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Dozens of photographers, all dressed in black tie, greet Oscar-winners with five minutes of non-stop flash bulbs and incessant screams to look their way



B.J. Sigismund for Newsweek.MSNBC.com

After the Oscars

Ever wondered what the winners do after they leave the stage? NEWSWEEK's B.J. Sigismund was behind the scenes at the Kodak Theatre to find out

By B.J. Sigismund
NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

March 25 — It took her a dozen years to get to this moment. She started with TV work, then transitioned to small movie roles. Bigger pictures came next, with her share of flops. There were good reviews. There was a bad marriage. A risky HBO telepic got her acclaim and a Golden Globe. An alleged hit-and-run got her some bad press. The last year brought an incredible role and her first Oscar nomination. Since February, there's been tension, handicapping and much politicking. At long last came the big night. The nominees were read, the

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envelope was opened, and she gave a poignant, history-making speech. You'd think Halle Berry could finally breathe.

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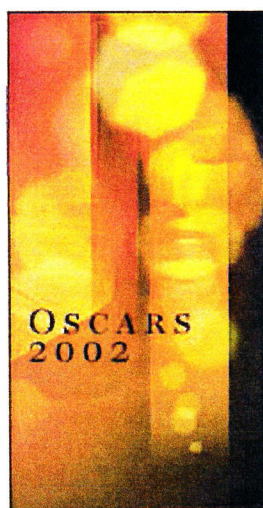
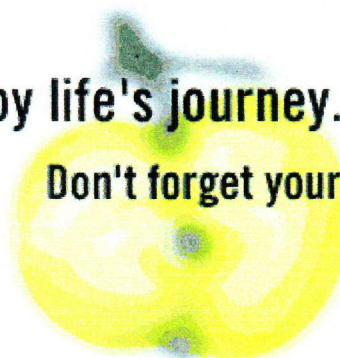
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WRONG! INSTEAD, BERRY was quickly escorted up two flights of stairs to the media room of the Kodak Theater. There, dozens of photographers warmed her up with five minutes of non-stop flash bulbs and incessant screams of "To your left, please!" and "Hold up your Oscar, Halle!" Then, in the next room, she—like everyone else whose lifelong dreams were realized last night—had to endure 10 minutes of questions from about 250 grizzled entertainment journalists.

The reporters, many of whom were veterans of this night, sat shoulder-to-shoulder. All of us were dressed in tuxedos and gowns. Roger Ebert was almost directly across from me and Cindy Adams from the New York Post was at my table. No one talked much. Instead, they typed non-stop into laptops (many filed reports several times over the course of the night), took digital pictures and recorded periodic radio reports. We each had headsets to listen to the telecast, which was being broadcast silently on TVs all around the room. When we got a free moment, we chowed down on the dinner of chicken salad, shrimp, pasta and cookies that had been provided.

The winners stand on stage
with only the Oscar and a



mike, and take random questions from an almost-faceless crowd of journalists

Every reporter was assigned a number (mine was 217), which we had to hold up if we wanted to ask a question. When an Oscar winner was on approach, a moderator would warn the room. "The winner for Achievement in Costume Design, Angus Strathie, will be here in about two minutes," she would say. "We'll begin with questions from No. 87, then No. 14, then No. 203 on the back in the right." (One TV producer complained that the moderator favored the right side of the room.) The winner entered, stood on a stage with only the Oscar and a mike, and took random questions from the almost-faceless crowd—many of whom were holding up their numbers, hoping to be the next called upon. (When Julia Roberts was confronted with the scene after winning her Oscar last year, she remarked that it was "like the weirdest auction, ever.")

OSCARS 2002

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Interviewing the winners while the show is still happening does make for some awkward moments. Danis Tanovic, director of the Best Foreign Language Film winner "No Man's Land," was in the middle of taking questions when all eyes turned to the monitor to watch the

Best Actress contest. When Berry's name was read, many in the media clapped and whooped. Tanovic didn't know what to do, especially when the actress began her teary acceptance speech. He ended up turning and watching the monitor himself. "She's beautiful," he said. Similarly, Robert Redford was at the mike answering questions about his life and career when

Reporters type into laptops, take digital pictures and record periodic radio reports—looking up occasionally. Here, Sidney Poitier meets the press



B. J. Sigismund for Newsweek, MSNBC.com

Denzel Washington won Best Actor. Again, more hurrahs from the crowd. Redford asked if he should continue, then paused.

Like most interviews, bad questions make you cringe, but decent ones lead to good discussions. "Is it better the second time around?" someone lamely asked Washington. But then

later, another reporter queried, "Do you feel there will be a time where there won't be black actors that feel racism?" This led Washington to say, "Do you write for a newspaper? Why don't you make sure the headline [simply reads], 'Actor Wins Award'?"

The room was filled with industry vets, but in truth, no reporter dared ask a really tough question. "A Beautiful Mind" triumphed at the night's end, despite the protracted controversy about the biopic, which left out some of the more unseemly aspects of mathematician John Nash's life. Director Ron Howard and producer Brian Grazer came to the stage and took questions from the same bloodthirsty journalists who for months have fanned the flames around the movie. But the reporters chose to avoid the subject completely. Maybe they felt that being up there was punishment enough.

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