The Rest of the Best: Ten Great Actors Snubbed by Oscar

Cinema is a very unusual art form. Unlike painting, composing, writing, or sculpting, it is inherently a collaborative effort. To make a good movie, you need a good script, a good score, good actors, good camerawork, good editing, good direction, and a good producer to make it happen. And every major film producing country has a yearly festival honoring its films and the people who make them.

In our country, the major awards given to celebrate achievement in cinema come from a collaborative organization, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences-- hence the name, “Academy Awards.” This is a group of about 6,000 film professionals whom I will call “the Tribe.” The Tribe is not defined by anything but professional affiliation. Though it consists of mainly Americans, it is open to professionals from all over the world. Its members are grouped into 15 branches, representing the different areas of the collaborative effort in producing cinema (actors, art directors, cinematographers, directors, etc.).

Why are some people singled out of the collaborative mix and achieve the top recognition of the Tribe, while others, clearly quite as good, are left out? One way of approaching this question is to look at some excellent and popular actors who never won an Oscar. To keep comparisons manageable, I’ve selected the round number ten, and all of my snubbed actors are male, and deceased. They have no further chance at an award. Some of them won honorary Oscars (or what I like to call “posthumous Oscars in advance”) for lifetime achievement, and one of the people on my list got an award for best screenplay, but none of them got an Oscar, frankly and simply, for acting.

Keep in mind, while I list my ten deserving people, that the contemporary actors Jack Nicholson, Dustin Hoffman, Tom Hanks, and Sean Penn have each won two best actor Oscars, with Nicholson having received a best supporting actor award as well.

Number one on my list of the unjustly snubbed has to be Joseph Cotten (1905-1994).

He was first a highly acclaimed stage actor, starting on Broadway in 1930, and joining the Mercury Theater Company, headed by Orson Welles and John Houseman, in 1937. He kept returning to the stage throughout his career. But his work in film was tremendous. He was superb in supporting roles, starting with “Citizen Kane” in 1941 and “The Magnificent Ambersons” in 1942 (both directed by Orson Welles). He also worked alongside Welles in “Journey into Fear” (1943) and “The Third Man” (1949). Each of his supporting roles would have merited an Oscar—especially his performance in “The Third Man” (directed by Carol Reed), in which he plays a rather shallow writer of cheap western novels, who is nevertheless the character around which the action moves.

He also played the lead in many excellent films, such as the Hitchcock classic murder mystery “Shadow of a Doubt” (1943), the romantic flicks “Since You Went Away” (1944) and “Love Letters” (1945, with script by Ayn Rand), the western “Duel in the Sun” (1946), and the interesting fantasy drama “Portrait of Jennie” (1948). Of these, he easily deserved a best actor award for “Shadow of a Doubt.” Later well regarded movies included “Two Flags West” (1950), “September Affair” (1950), “Niagara” (1953), “Touch of Evil” (1958), “Hush…Hush, Sweet Charlotte” (1964), “Tora! Tora! Tora!” (1970), “Soylent Green” (1973), and “Twilight’s Last Gleaming” (1977).

Not only didn’t he win an Oscar for any of this work, he was never even nominated. He put the point sharply himself when he said, “Orson Welles lists ‘Citizen Kane’ as his best film, Alfred Hitchcock opts for ‘Shadow of a Doubt,’ and Sir Carol Reed chose ‘The Third Man’ --and I’m in all of them.” Not just “in” them-- essential to them.

Why didn’t he get the recognition he deserved? All I can guess is that he tended to disappear in the role he played, by which I mean that his acting was so well-crafted that you just saw the character. Contrast Sean Penn, who advertises himself in every line of every script.

