

A Key Stop on Road to Film Glory

■ **Movies:** Wednesday's a big day for those chasing Oscar. The path to nomination is paved with advertising and videos and letters sent to voters.

By DAVID J. FOX
TIMES STAFF WRITER

By sunrise in New Hampshire Wednesday, one set of candidates will be sorted out, and by sunrise in Hollywood, so will another: candidates for this year's Academy Awards.

Wednesday morning the names of the Oscar contenders—five in each category ranging from best picture to acting, writing and other crafts—will be revealed at a 5:30 a.m. press conference at the headquarters of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Beverly Hills. The timing of the announcement is geared toward attracting the widest possible media exposure. By staging the press conference that early, the Academy knows it can command coverage from the major networks, whose morning news shows are on the air live in the East at that time, and from CNN for live coverage in Europe.

Based on awards by critics' groups, the Golden Globes and nominations by the writers and directors guilds, the best picture nominees are likely to be drawn from a group that includes "Bugsy," "The Fisher King," "JFK," "The Prince of Tides," "The Silence of the Lambs," "Thelma & Louise" and "Beauty and the Beast."

But none of them got into possible consideration for the final five without a campaign. As usual, much of the campaigning has been on the pages of the entertain-

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ment trade newspapers, the Hollywood Reporter and Daily Variety. Although Variety itself reported that Oscar advertising was somewhat down this year, film companies still plunked down thousands of dollars to advertise candidates for Oscar consideration.

According to one informal poll, the leader in the number of full-page trade newspaper ads was "JFK," followed by "Bugsy."

Producer Norman Lear sent letters out on behalf of his production, "Fried Green Tomatoes," and a group of well-known German directors made news by signing a letter protesting the German film committee's overlooking of "Europa Europa" as the German entry in the best foreign language film competition.

In one of the more impromptu Oscar efforts, director Henry Jaglom wrote a letter to the members of the Academy directors' branch urging them to nominate Andrei Konchalovsky for his work on "The Inner Circle." Jaglom has no ties to the film.

"I had received more than 40 videotapes and all those booklets," Jaglom said. "And it shocked me when I finally saw 'Inner Circle,' that here was a movie that I had heard practically nothing about. It seemed criminal to me that more people were not aware of it."

Jaglom said he faxed half the 260 directors' branch members and called the rest. He said distributor Columbia Pictures had not arranged to do anything on behalf of the movie. "I think the film was made in an earlier administration, and the new one was concentrating on its bigger films. But once I called attention to it, Columbia was very responsive and sent out videotapes."

This year, the number of potential major Oscar contenders was unusually plentiful among the 238 eligible films released in 1991. For many observers, like Mason Wiley, the co-author of "Inside Oscar—the Unofficial History of the Academy Awards," that meant a front-runner never emerged as in some

years when there has been a film widely viewed as the favorite.

"There were so many mixed signals from the beginning when the critics started handing out their awards," he said. "You didn't sense a consensus."

But there have been signs that the field already has narrowed.

There was, for instance, the first-in-the-nation caucus to determine 1991 film honors, conducted by the Los Angeles film critics in December. They gave their prize

to "Bugsy," the Barry Levinson biographical film starring Warren Beatty as the mobster Benjamin (Bugsy) Seigel.

But a week later, the New York critics opted for the dark suspense drama "The Silence of the Lambs," starring Jodie Foster and Anthony Hopkins. The National Board of Review also gave the nod to "Silence of the Lambs."

In early January, the National Society of Film Critics added a wild card by choosing an unconventional British movie, "Life Is Sweet," for best picture.

Then along came the Golden Globe Awards. Although the Golden Globes are voted by only 86 members of the Hollywood Foreign Press Assn., they have begun to take on a role in the Oscar race, akin to New Hampshire's role in presidential politics. In other words, like New Hampshire, the Globe voters may not be a big group, but they have influence.

In the Golden Globe competition, which divides the year's films into two categories, the best musical or comedy prize was won by the animated feature film "Beauty and the Beast," and the best dramatic film honor went to "Bugsy."

