar means to her. "I think when I hold this up, I have a

better chance of my kids listening to me."

The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert wins for Best Costume. The Aussies take it in stride and humor. Later I see beaming winner Lizzy Gardner, decked out in an appropriately gaudy gown of American Express gold cards. I confess that I hoped she would win. "Well we did!", she smiles, waving her Oscar like a new toy.

Ed Wood gets the award for achievement in makeup. When he comes to the press tent, I recognize the pony-tailed man from those *L.A.*

reflects on his own philosophy and the meaning of this award: "It is better to think about getting better before getting bigger... I'd rather get an Oscar for who I am than what I do." And in a show of equal eloquence and poise, Jack Nicholson makes an appearance with his oncedirector and Academy Honorary Award recipient Michelangelo Antonioni, who refrains from speaking. Nicholson, prompted by a question on the other bit of March madness, gives the advice, "Go Bruins." "I wear my sunglasses at night" Jack upstages the older filmmaker with the slightest grin.

I scope out the room some more. The Reseda High School student who won this trip to the Oscars is seated by her journalism teacher. She has lovely coiffed hair but is downing Vick's Formula 44 Cough medicine. It is no coincidence that she is sitting right next to the winner's podium, yet she doesn't ask a single question the whole night. Still, the photographers are snapping away at her. There is a reporter who is as vocal as she is quiet: a man who introduces himself as Rani from Pakistani International Radio. With his thick accent and deadpan delivery of prepared silly questions, he could very well be a plant from the Letterman camp of laughs. I spot Ebert with two roast beef sandwiches in tow. Time for a break.

I embark on a lengthy search for the official restrooms of these, the official awards. I pass by a dozen trailers before spotting the facilities. I think that this glorified outhouse, complete with normal washing sinks and ash trays, is pretty nice for, well, an outhouse. Just then a woman in a long sequined gown mutters to me that it is utterly ridiculous. Snideness is palpable. Back on the show, even Letterman's bits about Janet Reno as a dancer and Dom Deluise as Ghandi seem a little mean-spirited.

Just when the night is growing long, Elton John and Tim Rice come back to talk about their award for Best Song, "Can You Feel the Love Tonight" from *The Lion King*. These mu-

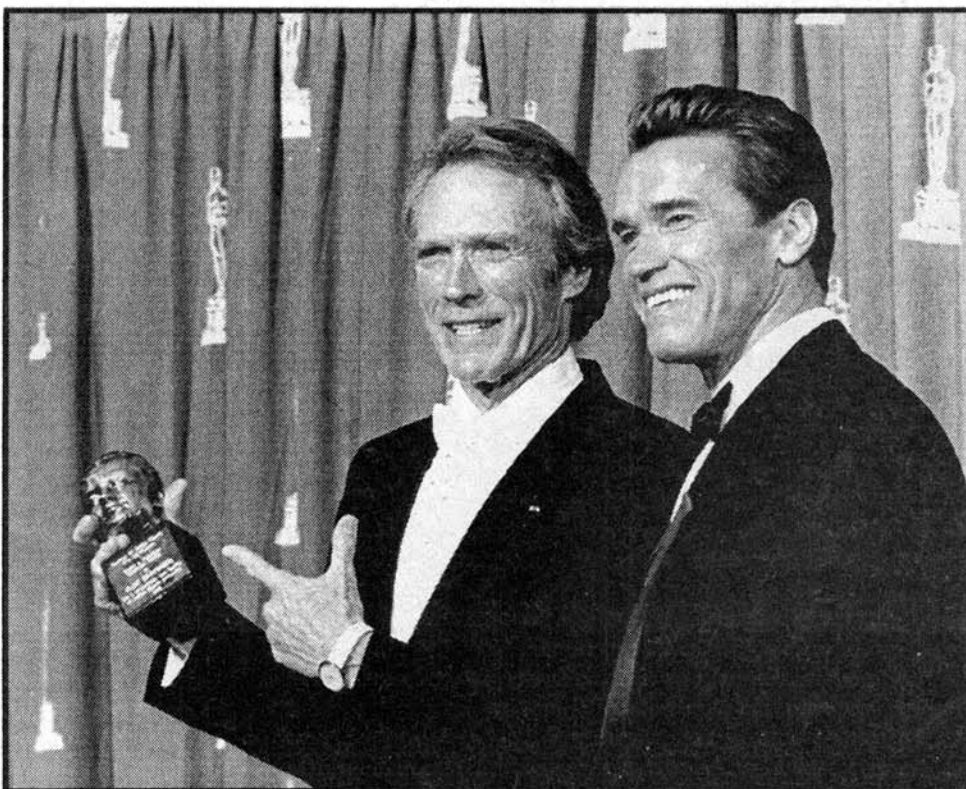
against AIDS, he defers the attention and says "At the moment, things couldn't be better in my life... Someone ask Tim a question!" A transvestite reporter dressed in a gown that would make Ru Paul jealous asks Elton if he would like to see Disney feature gay cartoon characters. He replies, "Why not! We thought there might be a couple in *The Lion King* actually."

