

CULTURE DESK

A STRANGE, UNEVEN OSCAR NIGHT IN THE YEAR OF #METOO



By Jia Tolentino

March 5, 2018

Allison Janney, who won Best Supporting Actress for her role in “I, Tonya,” at the Governor’s Ball after the Oscars on Sunday. Photograph by Eric Jamison / Invision / AP

My night at the Oscars ended on Melrose, around 1 A.M., teetering on a curb in clean cold air of Los Angeles after a winter snap and a rainstorm, offering girlfriend-outside-the-club encouragement to the beloved actress in her fifties whose stilettos had sunk into the grass outside the *Vanity Fair* party at the same time as mine. She'd pulled me onto the curb with her. "The grass is *terrible*," she said. Behind us were perpetual flashbulbs, heat lamps, a cluster of models dressed like exotic birds. In front of us, black S.U.V.s crawled down the street without stopping. "Come on, come on, are you my Uber, I'm fucking *cold*," the actress chanted, shivering in her sparkling dress. "I'm fucking *done*. Come on, come on, you've got to be my Uber."

"That next car's yours, I can feel it," I told her. "You'll be in your pajamas really soon."

"Here's to that, sister," she said. The next black car slowed to a stop. The actress hopped into the back seat. "Oh, thank *God* you're here," I heard her say, her voice fading into the ambient noise of the party. The car door closed and the actress drove away into the night.

What I didn't know about the Oscars until I arrived was that it takes place in and around a large outdoor shopping mall. The Dolby Theatre is part of the Hollywood & Highland Center, which is, as mentioned in host Jimmy Kimmel's opening segment on Sunday night, just a hop and a skip away from Hooters; the red carpet is about a two-minute walk from a Hot Topic, a Cabo Wabo Cantina, and a generously sized Dave & Buster's.

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Trussed into my dress like a chicken, I arrived at the Hot Topic around 1:30 P.M. and stood there for a while, observing the red carpet from a distance: limos dropped the celebrities off in a holding pen, from which they were escorted by handlers to the step-and-repeat, and then through the final press section, which featured bleachers of fans who'd been in place since the morning. Each person who walks is on a timetable; the camera angles are planned, as are many of the interview questions. A cheerful sweetheart of a man told me that he'd been onsite for the last three days doing "standing work"—walking the carpet as a celebrity placeholder so that the camera people could figure out their shots. "It's even more fun when you get to be inside the theatre pretending to be the nominees, because you always get to pretend to be the winner," he told me. "No one knows what's going to happen except for PricewaterhouseCoopers, so they have to practice every possible shot."

I went down to the red carpet—a blur of sequins and satin and filler and foundation spackled thickly across bone. There was a line of publicists, a line of tuxedoed security guards, and a trickle of celebrities accompanied by handlers. "Would you be interested in talking to Paz Vega?" a woman asked, as she walked down the press row holding a sign that said "PAZ VEGA." Waves of cheering passed through the bleachers like wind ruffling a field of wheat. I kept having the momentary delusion that happens when you see a famous person and, because you recognize them in intimate detail, briefly think you've caught sight of a friend. "There's no telling what will happen next!" an on-air personality kept saying despite all evidence to the contrary. Celebrities nosed up to the cameras like friendly dolphins inching to the edge of an enclosure. The interviews made no sense to me unless I watched them on camera, peering through the tiny rectangular viewfinders on nearby video rigs. I was in the middle of an assembly line in a hyper-efficient image factory. I left the red carpet, passed a Johnny Rockets, walked through a metal detector, and entered the press area, where a long line of journalists had formed to honor a buffet of charcuterie, cheese, and

cocktail shrimp. “I’m here with Bulgarian television, but they didn’t pay for Internet,” one young woman said. “Please—it’s been such a long day already—can anyone help?”

The great masses of beautiful people started migrating into the Dolby Theatre for the ceremony after 4 p.m. The atmosphere was vibrating, anxious, hopeful. Life-size Oscars were stationed on each floor for people to pose with, and there were miniature bags of popcorn to eat. Underneath each seat in the theatre was a snack box, each with an illustration of one of the Best Picture nominees. (Mine, pleasingly, was “Get Out.”) On my right, someone said, “We all really need a fun night, to get away from politics for a little bit.” Behind me, another person said, “I hope Kimmel does a good job with #MeToo.” I fished out the gummy bears from my snack box and sat contentedly eating candy as the lights went down.