At the Globe ceremonies, "Beauty" won the most awards, while "Bugsy," nominated in eight categories, ended up with only one. But that one, is often the one that goes on to win the best picture prize.

What might have been "Bugsy's" chance to dominate the spotlight was somewhat diminished by the two Globe awards taken by "The Fisher King" and the choice of Oliver Stone as best director for "JFK."

Finally, the Directors Guild of America announced its nominations for feature film directing in

late January. The guild has an uncanny knack for picking the eventual winner of the best director's Oscar and, in turn, the movie that individual directed usually goes on to take home the Oscar for best picture.

The directors nominated the work of "Bugsy's" Levinson, "JFK's" Stone and "Lambs'" Jonathan Demme. Plus, they nominated Barbra Streisand for her romantic psychodrama "The Prince of Tides" and Ridley Scott for his female buddy film, "Thelma & Louise." With the nomination of the latter two, the directors boosted the prospects for those films as serious best picture contenders.

There is always room for a dark-horse candidate. And those could be such other Golden Globe or Writers Guild nominees as "Fried Green Tomatoes," "Boyz n the Hood" and "Grand Canyon."

"What we do now is wait for Wednesday," said a spokesperson for the Walt Disney Studios.

Long before the cutoff for proposed nominations two weeks ago, Academy members received mailings of elaborate, full-color glossy souvenir books to remind them of the achievements of "Bugsy," "For the Boys," "Hook" and "Prince of Tides." Orion Pictures mailed an expensive gift package with videotape and videocassette to remind voters of their early 1991 release, "The Silence of the Lambs."

Oscar watchers could also not recall a precedent for the mother-and-daughter ad that was purchased on behalf of Laura Dern and her mother Diane Ladd. Dern was promoted for best actress and Ladd for best supporting actress for their work together in "Rambling Rose."

Academy members are not permitted to talk about their voting preferences and the Academy itself keeps the identity of its nearly 5,000 members a closely guarded secret. But, off the record, several voters said they could not remember a year when they had received so many feature films on videotape. One screenwriter said he received as many as 20 cassettes.

"The biggest disappointment

was the one for 'Beauty and the Beast,'" the voter said. "Here, I got the whole family together and we were all excited, only to find out that the tape was a 10-minute promo." A Disney spokesperson said the company did not send a complete videotape because of piracy considerations.

This year, Disney believes it has a good chance to win a best picture Oscar nomination for an animated movie, "Beauty and the Beast," a feat never previously achieved by any company. In all the years, in fact, the studio has had only two best picture nominations, "Mary Poppins" in 1964 and "Dead Poets Society" in 1989.

"We believed at the beginning that with the critical response to 'Beauty' and with the fact the critics suggested a best picture possibility, we should build on it," the spokesperson said. Disney started the talk going with a special screening of the unfinished work at the New York Film Festival last September.

The studio also bought a two-page color ad in The Times Sunday Calendar that specifically was addressed to Academy voters.

The company also sent Academy members copies of audio cassettes of the song score, which is widely acknowledged to be the front-runner in the musical categories.

Marilyn, the Mob and 'JFK'

■ **Television:** The movie's success inspires tabloid shows to revive dramatizations. 'Hard Copy' investigates Marilyn Monroe's death tonight.

By SHARON BERNSTEIN
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

The producers of television's syndicated tabloid news shows say Oliver Stone's film "JFK" has given their penchant for dramatizing events—even hypothetical ones—new credibility.

The daily tabloid show "Hard Copy" plans to test that theory starting tonight with a three-part series that, like "JFK," dramatizes unproven speculation—in this case about the death of actress Marilyn Monroe. It will assert that she did not commit suicide, but was killed by henchmen for gangster Sam Giancana, who supposedly had been her lover.

"It seemed to me that with Stone's movie elevating the notion of taking a big subject and dressing it up so graphically, the mood

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might be right to do Marilyn," said "Hard Copy" executive producer Peter Brennan, who predicts increased use of dramatization in the wake of Stone's film.