THE GRACIOUSNESS:
I ask Letterman if he had a good time. "No," he says emphatically without missing a beat.

Sometime after 8, we receive Clint Eastwood for the Irving Thalberg Award. The Pakistani radio man asks, "You spend a lot of the time in the saddle. Do you ever change your bottom?" Laughter from all sides. Eastwood flexes his comedic muscle by responding, "No I've never changed my bottom. I step down from the saddle and just walk it off."

In one of the freshest moments in recent years, Quentin Tarantino and partner Roger Avary, both former video store clerks, savor their nod for Best Original Screenplay for *Pulp Fiction*. Tarantino is wildly gesticulating his thanks and Avary confesses his love for his wife and his need "to pee."

Conversely, Jessica Lange makes dignified remarks when at the podium picking up her 2nd Oscar for her work in *Blue Sky*, a little-seen movie that sat in bank vaults for three years.



Separated at birth? Eastwood and Schwarzenegger check out Thalberg

sical veterans are no strangers to accolades and adoration. When Elton reports on his work for Disney, his decision to dedicate the award to his recently deceased grandmother, and his fight

Lange, a deserving and immensely complex actor, seems to get some of the best women's roles available. The Pakistani man asks her what she has done with all that big money for *King*

Kong, her first feature in 1976. "I don't remember making money on that movie." Of her future, she projects: "I've just begun to understand what it's all about, actually just kind of now hitting my stride."

Ebert doesn't seem the least bit interested in the line of questioning; he just plugs away to meet his print deadline.

Avary greets the press later sans Quentin. The blond guy from the South Bay lets us in on how some of that dialogue was concocted for the verbose slang-enriched *Pulp*. Besides being a video junkie, Quentin jotted down notes from conversations he heard while in LA county jail. I like Avary - he is the kind of guy you could meet at a party in Manhattan Beach and just start rapping with. But even so, the press writers are not totally enthralled.

The real headliner is Tom Hanks, who is as high-spirited and charming as he appears. Af-

but it appears he has gone on to party. Ebert is out the door for his date with the TV cameras. Reporters for daily papers modem in their stories.

As I linger outside, I encounter a cigar-smoking Dave Letterman rushing to his Porsche in khakis, a t-shirt and a baseball hat. I ask him if he had a good time. "No," he says emphatically without missing a beat. And when I ask if he is going to any parties, I get the same answer. Well I do get a personalized autograph, a chat with Dave's personal assistant and the sense this is one serious funny-man.

I spot Susan Sarandon munching on one of those mini-sandwiches and speaking of her kids, who seem much more important to her than that elusive statue which she has yet to own. In the horde of uncomfortable tuxedos and stiletto pumps waiting for their limos in front of the Shrine, I spot Tarantino, who is hur-



The Winners' Circle: Landau, Wiest, Lange and Hanks

ter giving his second tear-jerking speech for his second consecutive Best Actor Oscar, this time for *Forrest Gump*, he professes devotion to his wife "who demonstrate for me everyday just what love is." Yes, he is grateful to be compared to Jimmy Stewart and no, he doesn't think he'll get another nomination again next year because "there will be a collective wave of suicide jumpers from the third tier of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. I don't think they'll allow it to happen."

The show is winding down, and Letterman is running out of facial contortions. The last two awards are anything but surprises. *Forrest Gump* enriches the reputations of its director, Bob Zemeckis, and its producers. After a nine-year struggle to get the movie made, the *Gump* camp has reaped what it has sown with over \$300 million in box office sales. And with the Best Director and Picture accolades, the numbers are only going to grow. Indeed, that square idiot named Forrest was the hippest one of all Monday evening, having used his witless moronic tendencies to woo the Academy into awarding six trophies.

