

PROLOGUE

Hollywood, 1954

On March 25, 1954, from the stages of the RKO Pantages Theater in Hollywood and the Center Theater in New York, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences presented its annual award ceremonies—the Oscars, live, on television. For only the second time in the Academy’s twenty-six-year history, video was crashing the party, and NBC had sent out open invitations courtesy of another dream factory (“Oldsmobile brings you the famous Academy Awards Presentation!”). The come-on blurb in a new weekly publication called *TV Guide* had already realigned its screen priorities: “Jack Webb of *Dragnet* will be among those presenting the Oscars.”

Viewed via the washed-out kinescope that has preserved the evening, and measured against twenty-first-century standards of global saturation and glitzy excess, the festivities in 1954 look dressed-down and low-tech, the production numbers mechanical and martial, short on sizzle and skimpy on skin. The musical highlight was a modest vignette in a faux dinner club, featuring Dean Martin crooning a bourbon-smooth version of “That’s Amore” from *The Caddy* (1953), the latest box office hit from the golden comedy duo of Martin and Lewis. (Dino’s jukebox evergreen lost out to the treacly “Three Coins in a Fountain.”) In terms of sheer tonnage, the most elaborate choreography was reserved for a chorus line of behemoth Oldsmobiles parked on stage for the live commercials.

No matter. Still entranced by the novelty of bicoastal telecasts transmitted direct into the living room, Americans were thrilled to peek through the keyhole of the camera and spy on the glamour of a legendary Hollywood ritual. Of course, within the executive suites at NBC, the motives were less starstruck: advertising revenues might not recoup the costs of mounting the extravaganza, but the medium was selling more than any individual show. It was selling itself, betting on dividends down the line from a long-

term investment in a blue-chip futures market. For the television industry, the Oscar ceremonies were a prize catch. For the motion picture industry, the incursion of video was a portent of things to come.

A dollop of controversy shadowed the telecast—not over the nominated films, or a scandalous gown, or an incendiary acceptance speech, but over the very fact that the hottest ticket in Hollywood was being squandered on the archrival. “I rushed home last night to watch this great show on television,” confessed a depressed motion picture exhibitor the next morning. “I’m sure that millions of people (this morning’s papers say about 43,000,000) did the same thing. Certainly the empty seats in the theaters across the country prove that these figures are correct.” Not so long ago, the moving-image competition had been derided and disdained. “Television is nothing *but* rehearsals,” the effete theater critic Addison DeWitt scoffed in Joseph Mankiewicz’s *All About Eve* (1950), summing up Broadway’s, and Hollywood’s, high-hat attitude to the small screen. But with Milton Berle’s mad-cap variety hour and the Friday Night Fights (also known as *Texaco Star Theater* and *The Gillette Cavalcade of Sports*) beaming topnotch, no-cost entertainment into private homes and public bars, the lofty superiority and smug complacency soon gave way to frayed nerves and furrowed brows. To the theater operators who manned the front lines and endured personal rejection at the box office window, ushering television into the Oscar ceremonies was the moral equivalent of trading with the enemy. Ornate motion picture palaces and 600-seat theaters alike—venues once filled to the rafters with sniffling matrons, snuggling couples, and popcorn-munching moppets sitting rapt before a women’s weepie, a screwball comedy, or a matinee shoot-’em-up—were left sparse and vacant, shells of their former selves. Why give lapsed moviegoers another reason to stay home and watch movie stars on television—for free!—instead of making them pay for the privilege down at the local Bijou?

Worse, Hollywood’s most exclusive soiree was not just shown on television, it was staged *for* television. The second Oscar telecast “marked the first time the Academy Awards was fashioned to be run off with the TV cameras always in mind,” revealed the *Hollywood Reporter*. “The RKO Pantages audience, star-studded and glittering in evening dress, was passed up for the millions of more simply dressed home viewers.” The *Los Angeles Times* rubbed salt in the wound: “Unlike last year’s stuffy affair where the TV cameras were treated as intruders, this year the cameramen, decked out in white ties and tails, will have places of honor right on the stage.” During rehearsals a symbolic turf war erupted between the old Hollywood pro Mitchell Leisen, director of the Pantages stage show, and NBC’s William Bennington, director of the television show. “Let me rehearse, then you can

try out your damn cameras!” an exasperated Leisen bellowed at the upstart. Think of it: the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences taking direction from the National Broadcasting Company.

