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Batman may rescue Oscar ratings from the doldrums

By Scott Bowles and Susan Wloszczyna, USA TODAY

Batman has had a busy year.

First he came to the rescue of the box office as *The Dark Knight* became the second-highest-grossing film of all time and pushed 2008 to record ticket sales. He gave comic-book films a newfound cachet among critics and awards voters.

Now he may be asked to save Oscar.

Though the film has become a magnet for trophy metal and turned the past two months into a running tribute to its late star, Heath Ledger, the movie's enduring legacy may be shaped by Thursday's Oscar nominations.

Ledger's portrayal of the demented Joker is considered a lock-nominee for best supporting actor (and he's the odds-on favorite to win it). Many also consider the comic-book adaptation a contender for other Academy Award honors, including best director, cinematography and editing.

But more than a few observers — including stars and filmmakers who had nothing to do with the picture — are rooting for *The Dark Knight* to nab the granddaddy nomination. They see the film as a bridge between populist and artistic fare and a breakthrough for comic-book films, which have never been nominated for best picture.

It 'balances things out'

And Oscar could use a shot in the arm. To shake things up for this year's telecast (Feb. 22 on ABC), the show has changed producers and is opting for star Hugh Jackman instead of a television personality as host.

But as the Oscars has continued to honor small, artsy films, the gala has drawn criticism that it's out of touch with the masses, who are tuning in less and less. Last year's ceremony, when *No Country for Old Men* won best picture, brought in only 32 million viewers, an all-time low.

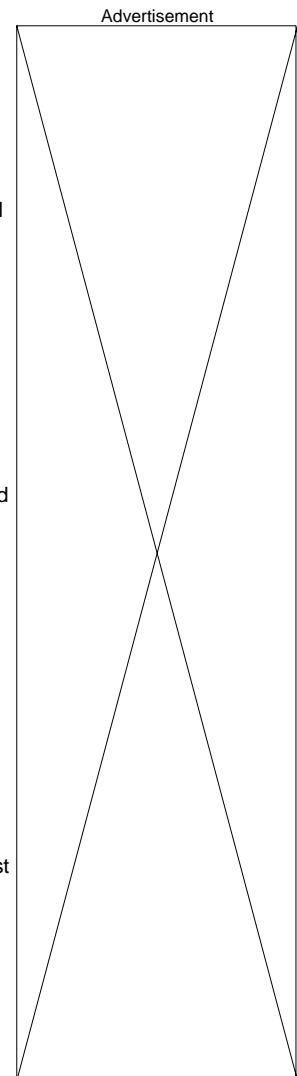
Though no one is calling for the Oscars to become a popularity contest, critics say the academy has developed a bias against public favorites.

"For some reason, the academy has gotten away from recognizing what Hollywood does really well: entertain the masses," says media critic Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies at the University at Buffalo. "Not all popular movies are good; many of them are terrible. But there is something to be said for entertaining great numbers of people. Recognizing *The Dark Knight* could be a sea change in the way commercial movies are treated."

That kind of talk makes *Dark Knight* director Christopher Nolan cringe. He still considers the original *Superman* the best comic-book movie ever made and doesn't buy that his Batman saga has brought a new pedigree to the genre. Nolan has been visibly uncomfortable accepting awards for Ledger, and he declined interview requests for this story.

So fans have taken up the Oscar crusade in his stead. And they've emerged from every corner.

Director Steven Spielberg sees *Dark Knight* a crucial counterweight to some of the smaller movies expected to vie for best picture, including



Slumdog Millionaire, *Milk* and *Frost/Nixon*.

"I am really happy to see that *The Dark Knight* is making a last-minute run at recognition," he said after the Golden Globes. "I was very happy with the Heath (Golden Globe) win and am looking forward to some more *Dark Knight* momentum. ... That balances things out."

For Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, star of movies including *The Game Plan* and *The Scorpion King*, *The Dark Knight* represents a chance for commercially viable films to be taken as seriously as art-house dramas and sweeping historical epics.

"It has always bothered me how quickly critics and (awards) voters dismiss something just because a lot of people like it," he says. "I really hope (*The Dark Knight*) gets nominated. I think it could dispel that disconnect between people who see the movies and the people who judge and write about them."

Finally, a familiar film

For moviegoers, a *Dark Knight* nomination could be the difference between watching the telecast or not. When asked whether they were more inclined to watch the Oscars this year if *Dark Knight* were up for best picture, 71% of the more than 2,500 respondents to a USA TODAY online vote said yes. An additional 11% said they would at least catch the supporting-actor and best-picture categories. Meanwhile, 18% wouldn't be persuaded to tune in.

