

THE BULL

THE WINNERS AND LOSERS EDITION
SRC & Honi Election Special :: Facial Hair
Heath's Oscar Chances :: Power Elites
US Presidential Race



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Editors

Will Atkinson
Naomi Oreb
Brigit Morris
Lukasz Swiatek
Daniel Wodak
editors@usu.usyd.edu.au

Contributors

Bronwyn Cowell
Stephanie D'Souza
Louise Easson
Patrick Effenev
John Nowakowski
Alex Panagiotou
Tristan Rendall
Alexandra Roach
Damien Straker
Allan Tieu

Publications Manager

Rachael Chan

Design

Carl Ahearn
Anjali Belani

Advertising

Simon Kang
(02) 9563 6255
advertising@usu.usyd.edu.au

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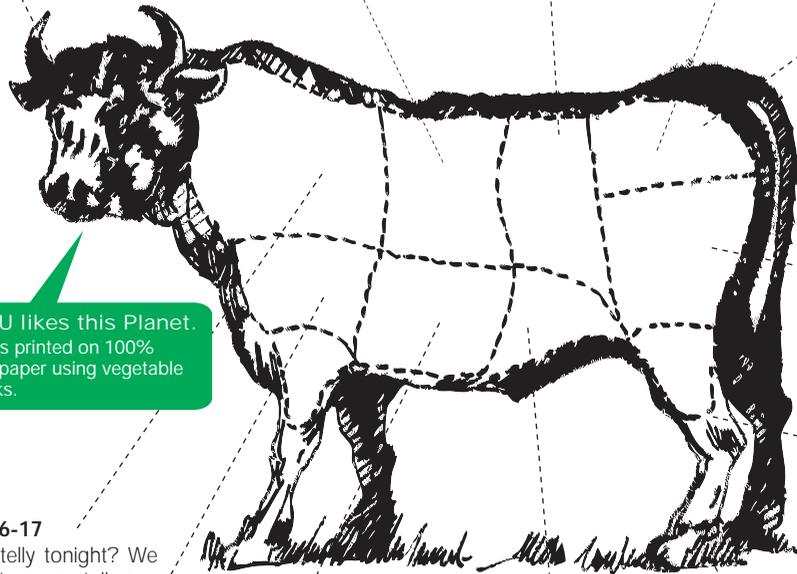
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American Beauty

Alexandra Roach assesses the late Heath Ledger's chances of winning a posthumous Oscar in light of the Academy's history.

In Hollywood, there is no prize more important than the Oscar. It is the ultimate accolade, a sign of respect and adoration, the division between the winners and the losers. But the Oscars have also been derided as a shallow popularity dispute – two-time Best Actor winner Dustin Hoffman once proclaimed the Oscars to be “obscene, dirty and grotesque; no better than a beauty contest.” Often criticised for the seemingly nonsensical decisions the Academy voters often make, an Oscar remains a highly coveted badge of honour in showbusiness, and something that leaves a lasting legacy upon one's reputation, even after someone has passed.

On 22 January 2008, Heath Ledger died at the age of 28. Though Ledger's life had barely begun, he was already being touted as one of the most gifted actors of his generation. After early success in teen comedies such as *10 Things I Hate About You*, Ledger had several consecutive box-office bombs behind him, and badly needed a hit when he was cast in the long-awaited film adaptation of *Brokeback Mountain*. The film was banned in several countries, derided as ‘the gay cowboy movie’, rendered many conservatives speechless with indignation, and lost its much-deserved Best Picture Oscar to the Racial Issues Movie of the year, *Crash*, much to the disgust of almost everyone (including Best Picture presenter Jack Nicholson, who did not look pleased). But almost \$180 million in box office receipts and eight Academy Award nominations later, Heath Ledger, an Oscar nod under his belt, was in demand as a Serious Actor.

And then came *The Dark Knight*. Beneath the cacophony of various, confused expletives emitted by those who could not see Ennis Del Mar as The Joker, buzz was building. There were whispers that Ledger's dark, edgy performance made Jack Nicholson's Joker in Tim Burton's *Batman* look quaint and harmless.