Singer, dancer, funnyman, and shameless ham Donald O’Connor hosted the ceremonies, riffing off his persona as the goofy second banana in the splashy Technicolor musical *Singin’ in the Rain* (1952), the big hit, though Oscar underachiever, from the previous year. A masterpiece of industrial craftwork from MGM’s famed “Freed unit,” the tightly knit team of artists supervised by unit producer Arthur Freed, *Singin’ in the Rain* was a nostalgic homage to the early talkie era, when the quiet realm of silent cinema was shattered overnight by the thunderclap of sound, the last time Hollywood had faced a technological revolution upending the old order. The good-humored glance back at the glitches and scratches of the late 1920s offered reassurance that Hollywood would surmount an even greater threat in the early 1950s.

This night, the charmed entry in the list of Oscar-nominated films was *From Here to Eternity* (1953), directed by Fred Zinnemann from the James Jones novel (“the boldest book of our time . . . honestly, fearlessly, on the screen!”). Set on a hardtack, hot-blooded Army post in Hawaii in the days before Pearl Harbor, the khaki-colored melodrama devoted less screen time to close-order drill on the parade ground than to close-quarter tensions behind bedroom doors. Already iconic, emblazoned on one-sheet posters and spread across huge billboards, was an image of luxuriant sexuality: the glistening bodies of Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr, clad only in bathing suits, entwined on a beach as the surf rolls in and licks their lithe limbs, the couple a single organism horizontal in the sand. The film won eight Oscars, including Best Picture.

If the suave Dean Martin stole the musical portion of the show, a singer with a more intimate vocal style provided the note of highest drama. The award for Best Supporting Actor went to Frank Sinatra, the heartthrob of the wartime bobby-soxers, whose downward career spiral in the postwar era was reversed by his fierce performance as Maggio, the doomed rebel in *From Here to Eternity*. When actress Mercedes McCambridge read his name, the auditorium erupted in rapturous applause: Hollywood loves a comeback. “The ovation and enthusiasm,” sighed the normally reserved *Variety*, itself reduced to a bobby-soxer swoon, “was of the gloss of which showbiz stardust is made.” An overjoyed Sinatra sprinted up the aisle and graciously accepted his statuette, joking that he had *not* been asked to sing one of the nominated songs that year.

Taking over from Donald O’Connor to preside over a spate of more mundane award presentations was producer and screenwriter Charles

Brackett, president of the Academy. Brackett owned a shelfful of Oscars himself, the most recent received just that evening for *Titanic* (1953), and the most notable earned in collaboration with his longtime partner Billy Wilder for *Sunset Blvd.* (1950), coincidentally, or not, another resonant meditation on the lost glory of Hollywood's silent era. In his introductory remarks at the top of the show, Brackett put forward a brave face for the battered industry. "Tonight we celebrate a single year—1953. We celebrate it exultantly, as a year of rebirth, revitalization, new techniques, new dimensions," Brackett insisted. "As to the audience, it hasn't drifted, it has surged back—but with a new look, a more knowing eye, an insistence on showmanship, a demand for balanced perfection in every department of picture making."

To Brackett fell the task of bestowing the honorary Oscars, a category devised to give due, often overdue, recognition to motion picture insiders, technical wizards, and neglected old-timers, the heavy lifters around town who were eminently regarded if woefully bereft of star voltage. Though good public relations and obligatory business, the honorary awards segment of the Oscars presaged a slump in the proceedings, the chance for the ladies to scurry to the powder room or the men to wander into the lobby for a smoke.

