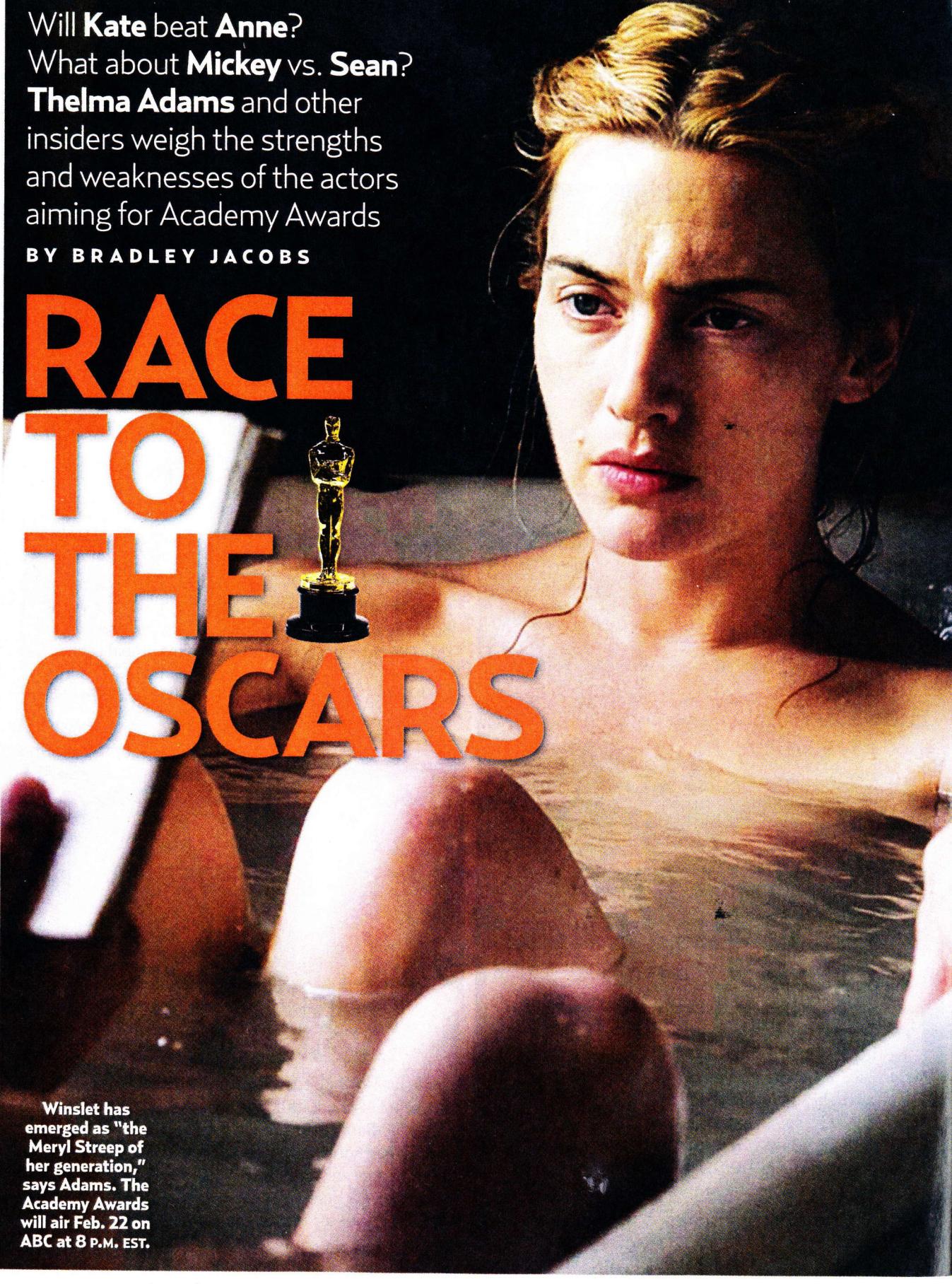


Will **Kate** beat **Anne**?
What about **Mickey** vs. **Sean**?
Thelma Adams and other
insiders weigh the strengths
and weaknesses of the actors
aiming for Academy Awards

