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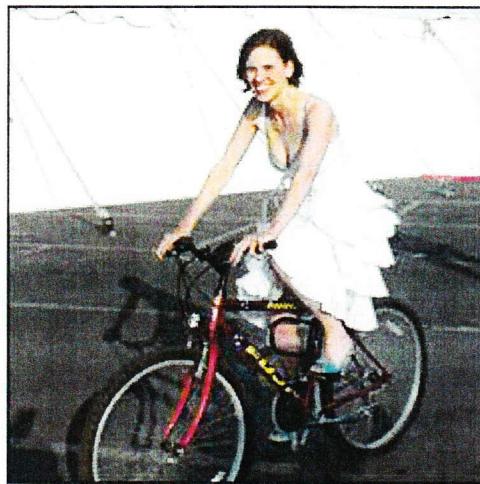
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Letter from Oscarland: Casual Cheek



Jessica Persson / Reuters

On the eve of the Oscars, our reporter takes in the chilled-out Independent Spirit Awards. It's the quiet before the stampede. The second of three Academy-Awards weekend diaries from L.A.

Things were so laid-back at the oceanside awards ceremony that last year's best actress Oscar-winner Hilary Swank actually rode over on her bike--in a dress

By B. J. Sigesmund
NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

March 25 — Here's how a publicist described the Independent Spirit Awards to me a couple weeks back: "You know, it's casual and cool. You're standing in line for the Port-a-Potty, and Jennifer Jason Leigh's right behind you." And indeed, when I had to use the loo at the awards show yesterday, Kristen Dunst was patiently waiting her turn just a couple people ahead of me.

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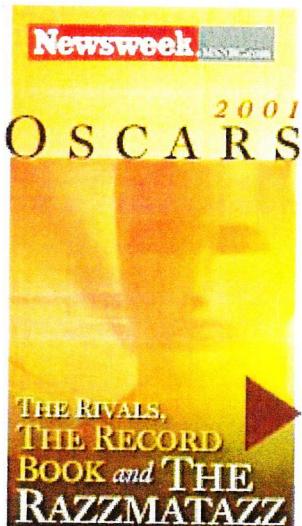
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“What’s with all you actors borrowing your outfits for the

YOU KNOW you’re someplace special when you and the stars stand in the same line to use the can.

I spent all afternoon wandering around backstage at the Independent Spirit Awards—the Oscars of indie film—which were held in an enormous tent on Santa Monica beach. Although the “Spirits” take place just a day before the ultrafussy Oscars, they’re incredibly informal. Just compare hosts. The Oscars has Steve Martin; the Spirits, John Waters. “What’s with all you actors borrowing your outfits for the Oscars?” he scolded in his opening monologue. “Free clothes are for the poor.”

Over a weekend during which I’ve found access tight just about everywhere I’ve gone, it was a pleasure to be somewhere so comfortable. All the major indie actors were there, relaxing at tables in the tent alongside film distributors and assorted industry folk. Hilary Swank, James Woods, Holly Hunter and Gabriel Byrne were just a few of the bold-faced names who presented awards at the show, which was also broadcast live on cable channel IFC.

Then there were those there to actually *get* awards. Willem Dafoe won best supporting male for “Shadow of the Vampire.” Zhang Ziyi took the best supporting female category for “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.” Javier Bardem was named best male lead for “Before Night Falls.” And Ellen Burstyn was picked as best female lead for “Requiem for a Dream.” Said the actress, “I just can’t tell you how much I wanted this.”

After the stars did their bit on stage, they headed to the media room for the obligatory time with about 100 members of the print, TV and online press. Kenneth Lonergan, winner of best screenplay, explained that he’d never directed before “You Can Count on Me.”

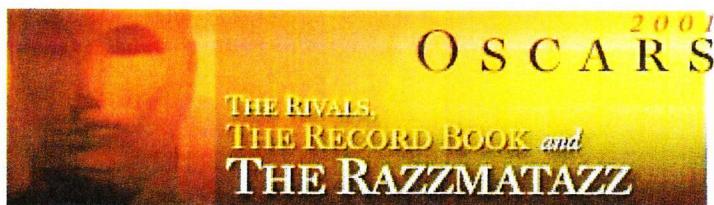
Oscars? Free clothes are for the poor."
 — JOHN WATERS
 Spirit Awards host

Presenter Rosanna Arquette swung by for a few minutes and spoke about moving into directing. Her first project: a documentary about Hollywood actresses. (And it could be excellent; Arquette said she loves Nick Broomfield, who did the controversial Heidi Fleiss and who-killed-Kurt-Cobain? docs.)

Once done with their duties, many of the stars mingled backstage instead of returning to their tables. (I guess celebrities get tired of sitting in one place, too.) Javier Bardem had a smoke. Marcia Gay Harden, who looks much younger in person than she did in "Pollock," chatted brightly with friends. Jennifer Tilly, the event's host last year, giggled with just about everyone. And Hilary Swank, who won the Best Actress Oscar last year for "Boys Don't Cry," went to the fence around the perimeter of the event (where fans were gathered) to sign dozens of autographs. Then she rode around on her bike—in a dress.

The afterparty was just as mellow. Hundreds of men and women in sunglasses—nominees, producers, scenesters—gathered there to drink, eat and talk indie inside a restaurant at the Shutters hotel and outside on a sunny patio. Chloe Sevigny made the scene. Jon Favreau from "Swingers" chomped and yakked with pals. John Waters got drinks for friends.

I kept hoping that the afternoon—with all its ease—might be a nice warm-up to this evening's Academy Awards. But in the back of my mind, I knew the Oscars would a whole other world. I'm fairly certain Hilary Swank won't be anywhere near a bicycle tonight.



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