"Hard Copy" will suggest that Giancana wanted to embarrass President John F. Kennedy and his brother, Atty. Gen. Robert F. Kennedy, by staging Monroe's death at a time when Robert Kennedy was rumored to have been involved with her. Giancana and mob-linked union leader Jimmy Hoffa, the program will claim, were angry with the Kennedys—Robert in particular—for clamping down on organized crime, Brennan said.

The series, which will air tonight, Tuesday and Wednesday at 7:30 p.m. on KNBC Channel 4 and KFMB Channel 8, will involve a mix of dramatization and standard news-style presentations, Brennan said. Monroe's final moments will be portrayed, based on "Hard Copy's" theory, in a dramatization featuring Stephanie Anderson.

The dramatic segments differ significantly from previous such re-creations on tabloid and news magazine shows, which were typically based on transcripts of interviews from people who were at the scene of a particular event. The ones in "Hard Copy," like Stone's dramatization of a conspiracy to assassinate President John F. Kennedy, are based on deductions by the show's producers, based on their investigation.

"There's sort of a cycle here," Brennan said. "Magazines and television have been doing J.F.K. conspiracy specials long before Oliver Stone did it. But what he set the mood for—whether he did it well or not journalistically—was to elevate and magnify the notion of using the resources of Hollywood [to tell a news story]."

And while the trend toward using dramatic re-creations of news events has been waning, viewers should expect to see more of it, as tabloid producers in particular continue to take inspiration from Stone.

"Will people be doing more of

them? Yes," said John Terenzio, executive producer of the syndicated tabloid, "A Current Affair." "When you have a movie as powerful as ['JFK'], it gets other people thinking [re-enactment] is a good technique."

Andrew Stern, head of the broadcast journalism program at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, said that it's "absolute nonsense" to think that Stone's controversial attempt to re-create the assassination of Kennedy somehow vindicates tabloid re-creations of news events.

Stone's film, he said, was never considered to be journalism. And even allowing for that, "there's a large difference between what Oliver Stone does and what 'Hard Copy' does," Stern said.

Network news divisions, which have been experimenting with flashy magazine shows inspired by the syndicated reality and tabloid shows, say they have no plans to re-introduce re-enactments.

"We want to push the envelope to do different types of reality programming, but that does not mean we will do re-creations, which are expensive and complicated," said Terry Byrne, president of NBC News Productions, which produces reality programs for syndication and for the network.

All three major broadcast networks used re-enactments when the trend toward them began in the late 1980s. But under a storm of pressure from media critics and journalists within their own ranks, the technique was speedily dropped.

NBC has no plans to re-introduce the technique, Byrne said, and neither do ABC or CBS, according to spokesmen there.

"It all comes down to what you believe is the proper way to communicate something," said Tom Goodman, spokesman for CBS News. The popularity of a film like "JFK" need not mean that news organizations should try the same

techniques, he said.

"A film has a totally different style and different way of communicating from a news organization," Goodman said. "They have one set of standards, and news organizations have other standards."

But that leaves the networks scrambling to compete in a market that features increasingly sensational looks at supposedly real-life stories.

Byrne said that NBC Productions, instead of relying on re-enactments, will use other methods for making the material more dramatic than standard news footage would be.

For example, she said, producers of the upcoming syndicated special "The Search for Amelia Earhart" used point-of-view camera angles and employed a dramatic writing style. The program was shot on film instead of videotape to make it seem more vibrant.

CBS, which produces the reality/news programs "48 Hours" and "Street Stories," will be using similar methods.

Everette Dennis, executive director of the Freedom Foundation Center for Media Studies at Columbia University in New York, said that, in and of themselves, re-creations aren't so bad.

"If they are done accurately, based on some documentation and evidence, they really are a literary device used to move the story along, much like a print reporter would write about a meeting in the White House based on interviews with people who were there," Dennis said. "There are people who burned their fingers with it, so it became taboo."

Not so at the tabloids.

"If the re-enactment is faithful to the facts, then it's another aid to fuller understanding," said Brennan of "Hard Copy." "If it's not [faithful], if it's twisted, then you can distort facts with it."