A close second is Cotten’s long time associate, Orson Welles (1915-1985). I will go lightly over his biography, since I discussed it in my recent review of the movie “Orson Welles and Me.” But put aside Welles the writer (he won his only Oscar for Best Original Screenplay, sharing it with Herman Mankiewicz for “Citizen Kane”), Welles the director, Welles the radio actor, and Welles the stage actor. He was a great film actor as well, and though he was nominated once for best actor in his role as Citizen Kane, he never won either best actor or best supporting actor awards.

Let’s just glance at a few movies in which he was lead actor or a major supporting player. These include of course "Citizen Kane" (1941)—considered by many critics to be the greatest movie ever made and a powerful, fascinating film to watch to this day. He co-wrote and acted with Cotton in the spy flick "Journey into Fear" and was the lead in "Jane Eyre" (1944). In "The Stranger" (1946), a fine movie, he played opposite Edward G. Robinson, he as a Nazi, and Robinson as a Nazi hunter. He then produced and starred in a project that wound up a mess, called "The Lady form Shanghai" (1947), starring opposite his estranged wife Rita Hayworth. The movie went over budget, the studio stepped in, and sliced and diced it. The result was to nobody’s taste. (It is now available in a director’s cut edition, and it is actually an intriguing film). He then starred in a low-budget version of "Macbeth" (1948), wrangling with the studio, as he often did.

"The Third Man," in which Welles starred, was a huge international hit that got Welles other offers. On the money he was made from acting and other work, he financed his own production of "Othello" (1952), which again involved production problems. A preliminary version won the Palme d’Or at Cannes, but when the film was released in 1958 in the U.S., Welles had re-cut it, and the prints had awful sound problems. His last major American film was 'Touch of Evil' (1958), which wound up being massively edited by the studio, but a restored version of this too is available on DVD. If you want to get an idea of his acting range, watch “Citizen Kane” and “Touch of Evil.”

Why was Welles snubbed? One theory is that he developed a reputation in Hollywood as a bad collaborator, someone hard to work with -- trouble for the producers and the studios, because he disdained movie budgets, and trouble for directors because he told them how to direct. There is no doubt that real problems lay behind his reputation. But recall that during his most productive period, Hollywood movies were produced by very large and closely run studios. This was the era before a lot of independent films were common. By the time the studio system broke down, Welles was past his prime. So whether his reputation was well deserved or not, it would be a bad reputation to have in a community built around a collaborative art form.

Another theory involves not just problems of collaboration but a resentment of individuality. Too many in Hollywood simply envied Welles's genius. There is, it must be admitted, nobody quite so hard to endure as a know-it-all who does, in fact, know it all. Hayworth stated as the reason for divorcing Welles, “I can’t take his genius any more!” Eartha Kitts, the well-known singer and long time friend of Welles, is said to have opined, “The way Hollywood treated him was a form of envy, jealousy. He died a frustrated man. In the eyes of Hollywood he never achieved 'Citizen Kane' again, but ironically Hollywood wouldn’t let him achieve another great success like 'Kane.'”

I would add that Welles spread himself too thin. He would work in Hollywood for a time, then return for extended periods to Broadway, then back to Hollywood, then abroad for work in foreign projects, then do radio work, then Hollywood again. He wasn’t centered in Hollywood, viewing himself as a permanent outsider. Tribes will accept an outsider, but not if he keeps bouncing back and forth. Still, it is a strange Tribe that gives a Tom Hanks two best actor awards and an Orson Welles none. Welles, by the way, refused to show up to accept his belated honorary Oscar.

Third on my list is a name that may surprise you. It's Edward G. Robinson (1893-1973). Robinson (born Emanuel Goldenberg, in Romania) came to America when he was 10 years old. He learned acting at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, started acting on Broadway, served in WWI, and did a few silent movies in the 1920s.