“Hollywood has nimbly absorbed its critiques and converted them into inspirational messaging and digestible branding exercises, just in time for the unfurling of the red carpets,” Amanda Hess wrote in January. Jimmy Kimmel’s opening monologue, which compensated for the discomfort of social consciousness by oversimplifying things, reflected as much. Thus the joke about how Oscar is a good man because he doesn’t have a penis—it was as if an ironic feminist mug from 2013 had taken the stage—and Emma Stone’s crack, late in the show, about the “four men and Greta Gerwig” nominated for Best Director. (Those four men, of course, included Guillermo del Toro and Jordan Peele; the ironic feminist mugs of 2013 never did a good job of reminding us that race and gender exist simultaneously.) The best joke in the ceremony belonged to Tiffany Haddish and Maya Rudolph, who stole the show as soon as they walked out carrying their heels. The Oscars had been too white, they noted, but now maybe people were worried they’d gotten too black. “We just wanted to say, don’t worry,” Rudolph said. “There are *so* many more white people to come tonight.” It’s funnier—and more honest—to address directly the ambient awkwardness

prompted by the sudden cultural focus on equality than to pretend that the narrative has already been resolved.

The glittering rock-candy arch that spanned the Dolby stage framed a lot of fierce, uneven change as the night progressed. Frances McDormand ended her Best Actress speech by introducing the world to the concept of the “inclusion rider”—a market-based redistributive solution by which an A-list actor can insist, in his or her contract, that a movie accurately reflect contemporary demographics. Ashley Judd casually mentioned intersectionality while introducing a taped segment that contained a slew of common-sense arguments for diverse onscreen representation. More people are beginning to think of these things structurally: the fact that Rachel Morrison was the first-ever female nominee for cinematography, for example, seemed not just like a shame but a problem with clear and specific causes. At the same time, Kobe Bryant won the Best Animated Short award for the truly terrible “Dear Basketball,” and Gary Oldman won Best Actor for “Darkest Hour.” The two men have been accused of rape and domestic violence, respectively, though both have denied the allegations; they both received wild, seemingly heartfelt applause. A man behind me whispered “Shut—the—fuck—up,” when Helen Mirren talked about witnessing social change. A woman in front of me examined her selfie roll while the #MeToo video played onscreen. Hollywood loves a sweeping narrative—we all do—but the story is recursive and complicated. Judd spoke alongside Annabella Sciorra, whose presence I found intensely moving. I also kept thinking about how much we ask of these actresses, how we want them to appeal to us while remaking the world for the better. I kept thinking about what Jacqueline Rose recently wrote in the *London Review of Books*: that our attention to violence against women might “be feeding vicariously off the forms of perversion that fuel the violence in the first place.”

After the ceremony, which went long as usual, the bathroom was full of women retouching their makeup with wordless, hyper-focussed resolve. Everyone streamed downstairs for the Governor’s Ball. Waiters passed holding

trays with truffle mac and cheese, chicken pot pie with truffles, smoked salmon with caviar. I got in line for the sushi buffet. “My guy at Bank of America says I’m overleveraged,” said the man behind me, who was eating lobster claws directly from the buffet table. A waiter approached a co-worker carrying a tray covered with inch-long tacos. “This tray is for Steven Spielberg, but I can’t find him anywhere,” he said. “I’m going to do three more laps, and then this tray goes to someone else.”

I got in a car to go to the *Vanity Fair* party, where I immediately tripped on my dress and walked into both Drake and Kendall Jenner. Timothée Chalamet held court in his white tux, Adam Rippon in his harness. Mary J. Blige was dancing in the middle of the room. Saoirse Ronan and Odeya Rush ran into each other’s arms giddily. I huddled under a heat lamp with Kelly Marie Tran and talked about BB-8. A TV host with benzodiazepine eyes wanted to say hi to someone but kept forgetting who. “Go get that guy,” a teen-age actress slurred. “He has *fried chicken*.” Through the crowd came Frances McDormand, finger pointed at a man in front of her. “Inclusivity! Rider!” she said.



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