Nicholson's Joker had a flower on his lapel that squirted water; Ledger's Joker performs a ‘magic trick’ that involves making a pencil ‘disappear’ into a man's skull.

Ledger's Joker is an anarchist, a deranged and worryingly intelligent villain. His face is smeared with thick, garish makeup that cannot disguise the frightening scars that curve up from the corners of his mouth like a sinister smile. Ledger's brilliant, multi-

layered performance is one that few actors could produce. The Oscar buzz is almost deafening, yet it is the very thing that makes the Joker so brilliant, so memorable, that it could hurt Ledger's chances for another Oscar nod.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is an eclectic bunch of showbiz professionals, whose voting habits oscillate wildly between artistic snobbery and Making Important Socio-Political Statements. They rarely nominate an actor in a big-budget ‘entertainment’ picture. And while, for example, Johnny Depp was nominated for *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, he lost to *Mystic River*'s Sean Penn, a Serious Actor in a Meaningful Movie.

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There are occasional exceptions to the rule, most of which make you wonder what the Academy was thinking. In 2006, Reese Witherspoon won Best Actress playing June Carter in *Walk The Line*, over Felicity Huffman's remarkable performance in *Transamerica*. While America's Sweetheart stood on the podium and breathlessly thanked everyone, audience members scratched their heads in confusion: had the votes been incorrectly counted? Meanwhile, film buffs sang the praises of Huffman, the Classy and Gracious Loser, the True Winner, robbed by a Hollywood frightened of change. Cynics were not surprised: Witherspoon had dyed her blonde hair brunette for the role, and was playing a much-loved (and recently deceased) singer; Huffman (who merely wore a brunette wig over her blonde hair in a far more difficult role) never stood a chance.

Although *Walk the Line* earned almost \$200 million, *The Dark Knight* is rapidly approaching the heralded Billion-Dollar-Barrier at the box office (after 25 days, the film's worldwide gross stood at \$925 million), something that may turn the *artistes* (and jealous actors) of the Academy off the film entirely, despite its merits.

Additionally, Heath died a tragic, drug-related death, and while Hollywood is infamous for its drug addicts, nymphomaniacs and scandalous deaths, the Academy's self-proclaimed Moral Right may reject Ledger as a Bad Example, particularly considering that he is playing a morally bankrupt villain with no ethics or redeeming features.

But what really stands between Heath and an Oscar win is his headline-grabbing death: only six actors have ever been nominated posthumously for an Oscar. So far, only Australian actor Peter Finch – who won Best Actor in 1976 for his role in *Network* – has been awarded the prize (unfortunately, that the press would have a field day if the second posthumous acting Oscar ever awarded went to another Australian is unlikely to improve Ledger's chances). However, despite Finch's wonderful, zany performance – including his famous “I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!” speech – he did beat *Taxi Driver*'s Robert De Niro, nominated for his controversial, villainous role, and some claimed that the Academy was behind the times. James Dean, whose tragic death has become the stuff of legend, was nominated for Best Actor twice after his death, and became one of the most famous Oscar Losers in history when he lost both times. The fact that Dean lost to two very worthy actors is of little comfort to many Oscars critics, who find the idea that Dean lost to Ernest Borgnine and Yul Brynner (for *The King & I*, a musical – oh, the shame!) insulting.

When the Academy Awards began in 1929, it was a small, fifteen-minute ceremony, so Hollywood's best and brightest could congratulate each other and bask in their mutual brilliance. In eight decades, little has changed, despite the ceremony's budget (overblown) and length (over-long). Critics have labelled the Academy as puritanical, small-minded and superficial; but sometimes, a moment of brilliance occurs, and someone worthy of the award actually wins. Kathy Bates in *Misery*, Charlize Theron in *Monster*, and Anthony Hopkins in *Silence of the Lambs* all won Oscars for playing villainous characters that made many audience members want to crawl out of their own skin just to get away.

There may just be hope for Ledger yet.