His career took off with the rise of talking pictures, which exploited his distinctive voice, and he wound up doing over a hundred movies in his career. He won public acclaim with his portrayal of a gangster in "Little Caesar" (1931). The film was a big hit, but it had a downside for him: it typecast him as an underworld character-- a role he certainly played well. In the 1940s, however, he expanded his acting range in other types of drama. Among his best pictures were g "Brother Orchid" (1940); "Dr. Ehrlich’s Magic Bullet" (1940), a bioflick about the great medical researcher Paul Ehrlich; "The Sea Wolf" (1941), "Tales of Manhattan" (1942), "Double Indemnity" (1944), "The Woman in the Window" (1945), "Scarlet Street" (1945), and "House of Strangers" (1949). He also reprised his gangster persona in the classic "Key Largo" (1948), co-starring (as he had four times before) with Humphrey Bogart. He had hit his stride as a first-rate actor.

Then, in the early 1950s, his career was mortally wounded by hearings conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). He twice testified before the committee, and he identified some communist sympathizers. He wasn’t blacklisted, but the Tribe kept a kind of reverse-blacklist, and those who cooperated with the committee (such as scriptwriter Morrie Ryskind) were shunned.

So it was that Robinson got few really decent parts offered to him after 1953, which led to economic hardship later in his life. His last movie was the quirky sci-fi film "Soylent Green," which co-starred Charleton Heston. It is said that that Heston was the only one the set who knew Robinson was dying of cancer, and wept real tears in one scene because of that knowledge.

Robinson could play it all: tough-guy villain, comic nice guys, academics, quietly shrewd investigators, even romantic leads -- remarkable for a man who was by no means handsome.

If you want to get a sense of his quality as an actor, you might start with "The Stanger" and "Key Largo." In both he is superb. Here we have another fine actor who was never even nominated for an Oscar. He was given another one of those honorary awards, but he was dead months before the ceremony. It is a strange Tribe, indeed, that can give a Dustin Hoffman two Oscars, and never even nominate an Edward G. Robinson.

I should note, in connection with the political prejudice against Robinson, that the Tribe has always had strange political attitudes. For example, there was little internal strife when it awarded Hitler's film-maker Leni Riefenstahl an honorary Oscar, but there was lots of it when it finally awarded one to Elia Kazan. Kazan, a renowned director of such movies as "On the Waterfront," had cooperated with HUAC because he was repelled by the communist movement, of which he had once briefly been a part. The Tribe could forgive Riefenstahl, but not Kazan.

Fourth on my list is the inimitable Cary Grant (1904-1986). Born in England with the anti-cinematic name of Archibald Leach, Grant was expelled from high school, joined a touring troupe of entertainers, and worked as an acrobat. While visiting America in 1920, he decided to stay, and started acting on the stage in St. Louis in 1931. He got into the movies shortly thereafter, and became a perennial star. He was the quintessential romantic lead: handsome, urbane, witty, and charming. He made more than 75 movies, including many that are on every list of classics.

Grant first came to popular attention playing the leading man opposite the larger than life Mae West, in "I’m No Angel" (1933) and "She Done Him Wrong" (1933). Paramount “rewarded” him by putting him in a string of mediocre movies, which no doubt had an effect on his later decision to desert the studio system. But in the late 1930s and early 1940s, he became as big as anyone in the business, with major hits such as "Topper" (1937), "The Awful Truth" (1937), "Bringing Up Baby" (1938), "Gunga Din" (1939), "His Girl Friday" (1940), and "The Philadelphia Story" (1940). The list includes some of the most popular “screwball comedies” -- and Grant was undoubtedly one of the most gifted comedians of any movie era, equally adept at physical and verbal comedy. He played against the greatest leading ladies of the time, such as Constance Bennett, Katherine Hepburn, and Rosalind Russell.

