BEEN (Done that!) THERE



Joe (left) and Michael Caruso were among the 1998 attendees at the Academy Awards.

1998 was the year for local Oscar attendees

By Michael Caruso
Special Writer

Last year I went to the Academy Awards.

I still smile every time I think about what was probably a once-in-a-lifetime event. The Academy Awards may be the most prestigious event in America and a difficult ticket to come by. Hockey fans will tell you that getting a date with Stanley is much easier than getting one with Oscar. Lots of people have attended a Superbowl or at least know someone who has witnessed championship football.

But very few of us have attended the Academy Awards. Last year, only 6,000 tickets were available and none of them were for sale to the public. You must be invited to see Oscar, which makes the ticket invaluable.

In Hollywood, the credo "it's who you know" may actually be more important than what you know. My younger brother Joe, who knows a lot, is a business consultant with some interesting West Coast clients. Last year, one of those clients introduced him to someone at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. In a nutshell, Joe impressed who he knew with what he knew and they offered him four tickets to the Oscars, just like that.

Joe and I have done some interesting things together. We've climbed cliffs in Hawaii, toured the country in a rock band and even taken a bath (we are two of four brothers!) at the same time, although not recently. When he called me with an invitation to the Academy Awards, I knew that we were in for another adventure.

The phrase, "I'm going to the Academy Awards," is a great conversation starter. Americans are fascinated with Hollywood and the film industry's big night. Before leaving for Los Angeles, I telephoned a female friend who lives there. I always call her before visiting southern California because I like her and hope to see her. She hasn't returned my call for four years. This time, I told her voice mail, "Robin, I'm coming to Los Angeles to attend the Academy Awards. Let's try to get together."

She called back within hours.

Joe also invited Bob Taylor and George Gorno, two well-known Downriver businessmen, and we all flew to Los Angeles International Airport from different parts of the country to convene at an exclusive hotel in Santa Monica called Shutters on the Beach. We figured that if we were going to do the Hollywood scene, we would go top drawer. Shutters' expensive room rates certainly played a role in keeping the common folk from getting too close to the celebrities. We discovered that they had booked extra security to keep the entrance and lobby free from autograph hounds. The concierge told us that he works extra hard during Oscar week, keeping all the special guests happy.



The Caruso brothers, Joe (left) and Michael pose with the Academy Award symbol Oscar.

Shutters on the Beach doesn't look ostentatious. The circular drive is too small for limousines to negotiate without making a couple of passes. But we noticed that the marketing department definitely wants you to appreciate the building's proximity to the ocean. They didn't, for example, simply name the hotel "Shutters." When I called for room rates, someone in reservations seriously referred to two different room classifications as "ocean view rooms" and "non-ocean view rooms," as if a "non-ocean view room" was somehow better than just a regular room.

The hotel was packed with industry types. We saw Peter Fonda, Robert Duvall and John Turturro, who had his family in tow. Joe met Spike Lee, who gave Joe a valuable tip on cell phone usage. There were no doubt dozens of directors and producers milling about, but we did not recognize them. It was a heady scene and we quickly got used to saying "hi" to everyone — just in case it was somebody famous.

The night before the Oscars, we went to dinner at an exclusive restaurant called Ivy on the Shore, which had apparently hired the same marketing firm as Shutters on the Beach. Seated at our corner table, we had a good view of the room and immediately spied Joan Rivers having dinner with a gentleman friend and another couple, which turned out to be former Miss America Mary Ann Mobley and her husband Gary Collins. My brother Joe went over to pay his respects. Later, we saw Gregory Hines do the same.

Hollywood people are "beautiful" people and they have the means to take special care of themselves. Not necessarily good care, but special care. All weekend, we saw slovenly men being escorted by stunningly pretty women. How does this happen? We'll never know for sure, but while dining alone at breakfast one morning, an attractive young woman entered the hotel restaurant and was led to a table by the maitre d'.

Periodically glancing over the top of my outstretched newspaper, I noticed that the young lady declined three tables before she eventually accepted a table adjacent to mine. When the maitre d' offered her the chair behind me, she again demurred and ended up sitting down almost directly next to me.

In the land of "who you know," strangers talk to each other. Most restaurant tables in Southern California are situated close together and it's not unusual to meet seven or eight people during dinner. By contrast, I've noticed that people in New Jersey are likely to speak to you only if you hit their car or bowl a 300 game.

Anyway, within five minutes, the pretty girl at the table next to me definitely "hit on me," which may go a long way toward explaining how beautiful women are seen with unseemly men during Oscar week.

Since I was spending some time with the beautiful people, I decided to treat myself to some special care too. I usually get a manicure once a year whether I need one or not. Women have known for a while that having someone hold your hand for a half hour is a good thing. I agree and visited the manicurist on the beach at Shutters the day of the Academy Awards.

"I don't want to put any undue pressure on you," I said, trying to sound casual. "But I need an excellent manicure because I'm going to the Academy Awards tonight. You will do a good job, won't you?"