The roll call of honorary recipients began with Pete Smith, a former press agent who since 1935 had produced and narrated a popular series of short films for MGM called the "Pete Smith Specialties," a monthly issue of whimsical vignettes with titles like *Romance of Radium* (1937), *Lions on the Loose* (1941), and *Movie Pests* (1944). Clocking in at ten to twenty minutes, the short or featurette had long been a staple entry on the program of newsreels, cartoons, singalongs, and sundry appetizers that unspooled before the main course of the featured attraction. Smith's shorts often played better than the films they preceded, but in 1954, with no captive audience and no sure profit margin, even the brand name extras weren't paying their rent. Smith had already announced his retirement, and the next year his unit closed up shop.

Also honored was producer Darryl F. Zanuck, president of Twentieth Century-Fox and the dauntless visionary behind CinemaScope, the new widescreen process designed to lure audiences away from the very medium they were watching. "You can see it without glasses!" exclaimed taglines, to prevent CinemaScope from being confused with the headache-inducing, and already fading, gimmick of 3-D cinema. After rolling the dice on CinemaScope, Zanuck was enjoying a huge payday with *The Robe* (1953), a biblical spectacle that earned three Oscars that night and accrued the highest



Hollywood, 1934:
Breen, on the town with
comedian Joe E. Brown.

(URBAN ARCHIVES /
TEMPLE UNIVERSITY)

grosses of any film that year. To cap his introduction of Zanuck, Brackett wittily turned his note card lengthwise to mimic the elongated shape of the CinemaScope screen.

Sandwiched between the awards to Pete Smith and Darryl F. Zanuck—whose names the well-informed, or at least older, moviegoer would surely have recognized—was someone whose name, at best, rang only a dim and distant bell.

Brackett read the commendation. “The motion picture Production Code is a strong protection against self-appointed, wildcat censorship groups,” he declared by way of preamble. “For his conscientious, open-minded, and dignified management of a difficult office, the Academy’s board has voted an honorary award to the administrator of the Code—Mr. Joseph Breen.”

On cue, a man walks forward from the wings: white-haired, well-fed, stiff-necked, barrel-chested, the very picture of a venerable Irish-American patriarch, a gentleman accustomed to the comforts of life and the respect of his peers, of his needs being met and his words being heeded—perhaps a police captain looking forward to a cushy pension, or a ward politician with a lifetime of favors in his pocket, or a monsignor from a prosperous parish with a case of twelve-year-old whiskey stashed back at the rectory.

After twenty years at the helm of the Production Code Administration, Joseph I. Breen was stepping down from the post he had forged, commanded, and cherished.

In retrospect, and set in relief against the rest of the program that evening, the curtain bow from Joseph I. Breen may be why so much about the twenty-sixth Academy Awards ceremony plays more like a grim wake than a joyous celebration. The controlling gaze of television, the extinction of the short film, the risky gamble on CinemaScope, and the retirement of the long-serving chief of the censorious Production Code Administration—all seemed to punctuate the end of a Golden Age, a shimmering epoch when Hollywood held a monopoly over the moving image, when throwaway shorts garnished a bountiful motion picture menu, when the square-shaped motion picture screen was plenty big enough, and when the moral universe projected by the medium was patrolled by a watchful sentinel.

As Breen walked across the stage to accept his trophy, the orchestra struck up an apt tune: “Don’t Fence Me In.” At the podium, a brief exchange occurs between Brackett and Breen, but the words, muttered away from the microphone, are barely audible.

“Joe—” begins Brackett.

“Thank you very, very much,” Breen interrupts, speaking over the greeting.

“Say a word,” urges Brackett.

But Joe Breen has already grabbed his trophy and is turning away, without saying a single word to either the home or the Hollywood audience. Taken aback, Brackett shrugs, the audience heeds the applause sign, and the orchestra, caught off guard, misses its cue to reprise the strains of “Don’t Fence Me In.” The camera cuts to a quick shot of Breen striding offstage, cradling his Oscar—the last glimpse of a man who, more than any actor, director, or producer in the room, had stamped his vision on Hollywood cinema.