During the next two decades, he played in a wide range films-- "Suspicion" (1941), "Talk of the Town" (1942), "Arsenic and Old Lace" (1944), "Notorious" (1946), "To Catch a Thief" (1955), "An Affair to Remember" (1957), and "North by Northwest" (1959) -- working with such directors as Hitchcock and working with such actresses as Jean Arthur, Ingrid Bergman, Grace Kelly, Deborah Kerr, and Eva Marie Saint. In the 1960s, he starred in such movies as "Touch of Mink" (1962), "Charade" (1963), "Father Goose" (1964) and "Walk, Don’t Run"(1966), and in all except the last one, he played the love interest to a much younger actress, and carried it off believably. Quite annoying, really, when you reflect upon it.

In the 1950s, he had become the first major actor to break free of the studio system and form his own production company. He personally chose what movies he would star in, who would direct them, and with whom he would work. While he eventually won an honorary Oscar, he never won an acting Oscar-- and some have suggested that part of the problem was his decision to go independent.

I find this doubtful. Grant went independent at a time when the studio system was breaking down anyway. And he did so in the waning days of his illustrious career, after racking up an amazing number of outstanding performances from the early 1930s to the mid 1950s.

I think the reason is more prosaic. To put it simply, the Tribe has always tended to rate acting done in dramas -- especially off-beat or “socially significant” dramas -- more highly than acting done in comedies, musicals, actions films, or westerns. The fact that audiences often like the latter genres more than the first means nothing to the Tribe.

In particular, the Tribe tends to value acting in certain kinds of roles: military figures, extraordinary police officers or attorneys, alcoholics or drug abusers, mad geniuses, psychopathic killers, extremely lonely or antisocial people, good Samaritans, and people with mental or physical handicaps. It helps if the character dies during the movie.

Here’s a free plot for screenwriters who want to win an Oscar: A young alcoholic woman decides to undergo a sex-change operation, is deliberately maimed by an evil right-wing doctor, and subsequently goes on a rampage killing right-wing doctors, celebrating the kills by eating their livers with fava beans. (I know that the liver-fava bean bit has been done before, but re-using ideas is part of the Tribe’s ethos).

Unfortunately, that's not the kind of role for Cary Grant. He tended to act in comedies or romantic dramas, in which he played a handsome, witty, virile man. Not Oscar worthy, apparently.

Two fine British thespians are tied for fifth on my list: James Mason and Richard Burton. Mason (1909-1984) never intended to become an actor. He earned a degree in architecture and had no formal training in acting; he tried it on a lark, but wound up making over 120 films during his 50- year career. His voice was a marvelous instrument (low, articulate and smooth-- perfect for playing the intelligent villain), and he was a very handsome man (perfect for playing the lead. He was even considered to play James Bond in "Dr. No."

I can't list all his films, and many of them are not particularly memorable anyway, so let me mention a few of the more significant ones. In Britain, he did a series of popular dramas, including "Hatter’s Castle" (1941), "The Man in Grey" (1943), "The Wicked Lady" (1945) and "Odd Man Out" (1947). In that last movie, he played an Irish revolutionary with a good deal of nuance, which made it rather controversial in Britain at the time.

His first Hollywood flick was "Caught" (1949). This led to a number of good roles in notable movies, especially during the 1950s, including "Julius Caesar" (1953), "A Star is Born" (1954), an entertaining version of Jules Verne’s "20,000 Leagues under the Sea" (1954), and the great Hit Hitchcock film "North by Northwest." He also starred in an enjoyable version of "Journey to the Center of the Earth" (1959). He convincingly played German General Irwin Rommel in two popular war movies, "The Desert Fox" (1951) and "Desert Rats" (1953), the latter movie co-starring Richard Burton.

Later good movies include the scandalous "Lolita" (1962) (in which he played the lead character, Humbert Humbert), "Lord Jim" (1965), "The Boys from Brazil" (1978), and his final movie, "Dr. Fischer of Geneva" (1985).

For a full sense of Mason’s ability, I suggest you view "Odd Man Out" and "North by Northwest". In the latter movie, you see a mature Mason playing against a mature Grant in what has been described as a contest to see who was more suave (a toss-up, if you ask me).