The results match a survey of 7,000 moviegoers by movie-ticket reseller Fandango, which also found 71% would be more inclined to watch the telecast if *The Dark Knight* were nominated.

Mel Maurer, 71, a retiree from Westlake, Ohio, fell out of the habit of watching the Oscars several years ago because "my wife and I have found we're not as familiar with the nominated movies as we used to be." Also, he says, "the shows themselves aren't as well-produced."

But as a Batman fan since the days of the '40s serial, he is pretty sure he will watch this year. And even if he doesn't watch the entire telecast, "I'll be watching to make sure Ledger gets his award."

Mechanical engineer Erick Webster, 47, of Farmington Hills, Mich., usually skips the Oscar show because of its length and his lack of familiarity with most of the movies up for prizes.

"A lot aren't shown at my theater," he says of the titles that have been dominating the event for a while. "None of my family members (including sons Alex, 16, and Joe, 19) have an interest in the Oscars. They are too boring to them."

But he will be tuning in this year if Batman gets the call. "*The Dark Knight* was that good a movie, and Heath Ledger deserves an Oscar nomination, if not winning the Oscar."

Still, not every fan is willing to endure the whole ceremony.

"As much as I adore *The Dark Knight* and really feel it deserves to win for best picture, more than likely I will not watch the entire broadcast," says banker Lorna Lewis, 36, of Norwalk, Conn. Instead, she will focus on catching just the opening monologue and the supporting-actor and best-picture categories.

A *Dark Knight* nomination, suggests Kris Tapley of the awards site InContention.com, could be the secret to nabbing those elusive Internet-addicted viewers.

"You've got *Wolverine* (star Jackman) hosting the show, the Joker being honored, *Iron Man* perhaps getting some recognition," Tapley says. "This could be the year that populism and critical attention finally dovetail."

Why the underdog?

Yet no one considers a best-picture nomination for *The Dark Knight* a sure thing, despite its achievements. It grossed \$531 million domestically, second only to *Titanic*'s \$600 million. (*Titanic* won best picture.) It will be rereleased on 250 regular and IMAX screens Friday.

Knight also bowled over critics, earning recommendations from 94% of the nation's film reviewers, according to RottenTomatoes.com. That makes it one of the best reviewed movies of the year, along with *Iron Man* and *WALL·E*, two films not expected to make the best-picture cut. The Joker's trademark "Why so serious?" has become the catchphrase of the season, much like last year's "I drink your milkshake" from best-picture nominee *There Will Be Blood*.

Still, *The Dark Knight* is viewed as being on the bubble, behind *Slumdog*, *Milk*, *Frost/Nixon* and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Other movies looking to make the final five are *Doubt*, *The Wrestler* and *Gran Torino*.

Part of *The Dark Knight*'s challenge is to overcome the stigma of being a comic-book movie.

"All movies from certain genres have to face this challenge," says Tom O'Neil, author of *Movie Awards* and forecaster for the award site TheEnvelope.com. "No one thought a horror movie could win, and *Silence of the Lambs* had to prove them wrong. No one thought a fantasy film could win, and *Lord of the Rings* had to overcome that.

"*The Dark Knight* will have to do the same thing."

And although Ledger's death helped propel the movie's box-office performance and probably will earn him an acting nomination, the tragedy could prove a hindrance in the best-picture race, analysts say. Academy members are loath to honor a movie for sentimental reasons.

"You can argue that *The Dark Knight* is getting all this attention because of a perfect storm of events," Tapley says. "We had been hearing that Ledger was doing great things with the part way before he died. So it was going to be big, and he was going to get noticed. But is the movie this big if there's not some rubbernecking due to his death? Probably not."

If it does get nominated, it could become the dark horse to upset *Slumdog* or *Button*, much the way that 1995's *Braveheart* upset the favorites *Sense and Sensibility* and *Apollo 13*.

"This is the movie that throws the race into total mayhem if it gets nominated," O'Neil says. "It was the biggest movie of 2008, in just about every respect. You can't underestimate the power of that big a movie."

But should size matter?

"What hopefully won't get lost in all this is that, even though it's a popular movie, *The Dark Knight* is also a very good one," Rapping says. "It's true film noir. It could influence other directors to push the envelope with their mainstream films. In the end, the best thing for the movie is if it gets judged on its own merits, not on all things that surround it."

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