At around 9:20, the telecast is complete. I am one of the lingering reporters who waits for Tarantino to make an appearance in our tent,

riedly being carted to his limo. "Sorry, I got to go," he says earnestly.

Roger Avary gives me his John Hancock and lets me hold his Oscar for best screenplay. He reflects on his future work, "all you need to do is put this in front of you." A limo driver happily tells me about his own experience as an actor. Stars are still being barraged by photographers close to midnight. Those nominated but not clutching a statue look a little worn down coming down this side of the red carpet. Maybe it's just the champagne and chocolate Oscars they downed at the Governor's Ball. I suspect most will be back.

I know I will, in one way or another.

Because it's the Academy Awards. For 67 years, they have transformed what began as the recognition of creative achievement to this overwhelming production seen by over 1 billion people in 170 countries. Where name-dropping is a given and self-congratulation are in itself is a work of art, the Oscars present us with an aura of power, prestige and pretense; in essence, how the entertainment industry sees itself. But more importantly, the Academy Awards are a tradition. And it is this tradition that allows me to remember what shape a Barone's pizza is. ■

OSCAR, OSCAR, OSCAR

ONE VIEW OF THE ACADEMY AWARDS TELECAST

BY PETER BERK

Lots of laughs. Beloved celebrities. Even a few surprises. But enough about Nick At Nite.

Now, let's talk about the 67th Annual Academy Awards, one of the most predictable, uninspired, and unexciting Oscar telecasts in recent memory.

Perhaps the Academy should take a cue from McDonald's: "Over A Billion Bored."

First things first: Nice try, David. You brought some clever and often hilarious filmed bits with you (the cab drivers, the *Cabin Boy* auditions). And that spinning dog should get his own series. Otherwise, in my opinion: BRING BACK BILLY!

Indeed, it seemed as if more than half of Letterman's monologue jokes and ad libs fell flat, lacking any particular wit, creativity or originality. When a stand-up comedian is laughing at his stuff more than the audience is, you know there's something wrong. Even Letterman's much-anticipated Top 10 list was surprisingly mediocre; maybe a 2 out of 10 proposition at best.

As it happens, the pressure on Letterman was only heightened by the fact that this year's telecast theme was comedy, making our expectations even higher and disappointment even greater. To make matters worse, this sense of disappointment actually preceded the host's arrival, with the talented Tim Curry and company performing a version of "Make 'Em Laugh" which may have played well at the Shrine but which seemed only claustrophobic and annoying on TV. In fact, the staging of this number was so odd and cluttered - people jumping, twirling and kicking like the Power Rangers - as to prompt only one thought about Curry and the others: get the hell out of the way so we can see the screen! Not, in other words, an auspicious beginning.

Other highlights - make that lowlights: Keanu Reeves' new Vulcan haircut; Martin Landau's Sinatra-like acceptance speech cut-off; Jack Nicholson on stage rocking back and forth faster than the bus in *Speed* (give that cameraman an award for staying with the actor); the obligatory presence of at least one truly bad nominated song; and the sparsity of comedy clips beyond mere snippets.

And in a night of droning speeches from anticipated winners, what could have been worse than actually hearing the two most dreaded words possible during an Oscar telecast: "IT'S A TIE!!!"

Naturally, the Academy and those responsible for this week's telecast can not be faulted for this being a year with predictable honorees. Nor can the Academy likely do much else - with the possible exception of a "Laugh-In"-like trap door - to limit acceptance speech times. What's more, the Academy is justified in presenting a wide variety of categories, even though many of them are invariably as thrilling as a visit to the orthodontist.

Nevertheless, hasn't the lesson been learned YET after all these years that most Oscar live production numbers will be overlong; that most two-presenter banner will be incredibly forced and awkward; and that audiences appreciate extensive and creative use of film clips? Each year the effort is definitely there, but each year I am left wondering when these people will really conceive of an Academy Awards telecast not only addresses these problems, but which appears primarily designed for people at home, not people in the live audience.

Oh, well. There's always next year. But as far as this year's show is concerned, perhaps my sentiments were ironically summed up best by one of the winners, composer Hans Zimmer: "Just let me go!"