

Oscar's big question: How did David slay Goliath?



FILE - Still scenes from the movie *The Hurt Locker* which was awarded with six Academy Awards on Sunday.



NEW YORK: For Hollywood pundits, industry folk and Oscar fans still paying attention on Monday, a major question remained: How did David slay Goliath?

For as much as *The Hurt Locker* was the critics' darling, it had three major strikes against it in its battle against the mighty James Cameron's *Avatar*. First, the box office was paltry - it's taken in just \$14.7 million domestically, compared to an amazing \$720.6 million for *Avatar*. That makes *The Hurt Locker* the lowest-grossing best picture winner since accurate records have been kept.

Second, it had no big acting names, usually an important factor in Oscar victory.

And third, it was about the Iraq war, a subject moviegoers traditionally just don't want to deal with. "Iraq is usually the kiss of death at the Oscars," says Tom O'Neil, blogger for the Los Angeles Times' Envelope, an awards site. But even with 10 nominees in the running for this year's best picture Oscar, the two films - whose directors were once married - were quickly pitted against each other in the race

for Hollywood's highest honor.

How did *The Hurt Locker* win out? Theories abound:

Many films about the Iraq war have fallen into a trap of appearing preachy or at least having a strong point of view. Viewers may or may not agree with that view - that still doesn't mean they want to get it at the movies.

But *The Hurt Locker*, a story of three technicians on a bomb-defusing team in Baghdad, is at heart an action movie - a documentary-style close-up of the men, their relationships, their missteps and the almost unbearable tension inherent in their exhausting, terrifying, tedious work.

"This isn't that kind of muckraking film aiming to show torture or violation of rules of war," says Robert Sklar, film professor at New York University. "This is a film about men trying to save lives rather than take them. It's also a buddy story. It has classic war-movie themes."

Often the Academy honors big, sweeping films, which *The Hurt Locker* is certainly not.

But it also looks for films with a substantial message. "Oscar likes films of importance, with a capital I," says film historian Leonard Maltin. "Often they're big films, but this is a small film that dealt with a really important subject."

Who says Oscar cares about box office? "The Oscars don't pay attention to that at all, and nor should they," Maltin says. In fact, he adds, they've often been accused of being too elitist, favoring independent movies over big films favored by the broader public.

Nonsense, says O'Neil, of *The Envelope*: "The Academy wants their movies to do well. Then they anoint them." Even last year's "Slumdog Millionaire," which originally almost went straight to DVD, had made \$40 million before the nominations, then rode to \$70 million by the time of the awards, he says.

All of *Hurt Locker's* technical merit aside, "it would be naive to think Oscar campaigning had nothing to do with it," says O'Neil.

He credits Cynthia Swartz, whose public relations firm was given the Oscar campaign-

ing job by Summit, the film's distributor, which was looking for industry respect and had plenty of money to fund the campaign, having already cashed in with the "Twilight" vampire movies.

"It was a very savvy campaign," says O'Neil. "Full force, and highly aggressive."

As compelling as her movie was, director Kathryn Bigelow had a compelling story of her own. This director who specializes not in female-oriented films but in big action thrillers had a real shot at becoming the first woman in Oscar history to win the best director prize, with her film winning best picture, too.

Yet Bigelow tried to downplay that element of her story, saying in interviews that she just wanted to be seen as a filmmaker, not a female one.

"Bigelow refused to capitalize on the woman factor, and to her credit," says Maltin. Everyone else wanted to make it a story but her. Still, you can't deny it had some impact."

Nor did Bigelow have any desire to capitalize on the *Ex Factor* - in case you're way

behind on your Oscar gossip, she was married to Cameron from 1989-91.

Were there some voters who were secretly rooting for her to leave him in the dust? No way of knowing, and the two seemed amicable through the awards season, with him standing and cheering as she won her Oscar. Still, there's no doubt that the "battle of the exes" (ok, we're done with the puns) added to the hype.

Then there was the new system for choosing best picture, with 10 nominees this year instead of the usual five. In previous years, a voter would simply make one choice for best picture. But this year's ballots had a preferential system, meaning voters ranked their choices. The lowest choices were then eliminated. That meant it was a system that favored consensus choices, some hypothesized.

"*Avatar* is polarizing," postulated Hendrik Herzberg in *The New Yorker* magazine last month. "So is James Cameron ... these factors could push *Avatar* to the bottom of a choice-ranked ballot." -AP

Brooke Burke joins Tom Bergeron on *Dancing*



FILE - Former *Dancing With the Stars* winner Brooke Burke

NEW YORK: Former *Dancing With the Stars* winner Brooke Burke will be Tom Bergeron's new partner when the series starts again later month.

She'll replace Samantha Harris as co-host. Bergeron made the announcement Monday on ABC's *Good Morning America*.

As a contestant, Burke won during the season that ended in November 2008. She has hosted TV shows including CBS' *Rock Star* and E!'s *Wild On*. The mother of four children has also built her own business on parenting issues, with an online baby products store and job as the "mommy cor-

respondent" on the syndicated show "The Doctors." She has more than 1.7 million followers on Twitter.

Contestants this season include former *Baywatch* babe Pamela Anderson, reality star Kate Gosselin, astronaut Buzz Aldrin and Olympics figure skating gold medalist Evan Lysacek.

Also competing for the mirrorball trophy will be reality TV personality Jake Pavelka, sportscaster Erin Andrews, singer Nicole Scherzinger, football star Chad Ochocinco and actors Shannen Doherty, Aiden Turner and Niecy Nash.

