

## Lifestyle | Features

## Hollywood set for pandemic-era Oscars, with 'Nomadland' out front

The Oscars tonight will mirror the movie industry they honor: transformed by the pandemic, forced to experiment with new venues and formats, and likely to be dominated by "Nomadland." The crowning event of Hollywood's awards season was delayed by two months, and will mainly be held at Los Angeles' Union Station, chosen for the social distancing its enormity allows in the age of COVID-19.

In a nod to the past year's unique circumstances, the 93rd Academy Awards will have a large footprint—the presentation of honorary prizes and musical performances will take place at a Hollywood theater and the Academy's new film museum, while Europeans unable to travel will gather at "hubs" in London and Paris. But the main business of handing out golden statuettes will take place at the station—with one particular film expected to depart with a handful including best picture, the night's final award. "I can't imagine that 'Nomadland' does not win the big prize. I can't imagine that Chloe Zhao doesn't win for director," Variety journalist Marc Malkin told AFP. "But I always say about this year—this year has been so weird. You just never know."

**'Total lock'**

Zhao's elegiac road movie about older Americans roaming the West in vans after the global financial crisis won top film festival prizes last fall and has dominated this



In this file photo US-China director Chloe Zhao poses during a photocall to present the movie "Songs My Brothers Taught Me" in the French northwestern sea resort of Deauville, during the 41th Deauville US Film Festival. — AFP

year's elongated and largely virtual awards season. The 39-year-old Beijing-born director is "a total lock—they're going to vote for her even if they haven't seen the movie," said Deadline awards columnist Pete Hammond. "Right now, she's very respected and much beloved in the directing community," one Academy voter, who asked not to be named, told AFP. If any film can rival "Nomadland," it may be "The Trial of the Chicago 7," which won the top prize from Hollywood's actors guild.

That would hand Netflix the industry's biggest accolade for the first time, in a year of shuttered movie theaters that was

ruled by streaming. "It's not inconceivable, but I don't get the vibe out there for it right now where it's going to pull this off," said Hammond, pointing to #MeToo revenge thriller "Promising Young Woman" and immigrant drama "Minari" as dark horses.

**Hopkins 'lurking'**

"Nomadland" star Frances McDormand, a two-time Oscar winner who anchors a film in which several real-life "nomads" play versions of themselves, is nominated once again this year. But that category is "up in the air" and "could go any which way," said Hammond, noting that all five contenders including Viola Davis ("Ma Rainey's Black Bottom") and Carey Mulligan ("Promising Young Woman") have won major awards in the run-up to the Oscars. Davis's co-star Chadwick Boseman, who died last year from cancer before the release of his tragic final performance as a trumpet player haunted by racist atrocities, is tipped to win the third-ever posthumous acting Oscar.

"I would probably put my money on Chadwick, but there could be a surprise," said the Academy voter. "Anthony Hopkins is lurking in the background," the voter added, referring to the Oscar-winner's shattering performance as a dementia sufferer in "The Father." Daniel Kaluuya is expected to win best supporting actor for "Judas and the Black Messiah," while South Korean actress



In this file photo Oscar statuettes are displayed at the "Meet The Oscars" exhibit before the 80th annual Academy Awards in Hollywood, California.

Youn Yuh-jung's popularity has grown with her "endearing" recent acceptance speeches for other supporting actress awards for her work in "Minari," said Malkin. It is realistically possible that all four acting prizes—and director—could go to people of color, while Netflix is expected to scoop the most prizes of the night, including for best documentary for "My Octopus Teacher."

**'Opportunity'**

The ceremony will be pared back—producers have spoken of a guest list so strict that even Hollywood's most powerful studio executives won't be allowed in, and

a "teeny-tiny" red carpet that could pose some challenges. "The few interviews that (the) talent are doing at the Oscars, they're doing from seven feet away," said Malkin. "That's just awkward... how do you do that? How do you make it fun?" But the show's co-producer, Oscar-winning director Steven Soderbergh, has described the Covid-mandated changes as an "opportunity" for a show unlike "anything that's been done before."

The ceremony will have "the aesthetic of a film as opposed to a TV show," including movie-like "over-the-shoulder shots from within the audience" and high-resolution, widescreen formats, he said. Stars have been asked to dress to the nines—and reportedly can remove their masks when cameras are rolling. A-list presenters include Harrison Ford and Brad Pitt.

