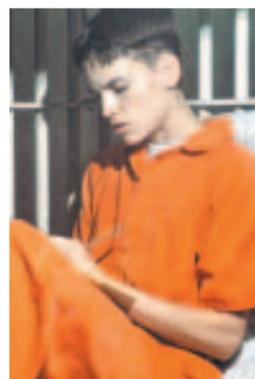# How to win an Oscar

WE'VE CRUNCHED THE NUMBERS, CONSIDERED THE VARIABLES, EVEN THOUGHT HARD ABOUT *SHAKESPEARE IN LOVE*. WANT TO KNOW WHO WILL WIN AN ACADEMY AWARD? FOLLOW OUR SIMPLE GUIDE.
BY **ANDREW FENTON**

THEY'RE among the most respected awards in the world, rivalled only by the Nobels and Pulitzers. But ever since the self-congratulatory Academy Awards ceremony sputtered into life in 1929, there have been criticisms that the top Oscars go to only a narrow selection of films and actors for the same old showboating performances and dreary subjects. And so, using a sophisticated new analysis of Academy voting patterns, a relatively small amount of research on Wikipedia and a few ideas from people in the office, we've come up with our very own *Weekend* guide to winning an Oscar. Good luck.

1. CHOOSE YOUR ROLE WISELY

Actors make up the single largest voting bloc in the Academy. And as we all know, actors aren't that bright. The rule of thumb is that the flashier the performance and the more obvious it is that someone is "acting" dramatically, the better their chance of winning the golden statue. There are numerous ways to make your acting obvious:

a) If in doubt, play a prostitute. At least a dozen actors have won an Oscar this way, including Kim Basinger for *LA Confidential*. Or play an alcoholic. Heavy drinking is responsible for more Oscars than anyone can count. This reached a zenith in 1983, when all five Best Actor nominees were there for having played drunks — think Michael Caine in *Educating Rita*. A few years earlier, in 1962, four of the Best Actress nominees had channelled alcoholics and/or drug addicts.

b) Straight actors should play gay characters, who then (spoiler alert!) die tragically. Think Sean Penn, assassinated while campaigning for gay rights as *Harvey Milk*. Tom Hanks died of AIDS in *Philadelphia*, Charlize Theron was a lesbian serial killer sentenced to death in *Monster*, and Hilary Swank triumphed as a transgender who was beaten, raped and murdered in *Boys Don't Cry*. This year, Christopher Plummer is up for a gong for *Beginners*, in which he plays an elderly man who comes out as gay and then dies of cancer, and Glenn Close is up for supporting actress for *Albert Nobbs*, in which she plays a woman pretending to be a man who winds up you-know-what.

c) Beautiful women should play ugly people. The Academy gives extra points to the beautiful for allowing themselves to be seen in a less than flattering light. Theron and Swank are both good examples, but they're not alone. Nicole Kidman won by a nose for her Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*, complete with prosthetic proboscis, while Elizabeth Taylor won the Oscar for playing a frumpy, 50-something hard drinker in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, years before Taylor herself was a frumpy alcoholic. It's harder for men to score points for an Oscar by going ugly, but Javier Bardem's stupid haircut in *No Country for Old Men* arguably pushed him over the line.

d) Play a real person. This enables Academy voters to compare your performance with their knowledge of the real deal. Six out of the past seven Best Actor Oscars were for actors impersonating famous figures — whether the King of England (Colin Firth), *The Last King of Scotland* (in which Forest Whitaker played Idi Amin) or the King of the Blues, as Ray Charles (Jamie Foxx) has never been known. Ladies have similar success — think of Helen Mirren as *The Queen* and Marion Cotillard as Edith Piaf. This year, Margaret Thatcher (Meryl Streep) is up against Marilyn Monroe (Michelle Williams), with Streep probably the frontrunner, since her character suffers from dementia.

e) On that note, play a character with a disability or affliction. Foxx was blind in *Ray*, Geoffrey Rush was mentally ill in *Shine* and Daniel Day Lewis had cerebral palsy in *My Left Foot*. But as Kirk Lazarus (Robert Downey Jr) warns in *Tropic Thunder*: "Never go full retard." That offensive but memorable phrase reminds us that Dustin Hoffman (*Rain Man*) and Tom Hanks (*Forrest Gump*) won Oscars for their arguably stylised portrayals of mental difficulties, while Penn played a developmentally disabled person in *I Am Sam* a little too accurately to actually win the Oscar in 2001. (This theory doesn't explain why Russell Crowe, a schizophrenic genius in *A Beautiful Mind*, also lost that year.)

2. CERTAIN TYPES OF FILM NEVER WIN

Don't make a comedy, because the Academy holds them in contempt. Only two movies that are even vaguely comedic have won Best Picture in the past 30 years (*Annie Hall* and *Shakespeare in Love*). Don't make a fantasy film, as only *The Lord of the Rings: The*

Return of the King ever won from this genre. Don't make an action adventure or a film based on a comic book — even the critically lauded and popular ones such as *The Dark Knight* fail to land a best picture nomination. Don't make a kids' movie. Don't make an animated movie (only *Beauty and the Beast*, *Up* and *Toy Story 3* have scored a best picture nomination and none of them won.) Don't make a horror film. Don't make a franchise movie or a sequel. And don't hire a woman to direct the film, either, as only one film directed by a woman has ever won Best Picture or Best Director: Kathryn Bigelow for *The Hurt Locker.*