The question of why Mason never won an Oscar for acting (though he was nominated three times) is especially tricky. Some of his finest films, such as the brilliant "Odd Man Out," were British, so not open to best or best supporting acting Oscars. Also, he had a tendency to accept any role that was offered, not matter how bad the script. He appeared in some real turkeys (for example "Mandingo"). This certainly kept him employed, but it didn't help his reputation. because it led him to appear in a lot of mediocre or downright bad movies.

The Tribe can understand doing some questionable movies while you are just starting out in the business-- hell, Jack Nicholson did "Little Shop of Horrors" (1961), which is more of a cult than a cinema classic. And it can accept your doing so if, at the end of your career, you are desperate for work. But if at all points in your career you accept whatever is offered, it suggests that you do not take your art completely seriously, which offends the Tribe greatly.

Richard Burton (1925-1984) probably needs no introduction, if only because of his notorious romance with Elizabeth Taylor. An accomplished Shakespearean, he was part of the inner circle of British actors when he ran into Bogart at a social event, and Bogart pushed his name in Hollywood. He was well enough known to be handed the lead in "My Cousin Rachel" (1952), co-starring Olivia de Havilland. The film was a critical and popular success, and got him the first of his seven Academy Award nominations. His magnificent voice and his intelligent, intense good looks served him well. He starred in “Desert Rats,” followed by the CinemaScope extravaganza “The Robe” (1953). During this period he kept up his stage acting as well.

The 1960s were Burton’s most fertile film period. His notable movies include the ill-fated "Cleopatra" (1963); "Becket" (1964), in which he gives a powerful performance as the archbishop martyred by Henry II; "The Night of the Iguana" (1964); "Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" (1966); "The Taming of the Shrew" (1967-- a bravura performance opposite Elizabeth Taylor, who convincingly conveys the shrew, as also in "Virginia Woolf"); "The Comedians" (1967); and "Anne of the Thousand Days" (1969).

His movies were fewer and less choice in the 1970s and 1980s, with only a few particularly noteworthy offerings: "The Assassination of Trotsky" (1972), "Equus" (1977), and "Nineteen Eighty-Four" (1984).

As to why he didn’t win and Oscar for acting, despite seven nominations, some have suggested his politics-- he was a life-long socialist, and is alleged to have spoken out against blacklisting. This is very doubtful. Burton’s prime roles were in the 1960s. By then, blacklisting was long past, the blacklisted people were seen as martyrs, and Hollywood had turned decisively Left. Neither Burton's politics nor his notorious private life made him [[*persona non grata*]] to the public or the critics.

I’m inclined to suspect that in this case the culprit is the actor himself. To many of his performances he brought a noticeable staginess, a marked tendency to over-act that may have been too much for some of the Tribe (or for anyone: consider his performance in "Equus"). But it is still a puzzling thing.

Seventh on my list is the estimable Claude Rains (1889-1967), an English actor who magnificently overcame a speech impediment. Early to the stage, he was relatively late in film, though he did manage to appear in nearly 60 films during his career. Rains got his first significant role in "The Invisible Man" (1933). The film brought him to public notice, but it led his studio (Universal) to try to put him in nothing but horror movies. He resisted this, and during the 1930s his notable movies included the outstanding "The Prince and the Pauper" (1937), and the classic "Adventures of Robin Hood" (1938) and "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (1939).

Without doubt, however, his most fruitful decade was the 1940s. He was great in "The Sea Hawk" (1940), "Here Comes Mr. Jordan" (1941), the famous horror flick "The Wolf Man" (1941), and the fine melodramas "Kings Row" (1942, with terrific cinematography by James Wong Howe) and "Now, Voyager" (1942). Add to these "Casablanca" (1942), "The Phantom of the Opera" (1943), and "Notorious" (1946), to name a few.

