

CITIZEN KANE

Directed by Orson Welles
Produced by Orson Welles
Distributed by RKO Radio Pictures
Released in 1941

In any year, the film that wins the Academy Award for Best Picture reflects the Academy's preferences for that year. Even if its members look back and suffer anxious regret at their choice of *How Green Was My Valley*, that doesn't mean they were wrong. They can't be wrong. It's not everyone else's opinion that matters, but the Academy's. Mulling over the movies of 1941, the Academy rejected *Citizen Kane*. Perhaps they resented Orson Welles's arrogant ways and unprecedented creative power. Maybe they thought the film too experimental. Maybe the vote was split between *Citizen Kane* and *The Maltese Falcon*, both pioneering in their Film Noir flavor.

Or they may not have seen the film at all since it was granted such limited release as a result of newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst's threats to RKO. Nobody knows, and it doesn't matter. Academy members can't be forced to vote for the film they like best. Their biases and political calculations can't be dissected. To subject the Academy to such scrutiny would be impossible and unfair. It's the Academy's awards, not ours.

What the critics think and what the public thinks makes no difference. We've already got exhibitions like The Golden Globes and trivialities like The People's Choice Awards. Every interest group and faction has its prizes. So why do the critics care? Why do they on one day dismiss the Academy Awards as inconsequential and the day after rip the Academy a new one for its gutless/bland/predictable choices, decrying that instead of *this* movie, *that* one was picked? It's because these awards were the first, because they are the most glamorous, because no other movie award matters except as a harbinger of the one that people will remember—the Oscar.

And it's arguable, but an artist's work is best judged by a body of his peers. After all, only they know firsthand the obstacles to success.

An Academy Award also engenders feelings of community spirit—it's a recognition that, in spades, a winner has arrived, that he belongs. In fact, many presume that the reason *Citizen Kane* won its only Oscar (for Best Screenplay) was because Welles's co-author was Hollywood's most lovable drunk, Herman J. Mankiewicz. Welles lost for Director, Actor, and Picture. He didn't belong...and he never found a home in Hollywood, only making an occasional film there, when he wasn't circling the globe scrounging up money to fund yet another quixotic project.

Occasionally the Academy recognizes that it may have made a mistake, the reason behind the majority of its Honorary Awards. Peter O'Toole, Howard Hawks, Fred Astaire, Barbara Stanwyck, Harold Lloyd, Cary Grant, Lillian Gish, Mickey Rooney, Gene Kelly, Kirk Douglas, Edward G. Robinson, Stanley Donen, Akira Kurosawa, Blake Edwards, and Henry Fonda and Paul Newman (before *On Golden Pond* and *The Color of Money*, respectively, made

them back-to-back winners) had all been rejected or ignored, and then, as the end was nigh, were belatedly celebrated.

Sometimes the Academy, apparently, decides that one award wasn't enough, hence the life achievement Oscars for Gary Cooper (in 1961) and Sidney Poitier (in 2002). And sometimes, it appears, the Academy rethinks a performance from a year previous and awards that performance under the guise of a new film (Joan Fontaine for *Suspicion* a year after *Rebecca* [1940], and Jimmy Stewart for *The Philadelphia Story* [following *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939)]).

Especially before Martin Scorsese won for *The Departed* (2006), Academy watchers would recite the growing list of great actors, actresses, and directors who never won a competitive Oscar as evidence that the Academy was blind. Never mentioned in such recitations of trivia is the concept that, each year, the Academy is supposed to be rewarding *that year's* work. Also ignored is the possibility that an artist is only outstanding in the aggregate or that in the years that the performer really shone, others just happened to be a little better. The Academy can't award everybody. The awards would mean nothing.

Along the same lines, especially before Denzel Washington and Halle Berry scored at the 2002 ceremonies, the dearth of black winners was belabored incessantly. Somewhere along the line, maybe in the '60s, maybe in the '70s, Hollywood stopped rejecting actors because of their color (one hopes). (We, for the sake of argument, will consider Hattie McDaniel's win for *Gone With The Wind* as tokenism or a fluke.)

What was never discussed was how one could prove that black actors were not getting a fair shake. The truth is, even if a black actor won every year it would not be evidence of fairness. Because if black actors are, each year, considered on the merits, then there should be no problem losing or not getting a nomination. Equality of opportunity is what matters. What critics were pressing for was, in reality, a free pass. The critics wanted to award black actors, to atone for the sins of their predecessors' past exclusion. But then the award would be meaningless, because it wouldn't be earned, and the Oscars would become, even more, a platform for political grandstanding.

Again, it's not for us to decide whether the Academy (now numbering over 6,000 members) should foster esprit-de-corps in its awards, at the expense of artistic excellence. (As if we could ever agree on what that entails.) No, a movie is not great because the Academy deems it so; nor are their awards bad because they deny great films the imprimatur of legitimacy, seeming to, on occasion, reject, out-of-hand, difficult bastard children.

These kids, though rejected, manage well for themselves and are a gift to society, despite the fact they were never given the chance to abide in the Academy's mansions of idealized memory. *Citizen Kane*, and decades of frenzied interest in the Awards, testify that the Oscars and great films can occasionally go separate ways to the detriment of neither party.

And Orson Welles did receive an Honorary Oscar for life achievement, in 1971. He didn't show up.