3. CERTAIN TYPES OF FILMS ALWAYS WIN

Most Best Picture winners are serious dramas dealing with weighty themes. And there's no subject weightier than the Holocaust. Steven Spielberg made 15 classic movies — and *Hook* — before he finally won Best Director for *Schindler's List*, while Roman Polanski's only Best Director Oscar win was 40 years into his career, for Holocaust movie *The Pianist*. And Roberto Benigni won Best Actor and Best Foreign Language Film for *Life is Beautiful*. "I've noticed that if you do a film about the Holocaust you're guaranteed an Oscar," said Kate Winslet, sending herself up in TV show *Extras*. By curious coincidence, Winslet won an Oscar two years later for playing a Nazi guard in Holocaust movie *The Reader.*

4. GET YOUR TIMING RIGHT

If you're a man looking to win Best Actor, you have your best chance in your mid-40s, as the Academy favours a bit of gravitas. Women, however, tend to win Best Actress in their mid-30s (and only one actress over 50 has won in the past 20 years). Being Meryl Streep is a considerable disadvantage — she has been nominated for 17 Academy Awards, but hasn't won since 1982.

5. MISS OUT THE YEAR BEFORE

Otherwise known as the "it's time" factor. Colin Firth missed out for *A Single Man* (straight actor plays gay man who dies!) but won the following year for *The King's Speech* (real-life figure with an affliction). Judi Dench missed out on Best Actress in 1998 playing Queen Victoria in *Mrs Brown*, but won Best Supporting Actress the following year for her Queen Elizabeth I in *Shakespeare in Love*. The reverse is also true: winning the year before hurts your chance of winning again. Crowe won for *Gladiator* then lost the next year for *A Beautiful Mind.*

6. RUN A GREAT CAMPAIGN

Traditionally, one of the best ways to score an Oscar has been to hold lots of lavish parties, functions and screenings as a way to buy the votes of Academy members. From this year, the Academy has banned members and nominees from attending any promo events after the nominations are announced. But with $500,000 to $4 million to spend on their Oscar campaigns, the "awards season consultants" can still have a big influence, arranging free screenings and taking out "for your consideration" ads. The most notable example last year was Melissa Leo's self-funded, sultry-looking magazine ads, which helped her win Best Supporting Actress for *The Fighter*. Campaign organisers can also rope in other celebrities — James Franco recently wrote an open letter in support of his *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* co-star Andy Serkis. The master of Oscar campaigning is undoubtedly Harvey Weinstein, whose well-considered campaigns have seen unlikely films such as *Shakespeare in Love* carry off

Best Picture against films with actual artistic merit. In the past few months alone, he's turned up to a screening of *The Artist* with Charlie Chaplin's extremely attractive granddaughters ("glam-daughters", wrote the US press), plugged *The Iron Lady* on Fox News, and penned a 1900-word essay about the making of *My Week with Marilyn* for *The Huffington Post*. Some say Weinstein also masterminded Michelle Williams' racy *GQ* cover shoot and the media tour by Uggie, the Jack Russell terrier in *The Artist*, who appeared everywhere from the Golden Globes to *Ellen.*

7. LISTEN TO THE BUZZ

If you want to predict the Oscars, you need to listen to The Buzz. This essentially means that whatever everyone else thinks is going to win usually ends up winning. Last year The Buzz was with *The King's Speech*; this year it's with *The Artist*. The Buzz isn't perfect, as the *Crash/Brokeback Mountain* debacle proved. The best predictors of Oscar success are the other major gongs in awards season, such as the Golden Globes (decided by 80-odd foreign journalists) and the Screen Actors Guild Awards. Not our own AACTAs, though. Not yet.

8. GO NEGATIVE

Planting or fanning the flames of negative stories about rival films is a well-worn strategy. Remember all those news yarns about how the makers of *Slumdog Millionaire* had exploited the poor young stars who were still living in squalor? That wasn't a coincidence. Recently, *The Artist* star Jean Dujardin was embroiled in a controversy over sexist film posters in France — news that broke early this month just as the final Oscar ballots were being sent to voters.

ALSO KNOW THAT...
THE BEST PICTURE IS RARELY THE BEST PICTURE
Crash wasn't a better film than *Brokeback Mountain* in 2005, even though it took home the gold statue on Oscar night in 2006. *Shakespeare in Love* wasn't a better movie than *Saving Private Ryan* or *The Thin Red Line* in 1998. *Forrest Gump* didn't measure up to *Pulp Fiction* or *The Shawshank Redemption* in 1994; *Kramer vs Kramer* wasn't a patch on *Apocalypse Now* in 1979; *Rocky* wasn't cut from the same cloth as *Taxi Driver* in 1976 . . . you get the picture.

THE BEST DIRECTOR AWARD IS STUPID
All you need to know about this award is that some of the most unique and interesting directors in the history of cinema have never won it, including Alfred Hitchcock, Ingmar Bergman, David Lynch, Sam Peckinpah, Ridley Scott, Orson Welles (who lost for *Citizen* "the best film of all time" *Kane*), Robert Altman, Jean-Luc Goddard, Werner Herzog . . . we could go on.

RULES ARE MADE TO BE BROKEN
Consider the following received wisdom: French films, or any foreign films for that matter, rarely win Best Picture. A silent film hasn't won the top award since *Wings* in 1929. Only two comedies have won Best Picture in 30 years. The last black and white film to win Best Picture was *Schindler's List* in 1993. And yet *The Artist*, which is a French, black and white, silent comedy, has the momentum going into this year's Oscars. If it wins, it will underline William Goldman's stunningly accurate observation about the movie industry — that "nobody knows anything". If it doesn't win, it will also prove Goldman's point. That's why it's such a good point.