

WHO WAS OSCAR ANYWAY?

Let's clear up the acronym question first. An Oscar is not an Over-Siliconed Carping Actors' Reward. If the annual Hollywood gong-fest was a handy collection of initial letters, the 13.5in gold-plated britannium statuette would be the instantly forgettable AAM, after its official name, the Academy Award of Merit.

The film-makers who founded the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1927 hoped their clumsy moniker would bestow gravitas on their disreputable profession. Their awards ceremony, however, soon cried out for something warmer and more showbiz. Oscar fitted the bill and, in keeping with the myth-making of the movie business, is now the object of a number of heart-warming stories of origin.

Luvvies like nicknames and one theory has Bette Davis giving the prize her first husband's middle name when she received the statuette in 1935 because its flat bottom reminded her of him. Hollywood columnist Sidney Skolsky undercuts the Davis theory by a year. He used Oscar to refer to Katharine Hepburn's first win in a column published in 1934. While this is the first written evidence of the name, it is thought Skolsky was simply repeating the name he had already heard, not devising a new one from an old vaudeville joke, "Will you have a cigar, Oscar?" (No, I don't get it, either.)

A pleasingly Eurocentric explanation links the name to Oscar Wilde who, years before on a US lecture tour, was asked if he had won the Newdigate Prize for Poetry. "Yes, but while many people have won the Newdigate, it is seldom that the Newdigate gets an Oscar," he retorted. When Helen Hayes won the best actress award in 1931, her playwright husband reportedly said: "Ah, I see you've got an Oscar."

But the most repeated legend - and the one the academy folks officially approve of - has it that their humble librarian, Margaret Herrick, saw a sketch of the statuette of a blank-faced knight and whispered: "He looks a lot like my uncle Oscar." Other academy staff picked up the habit and, by 1939, Oscar was used officially for the first time. Herrick went on to become the academy's executive director. What her uncle thought is lost to civilisation.

acronym	zkratka
carping	věčně kritizující
handy	užitečný
moniker	pseudonym
to bestow	dát, propůjčit
gravitas	důstojnost
disreputable	pochybný
to fit the bill	vyhovovat
columnist	sloupkař
to undercut	podrýt, podkopat
to retort	odseknout (odpovědí)
humble	skromný