If you are unfamiliar with his work and want to judge his ability, I would suggest, in addition to "Casablanca," his "Caesar and Cleopatra," a full-color production of the George Bernard Shaw play, in which Rains plays Caesar as an aging, wistful, but playful character. Alas, his superb acting, along with that of his co-star Vivien Leigh, doesn’t save the move from being a tremendously expensive box-office disappointment.

Despite being nominated four times for Best Supporting Actor, Rains never won. I suspect the fact that he chose to dwell on his Pennsylvania farm instead of in the Tribal territory (Hollywood, Beverly Hills, Bel Air, Brentwood, Santa Monica and Malibu) may have hurt his chances among folk who often push collaboration into a collective mentality. Rains was seldom in town except during filming; he wasn't one of the group.

Number eight on my list is the woefully underrated Alan Ladd (1913-1964). He attended the Universal Pictures studio school for actors but was considered too short for the profession. Nevertheless, he managed to get a start with minor roles and found work, if not stardom, throughout the 1930s. But in 1942, he landed the lead in a movie that made him a star, the excellent film noir gangster film "This Gun for Hire." He found a persona-- the cool, chisel-faced killer. What struck the public was that the loud, ugly, and crude gangster of the thirties was now replaced by a quiet, attractive, polished criminal. Other significant movies of the 1940s were "Two Years Before the Mast" (1946), "The Blue Dahlia" (1946), and "Whispering Smith" (1948).

Early 1953 saw Ladd in his most acclaimed movie, "Shane" (1953). But from the mid 1950s until his final film ("The Carpetbaggers," 1964), he starred mainly in ordinary though watchable films. He died in 1964 at age 50; in what may have been a suicide. If you want to see Ladd at his best, I recommend "This Gun for Hire" (in which he plays a hit man out for revenge), and "Shane" (in which he plays a gunslinger who tries to give up his gun, only to find that he can’t).

Why no acting Oscars, or even a nomination? The problem, I think, was a personal decision, or drift. Ladd kept trying to play the handsome lead too long, instead of allowing himself to evolve into a distinguished character actor. Add to this his early death, and the fact that many of his roles were in westerns (a genre generally looked down upon by Oscar), and there you probably have it.

Ninth on my list is a controversial pick, Robert Mitchum (1917-1997). Mitchum was born and raised back East, growing up as a handful. Expelled from school repeatedly, he wound up in the early 1930s travelling the country as a drifter. He worked at various menial jobs, tried his hand at professional boxing, served time on a chain gang, and eventually wound up in Long Beach, California. He started in movies as a minor player in B westerns in the early 1940s. His heavy-lidded, tough-guy look got him more and more major roles. His big break came with his prominent role in the critically acclaimed "The Story of G.I. Joe" (1945), for which he got his only Oscar nomination.

At this point, Mitchum started working in a string of film noir flicks-- the genre for which he is most famous. Perhaps the best is "Out of the Past" (1947). He was busted for smoking dope in 1948, and did a couple of months in jail for it, thus reinforcing his bad boy image. He returned with another western, "The Red Pony" (1949) and a noir film, "The Big Steal" (1949).

From the 1950s to the 1990s, Mitchum kept working in a wide variety of roles. Indeed, he did over 120 films in his career. Especially worthy efforts include "River of No Return" (1954) and the disturbing "The Night of the Hunter" (1955), a film directed by Charles Laughton, who praised his acting highly. Mitchum gave an unusually powerful performance as a vicious preacher in pursuit of a couple of young children, but the movie didn’t do well at the box office-- no surprise, given its nature. Later movies include "Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison" (1957), "The Longest Day" 1962), "Ryan's Daughter" (1970), "The Big Sleep" (1978), the chilling The Sundowners (1960), and Cape Fear (1962), one of his best bad guy films, highly recommended for people who don't know his work.

Why no Oscar? I think there are several reasons. Mitchum shared James Mason's habit of taking whatever came his way, even after his career was well established. And he shared Cary Grant's and Alan Ladd's problem of working in genres (in his case, especially westerns) in which the Tribe doesn't expect to see great acting ability.