The new season begins March 22. -AP

WB's reality shows an affront to female viewers

LOS ANGELES: The CW is taking its largely female audience into two women-centric worlds with the reality shows *Fly Girls* and *High Society*. And yet in many ways, the same message emerges: Women are catty, two-faced and insane, and all we can do is film them for our amusement. *High Society*, which premieres on Wednesday followed by *Fly Girls* two weeks later, looks at the privileged, cloistered inhabitants of Manhattan's Upper East Side, a usually cloistered world. But breakaway society gal Tinsley Mortimer, a creator, co-executive producer and star, has opened the doors, revealing that every stereotype one ever had about these people is true.

There's boring party-boy Paul, who blows money Mama gave him for an apartment on a shindig; there's Tinsley's mother, scandalized by her daughter's divorce but more floored when Tinsley chooses to live in Midtown.

Then there's Jules, who at first is just another cliched reality-show bitch, but then she opens her irony-free mouth, "My friends tend not to be homosexuals, fat or Jewish," she

says. "I only like white guys. ... My dream is to work for the United Nations." Clearly, the only function of the show is to make Tinsley (who runs a handbag company) look like a valuable, upright member of society. So that's where the bar is set these days?

After the turn-and-cough experience of *Society*, *Fly Girls* comes like a fragrant hot towel. Sure, it's entirely Virgin America-branded, but this particular set of women - five hardworking, real-life stewardesses (sorry, "in-flight team members") does their own laundry and knows when to call B.S. They live in the same beachside house when jetting around the US, and the window into their world is superficially intriguing.

But even this setup has a prefab feeling to it - the clearly defined personalities (good, innocent Mandy and immature biyatch Nikole), conversations and situations all have a deeply scripted feel. Still, it's nice to experience a show whose leads don't force bile up from one's stomach; here, the ignorant idiots largely are outsiders. -Reuters

Japan dolphin hunt town shrugs off 'Cove' Oscar

TAIJI, Japan: The gala crowd in Los Angeles cheered as *The Cove* won the best documentary Oscar with its grisly portrayal of dolphin hunting. Half a world away, residents of the small Japanese village shown in the film abhorred the attention and said it won't end their centuries-old tradition. In Taiji on the rocky coast of southwest Japan, residents gathered in whale eateries with names like *Tail* and rolled their eyes Monday when told of Oscar laurels for the film, which they see as yet another biased foreign take on their culture.

The village of 3,500 people has been hunting dolphins and whales since the early 1600s. It calls itself *Whale Town* and has a massive pair of whale statues looming over the main road. *The Cove* refers to Taiji and its dolphin fishing as "a little town with a really big secret," but local councilman Hisato Ryono said there is nothing to hide.

"Everyone around here knows about it. The water nearby turns red during the hunt. The actual killing is done in a concealed area because it is unpleasant to look at, as is true of killing cows or pigs or any other animal," said Ryono, who says he was tricked into appearing in the film.

"This is a close-knit group of fishermen. The more they feel squeezed, the more they will close off to outsiders. They won't stop this hunt because of such pressure," Ryono said.

The Japanese government allows about 19,000 dolphins to be killed each year. Taiji hunts about 2,000 dolphins every year for meat - less than other places - but is singled out in part because of its "oikomi" method of herding and killing them near the shore.

Dolphins, in addition to being food, are also recognized in Taiji as crowd pleasers with their playful nature, leading to odd contrasts. Taiji fishermen capture some to sell to aquariums, and the area is dotted with ocean cages offering dolphin bonding sessions. "Dolphin Base" charges 2,000 yen (\$22) for a 20-minute session less than half a mile from the cove where hundreds of the animals are stabbed and dragged ashore in the annual hunt. Like most residents of Taiji, the dolphin trainers repeatedly avoided talking to a foreign reporter - one young woman ran away when asked her opinion. At the nearby Dolphin Resort, a modern hotel complex with its own dolphin pool, manager Kiyo Ikeda agreed to be interviewed, as long as there were no questions about dolphins.

"We really don't get many foreign guests at this hotel," she said. Many Taiji residents said they would no longer speak to foreign visitors on the record, after years of what they felt were one-sided articles and gory pictures shown out of context. After the movie won, the town government issued a short news release.

"There are different food traditions within Japan and around the world," the statement read. "It is important to respect and understand regional food cultures, which are based on traditions with long histories." The documentary, directed by Louie Psihoyos, follows Ric O'Barry, a trainer for the 1960s *Flipper* TV series who says he became an activist because of a suicidal dolphin in his charge. The film team broke into a restricted area to set up cameras that captured the slaughter. -AP

Heroes actor cast in new USA series



FILE - *Heroes* co-star Sendhil Ramamurthy

LOS ANGELES: *Heroes* co-star Sendhil Ramamurthy is joining USA Network's new drama series *Covert Affairs* as a regular.

The spy drama centers on Annie Walker (Perabo), a multilingual CIA trainee unexpectedly promoted to field operative while reeling over a mysterious ex-boyfriend who appears to be of particular interest to her agency bosses.

Ramamurthy will play a CIA agent. He fills the void left by the departure of Eric Lively, who played a third-generation CIA agent in the pilot. However, this is not a straight recasting as Ramamurthy will play a new character.

He joins *Covert* cast members Christopher Gorcham, Peter Gallagher, Kari Matchett and Anne Dudek as well as Eion Bailey.

Ramamurthy first indicated that he may be done with *Heroes* in November when he was cast in a regular role on NBC's dramedy pilot *Rex* but made a quick exit over a scheduling conflict.

Ramamurthy's character on *Heroes*, Mohinder Suresh, was key in the series' first couple of seasons, but his importance has gradually been scaled down. He also recently guest starred in an episode of another USA series, *Psych*. -Reuters