"Why don't you ask Bruce Willis," she smiled sweetly. I made a mental note to do just that.

As she worked, the manicurist managed to mention that she was doing Joan Rivers' nails at Joan's daughter Melissa's house the next day. "Really?" I calmly said. "We had dinner with her at Ivy's last night." I was starting to get the hang of the Hollywood scene.

At 3 o'clock in the afternoon, Joe, Bob, George and I assembled in the hotel lobby for a toast and a photo opportunity. Men — like

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babies — should be photographed right after they are dressed.

Putting on a tuxedo is a major production that is made even more complicated when staying in a hotel. The problem lies in the sheer number of accessories.

Women have the accessory thing down pat. Men have trouble remembering to wear a belt. Tuxedos as most men know, come with a 12-point check list including suspenders, a cummerbund (pleats facing up or down?), studs, cufflinks, a bow tie and special shiny shoes that have to be black and have to match. And for this West Coast event, everything had to be arranged in advance.

I can't tell you how difficult those button studs can be after a few vodka martinis. We toasted our good fortune and sauntered out to the waiting limousine. We headed for a suite in Century City where the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences had invited us to a reception.

At the pre-party, we had cocktails with various industry types, but, alas, no celebrities. We met a gentleman who does voice-overs for "NYPD Blue" and had our pictures taken next to a 6-foot version of the Oscar statuette. We also met a couple of "fillers." Fillers are the people who rush into the auditorium to sit in celebrity seats when the stars go to the rest room.

We headed back to the limo for the ride to the awards presentation, which was scheduled to start at 6 in the evening at The Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles. The sun was shining brightly and it seemed strange to be in evening clothes so early in the day. Rounding the corner at Figueroa and West Jefferson Boulevard, traffic was crawling. We found ourselves in a parade of limousines. Long black cars were four abreast.

People lined both sides of the street, most of whom held cameras and video recorders. Some protesters held picket signs, but everyone was trying to catch a glimpse of Jack Nicholson or Cameron Diaz.

Have you ever tried to look inside a limousine with tinted windows? It's impossible to see anything. Suddenly, I realized that I was attending a once-in-a lifetime event and no one could see me. I reached for the switch to lower the window. "I want to be with my people!" I exclaimed as I reached out to wave. Crowds on both sides of the street waved back.

This was too much fun. I stuck my head out to get a better view. Dozens of cameras aimed and fired. The throng screamed. They liked me! At our best guess, about 75 people looked at my photograph the next day when they returned from Photo Hut. Squinting at my unfamiliar mug, they no doubt asked, "Who's that guy?" and "Why did I take his picture?"

The excitement was mounting to fever pitch. We exited the vehicle and stepped onto a luminous red carpet that seemed to be 3 inches thick. Television crews had flooded the area with artificial light, which gave the area a surreal atmosphere. The scene was crowded and bustling and a public address system announced celebrity arrivals. Everyone, including the security personnel was wearing black. It seemed as if every other person was working security and they herded us toward the building.

The security people were pleading with us to stay to the left of a velvet rope. Celebrities were escorted to the right side of the rope where people from ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX and E! interviewed them. Paparazzi and the media representatives leered from a grandstand on our left. I never knew cameras could be so loud. We learned that there is a pecking order for entering the auditorium and the bigger stars enter last. We heard that Madonna was scheduled to enter after everyone else arrived.

On the way into the building, we met Jeremy Irons, a fairly big star by most standards. The fact is that for every legitimate "hot" celebrity in Hollywood, there are 100 "has beens." For every Tom Cruise, there are 100 Ernest Borgnines. So we met Ernest Borgnine. And his lovely wife, Tova.

The Academy Awards show is broadcast live, so the audience was prompted for applause and it didn't take us long to catch on to the rhythm of the commercials and such. Wide screen images helped people in the balcony see the action up close. A remote camera hovered over the crowd like an insect, moving back and forth, up and down. The best place to be was in the large room adjacent to the auditorium where many people gathered to have a cocktail and catch the action on a pair of large screen televisions. Cleavage was everywhere.

"Titanic" won about a hundred awards at the 1998 Academy Awards. Home viewers had the distinct advantage of being able to channel surf or make a trip to the fridge whenever the house band struck up the opening chords to "My Heart Will Go On," "Titanic's" theme song. If I never hear that song again, it will be too soon.

More than four hours later, we slowly walked out of the auditorium and found our limousine with the help of a walkie-talkie. Starving, we found dinner at about 11 p.m. and relived the magic of the day.

For a full year now, I've been especially nice to my brother Joe and for that I may be nominated for an Academy Award. I guess that in the back of my mind, I'm still hoping for that twice-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Michael Caruso, a former Trenton resident, is a communication consultant with The Edison House in Royal Oak. He recently wrote a book titled "Dear Michael Angelo," a collection of letters his father wrote to him that underscore the value of personal legacies. For more information, visit http://home.switchboard.com/michaelangelo.