But the most important reason was probably his apparent disdain for the craft. Part of that was a self-deprecating streak in his nature. “The reason I’m in demand," he commented, "is that I work fast and cheap. . . Like an old whore, you know, I got nothing to get ready.” He also said, “Look! I have two kinds of acting. One on a horse and one off a horse. That’s it!” The other part of it was that he was naturally gifted at acting, so it just seemed easy to him.

Last on my list is Fred MacMurray (1908-1991). He started in show business as a singer, did some Broadway work, then started making movies in the mid-1930s. His career lasted until the 1970s, and he did more than a hundred pictures. In most of his movies he played a handsome, decent, friendly guy, the kind of guy who figures in musicals and romantic comedies. He expanded his range in the 1940s and 1950s, with prominent roles in "Double Indemnity," "Murder, He Says" (1945), and "The Caine Mutiny" (1954). Then, however, he returned to nice-guy roles. He did a flock of Disney comedies, such as "The Shaggy Dog" (1959) and "The Absent-Minded Professor" (1961), and starred in a popular TV series, "My Three Sons" (1960-1972). Unfortunately, most people who remember him remember his later roles.

If, however, you want to see two of his best performances, I recommend the beautifully written, acted, and photographed "Double Indemnity," and the intellectually fascinating "Caine Mutiny," where he plays opposite Humphrey Bogart and Jose Ferrer. In both films, the directors get him to show a dark underside of that smiling, decent, friendly persona. In both, we see how surface charm can mask underlying weakness or cowardice. Why did he never win an Oscar? Here again, I think we have a fine actor who had the misfortune to work almost entirely in genres looked down upon by the Tribe.

There are many other actors who could have made my list: Charles Bickford, Montgomery Clift, Elisha Cook, Jr., Laurence Harvey, Leslie Howard, Peter Lorre, Burgess Meredith, James Whitmore, and Richard Widmark, to name just a few-- all fine players, all sadly overlooked by the Tribe.

I've attributed some of my ten actors' difficulties to their own choices, and much of those difficulties to the collective or herd instincts and prejudices of the Tribe. But all of them faced another problem in their quest for the Oscar: the sheer number of other first-rate lead and supporting actors, compared to the numbers they would have faced in more recent times (and particularly the past several decades). In any given year, my ten snubbed actors were up against dozens of other fine actors turning in good performances.

The reasons are two-fold. First, and I believe especially significant, was the importance of stage acting. In the early twentieth century, before strict union codes drove prices up, it didn't cost a fortune to visit a theater. “Legitimate” theaters were able to train and employ more actors, many of whom migrated to Hollywood. While movie acting differs from stage acting, acting on stage is a good way to learn the craft. Note, in this regard, that almost half the actors on my list started their careers in Britain, home of a great stage tradition.

Second, the Hollywood studio system supported enormous numbers of artists -- hence the phrase "stables of actors" -- and had training schools to produce new ones. Train thousands of potentially talented people, on stage and in studio schools, and you are bound to get lots of fine actors, and hence lots of competition for acting Oscars. From the 1930s to the late 1950s, most people had only movies for visual entertainment – no television.  So the studios put out a lot more movies then, and thus the pool of performances to select from was larger.

Now, however, conditions are much more favorable for even minimal talents to be recognized. There may be as many aspiring actors as there ever were, but the training grounds are fewer. Community theater is dying out, Broadway is not the force it used to be, and many high schools have cut their acting programs, if they ever had them. The studios don’t sign new possibilities to starter contracts, and train them in acting; that's too much overhead. There are fewer movies and fewer well-trained people, so the good, the sort of good, and even the mediocre have more of a chance to stand out and be rewarded by King Oscar. Anyone writing a piece like this, 20 years from now, may have much more difficulty identifying unrewarded merit.

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