"Kudos to the Academy for at least trying to have some semblance of a live show, without Zoom," said Hammond. But the lower profile of this year's nominees and pandemic-era screen fatigue mean the Oscars are all but certain to suffer the same precipitous ratings drop of other awards shows. "It would be a wonderful day for the Academy if it only drops 50 percent," he told AFP. "It's just the way it's going." — AFP

## Five things to watch for at the Oscars

Travelers passing through Union Station in downtown Los Angeles tonight might notice a slight commotion—for one night only, it is doubling as the venue for the Oscars. While passengers jumping on a train most likely won't get a glimpse past the tight security, here are five things that movie fans watching the 93rd Academy Awards from home should look out for:

**'Nomadland' sweep?**

Going into tonight, "Nomadland" is the clearest best picture Oscar frontrunner in years. So barring a dramatic shock, the question may be just how many Oscars Chloe Zhao's road movie can win. If the heavily improvised film lands the prize for best adapted screenplay early in the night, a serious sweep could be on the cards. And Zhao—who would be the second woman, and the first of color to win best director—could equal another remarkable record. Nobody has won more Oscars in a night than Walt Disney's four in 1953. Zhao is up for golden statuettes for editing, screenplay, directing and as a producer for best picture.

**Eighth time unlucky?**

Of course, there is a big difference between landing multiple nominations and actually winning—just ask Glenn Close. From 1983's "The World According to Garp" to 2019's "The Wife," Close has been nominated but failed to win on seven previous occasions. If she comes up short again tonight, she will be tied with the late Peter O'Toole as the Academy's most reliable runner-up. Unfortunately the odds



In this file combination of pictures shows (from left) British actor Daniel Kaluuya, actor Chadwick Boseman, South Korean actress Youn Yuh-jung and US actress Viola Davis.

don't look great for Close—while her transformational performance as a tough-as-nails grandmother in "Hillbilly Elegy" was praised, the film drew widespread scorn.

**#OscarsSoDiverse?**

When last year's nominations were announced, it looked like years of activism and pledges for reform driven by the #OscarsSoWhite campaign had come to nothing — 19 of the 20 actors were white. But this year's crop of stars have set new records for diversity, including nine actors of color on the shortlists, and the first Asian American ever nominated for best actor (Steven Yeun of "Minari"). Two women were nominated for best director, for the first time ever.

And it is not just the Oscars—earlier this month, the Screen Actors Guild selected non-white winners in all four film categories. That quartet—Chadwick Boseman, Viola Davis, Daniel Kaluuya and Youn Yuh-jung—could well repeat tonight.

**McDormand three-peat?**

Frances McDormand has long been an Academy favorite, and she anchors this year's frontrunner "Nomadland" with a characteristically unglamorous portrayal of a grieving widow living in an old van. If she takes best actress honors tonight, she will become only the second woman in Oscars history to bag a trio of wins in that

category—after the peerless Katharine Hepburn, who has four. The Oscar would put her at the pinnacle of a triple-winners actress club also including Meryl Streep and Ingrid Bergman, who each have two lead actress Oscars and one supporting actress prize.

**Masks, movie shots and more?**

Oscars co-producer Steven Soderbergh and his colleagues held a press conference last weekend where they set out their vision for a ceremony intended to look more like a feature film than a TV show—without saying anything specific at all. For instance, will the stars wear masks?

"Masks are going to play a very important role in the story of this evening... If that's cryptic, it's meant to be," Soderbergh said. With so much under wraps, one thing is sure—the night is the first major Hollywood gathering in more than a year, and without pesky journalists and studio executives around to disturb them, many stars will be ready to party. "After the show, we'll go to the post-show, probably more alcohol on the post-show, but it'll be free, so it'll be great," joked co-producer Jesse Collins. — AFP

## The Oscars: Five memorable moments

The Oscars is Hollywood's most glamorous night, and the gala has generated some remarkable moments in its more than 90-year history—some funny, some moving and some confounding. The following is a look at some of the most unforgettable moments in Oscars history:

**And the best picture goes to... oops**

The most memorable moment in recent Oscars history happened in 2017, when the Academy's top prize was briefly handed to dreamy musical "La La Land," when coming-of-age drama "Moonlight" was the actual winner. It turns out accountants for PricewaterhouseCoopers, the firm responsible for tabulating and safeguarding Oscar votes and results, had handed presenters Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway the wrong envelope.

They ended up with a duplicate of the best actress envelope—a prize that went to Emma Stone for "La La Land"—instead of the one that had "Moonlight" winning for best picture. The embarrassing mix-up, the worst snafu in the history of the Academy Awards, came to be known as "Envelopegate." "It was a heartbreaking fiasco," Entertainment Weekly critic Jeff Jensen wrote at the time. "You felt embarrassed for Dunaway and Beatty, who clearly knew something was amiss when he opened the envelope but didn't know how to proceed."

**Political protest**

In March 1973, the legendary Marlon Brando won the best actor prize for his work in mob epic "The Godfather," besting a remarkable field of contenders—Michael Caine, Peter O'Toole, Laurence Olivier and Paul Winfield. But Brando did not attend, and Apache actress and activist Sacheen Littlefeather took the stage in his place. When actor Roger Moore offered her the golden statuette, she held up her hand in refusal, and he and co-presenter Liv Ullmann stepped back as she began to speak. Before a stunned audience, Littlefeather said Brando "very regretfully cannot accept this very generous award" as he wanted to protest the movie industry's treatment of Native Americans. Her statement was met with applause, cheers and a few boos.