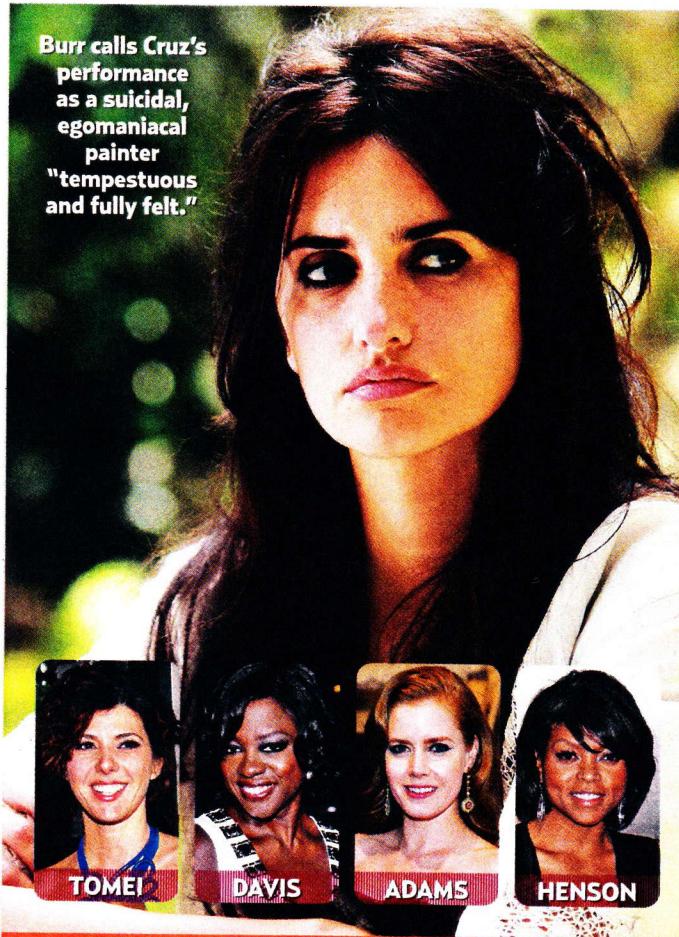
BY BRADLEY JACOBS

RACE TO THE OSCARs

A woman with blonde hair tied up in a bun, wearing a light-colored bikini, is sitting on a beach. In the foreground, a white envelope and an Academy Award statue (Oscar) are visible. The background shows a dark, possibly cloudy sky and some beach equipment.

Winslet has
emerged as "the
Meryl Streep of
her generation,"
says Adams. The
Academy Awards
will air Feb. 22 on
ABC at 8 p.m. EST.

Burr calls Cruz's performance as a suicidal, egomaniacal painter "tempestuous and fully felt."



BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS

Heath Ledger *The Dark Knight*

WHY HE'LL WIN "Even if he hadn't died, he'd be the frontrunner," Burr says of Ledger. "His Joker is far deeper and creepier than the usual comic villain."

WHY HE'LL LOSE No reason. It's the night's sure bet.

Philip Seymour Hoffman, 41 *Doubt*

WHY HE'LL WIN "He makes you believe a priest accused of child abuse may be innocent," says Tourtellotte.

WHY HE'LL LOSE He won three years ago for *Capote*.

Josh Brolin, 41 *Milk*

WHY HE'LL WIN With raves for his work in *Milk* and *W*, voters see him "in a new league," says Thompson.

WHY HE'LL LOSE Some say his role is underwritten.

Robert Downey Jr., 43 *Tropic Thunder*

WHY HE'LL WIN "Downey ended the year finally an A-lister, even after all his past issues," says Adams.

WHY HE'LL LOSE Voters may dislike his blackface.

Michael Shannon, 34 *Revolutionary Road*

WHY HE'LL WIN As a mentally unstable man, he steals scenes from Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio.

WHY HE'LL LOSE Um, Michael who?

BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS

Penelope Cruz, 34 *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*

WHY SHE'LL WIN "Voters say she's a great actress in Spanish, but weaker in English," says Tourtellotte. "She speaks both well here. She's the frontrunner."

WHY SHE'LL LOSE Some still don't take her seriously.

Marisa Tomei, 44 *The Wrestler*

WHY SHE'LL WIN "She turns her stripper-with-a-heart-of-gold into someone real," says Thompson.

WHY SHE'LL LOSE She won for *My Cousin Vinny*.

Viola Davis, 43 *Doubt*

WHY SHE'LL WIN As a mother who makes a shocking decision, she outshines Streep in their pivotal scene.

WHY SHE'LL LOSE She has very limited screen time.

Amy Adams, 34 *Doubt*

WHY SHE'LL WIN She makes big hits (*Enchanted*) and small dramas (*Doubt*). "Voters like that," says Adams.

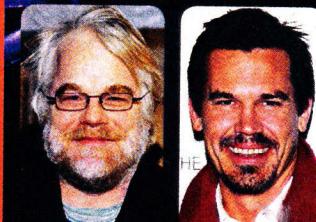
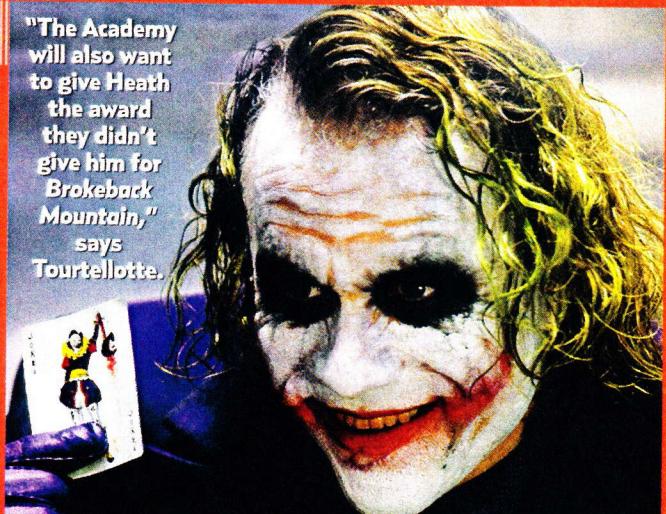
WHY SHE'LL LOSE Costar Davis has more heat.

Taraji P. Henson, 38 *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

WHY SHE'LL WIN The Academy loves to reward a character actress (*Hustle & Flow*) with a great résumé.

WHY SHE'LL LOSE There's no big Oscar moment.

"The Academy will also want to give Heath the award they didn't give him for *Brokeback Mountain*," says Tourtellotte.



HOFFMAN

BROLIN

DOWNEY

SHANNON