**It's a tie!**

There have been a handful of ties in Oscars history, but one that earned a lot of attention came in 1969, when Barbra Streisand and Katharine Hepburn both won the award for best actress. "The winner—it's a tie!" exclaimed presenter Ingrid Bergman. Streisand earned the honor, her first Oscar, for her performance as

Fanny Brice in "Funny Girl," while Hepburn—the all-time leader among actors and actresses with Oscar wins at four—triumphed for "The Lion in Winter." Only Streisand attended the ceremony. "Hello, gorgeous!" she said, looking at the golden statuette.

**Lip lock**

Of course, actors are thrilled when they join the hallowed pantheon of Oscar winners, but in 2003, Adrien Brody definitely took it a bit too far when he picked up the best actor statuette for "The Pianist." When he took the stage to accept his award from the previous year's best actress winner Halle Berry, he stunned the audience—and Berry—when he swept her into a brief but passionate kiss on the lips. "That was not planned. I knew nothing about it," Berry said in a 2017 interview, explaining she was caught totally off guard. But she confirmed she just "went with it."



In this file photo "La La Land" producer Jordan Horowitz (left) shows the card reading Best Film "Moonlight" next to US actor Warren Beatty after the latter mistakenly read "La La Land" initially at the 89th Oscars in Hollywood, California. — AFP

For his part, Brody said in 2015 that "time slowed down" for him in the moment, but that the stunt almost cost him his chance to make a speech. "By the time I got finished kissing her... they were already flashing the sign to say 'Get off the stage, your time is up,'" he said in an interview at the Toronto film festival.

**Show of strength**

The late Jack Palance won his first and only Academy Award in 1992 for best supporting actor, for his portrayal of a crusty old cowboy opposite Billy Crystal in the Western comedy "City Slickers." After Whoopi Goldberg handed the then 73-year-old Palance the award, he gave a short acceptance speech about how producers worry about casting actors "at a certain age plateau." "They forget to ask" if you can do certain things, he said—and then left the audience gobsmacked when he dropped to the stage and did one-handed push-ups in his suit, earning a jovial round of applause. "I didn't know what the hell else to do," Palance later quipped. — AFP



In this file photo Union Station is pictured during preparations for the 93rd Academy Awards in Los Angeles.



In this file photo US actress Frances McDormand delivers a speech after she won the Oscar for Best Actress in "Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri". — AFP photos

## Bollywood composer Shrivani Rathod dies after COVID diagnosis

Tributes poured in Friday for popular Bollywood music composer Shrivani Rathod, who died in a Mumbai hospital aged 66 after being diagnosed with COVID-19. Rathod worked with fellow

composer Nadeem Saifi to create some of Bollywood's most enduring hits of the 1990s, with the duo winning multiple awards for their soundtracks during the decade.

He was hospitalized after contracting COVID-19 and died late Thursday, his musician son Sanjeev Rathod told the Press Trust of India. His death comes as India battles a vicious second wave of the pandemic, and on the heels of a particularly tragic period for Indian cinema, with the film industry losing many luminaries over the past year. Much-loved singer S.P. Balasubrahmanyam died in September aged 74 following a prolonged battle with COVID, while 42-year-old composer Wajid

Khan passed away in June after contracting the virus.

The industry also lost leading actors Irrfan Khan and Rishi Kapoor to other illnesses last April, while the June suicide of young star Sushant Singh Rajput shocked the country. Oscar-winner A.R. Rahman led the tributes to Rathod, with the "Slumdog Millionaire" composer tweeting: "Our Music community and your fans will miss you immensely". The duo known as Nadeem-Shrivani were responsible for many of Bollywood's biggest romantic chartbusters in films such as 1991's "Phool Aur Kaante" ("Flowers and Thorns") and "Saajan" ("Beloved") that helped top stars such as Salman Khan and Ajay

Devgn cement their places in the industry.

"Shrivani (and Nadeem) walked 30 years alongside me in my career with the evergreen album for Phool Aur Kaante. Very sad, very unfortunate to hear of his demise last night," Devgn tweeted. A heartbroken Saifi, who had earlier asked fans to pray for Rathod's recovery, said on Facebook: "I have lost my younger brother today." Leading producer Boney Kapoor, who collaborated with the duo on two films, tweeted that he was "deeply pained to hear of the demise of music Director Shrivani. Have wonderful memories of working with him". — AFP



In this file photo Bollywood music director/composer Shrivani Rathod (left) and writer/lyricist Yogesh Gaur pose for a photograph during the Ravindra Jain Academy Awards ceremony in Mumbai. — AFP