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MARCH 2007 \$4.95





Seeing Stars

★★★★ BY SARAH FX COBLE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NANCY DENIKE



Opposite: Marilyn Monroe (Camille Terry) and Sean Connery (John Allen) made an appearance at the Barrons' annual Oscar Party. Left: Guests watch the ceremony. Below: The prizes.

Art and Joan Barron host a West Coast salute to the Oscars.

Everyone likes a little celebrity treatment. Although it might be tiresome to have photographers and fashion critics hiding in the bushes, tracking your every step and fashion faux pas, it's nice to be treated like a star now and then. As a voting member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Art Barron has an inside line on showbiz, and has even attended the real deal in Hollywood a few times. For the past eight years, however, he and his wife, Joan, have rolled out the red carpet in Bonita Springs (Florida's version of the West Coast) for old friends, new acquaintances, colleagues, relatives, and the occasional journalist. Their annual Academy Awards party has become an eagerly anticipated event that has made them into something of celebrities themselves.

An Oscar Night party, with all the trappings of Hollywood glamour, flashing camera bulbs, and toothy smiles, is a con-

genial and elegant way to essentially invite a bunch of friends over to watch television. After all, what better subject for convivial conversation, deep discussion, or good-natured derision is there than the movies and movie stars?

As guests make their way up to the Barron's front door for the 2005 fete, along the honest-to-goodness red carpet, photographers' flashbulbs leave them with stars in their eyes. Doing the fashion interview with the Joan Rivers doppelganger (aptly played with affable snarkiness by Joan Barron's sister, Janice Lafemina), and rubbing elbows with Marilyn Monroe and Sean Connery (played by professional celebrity impersonators Camille Terry and John Allen) before entering between the giant gold Oscar statues flanking the doors gives partygoers a taste of what it's like to be a movie idol, and sets the tone for the evening.

Even before the party's started, however, Art Barron has



added a particularly special touch: He's sent his guests copies of his own official ballot for them to cast their own votes. Walking around the spacious foyer and bar area laid with an elegant selection of hors d'oeuvres, or taking in the sunset near the pool where the specially installed big-screen television plays the Hollywood pre-show broadcast, guests mix easily, supplied with a sure-fire cocktail of conversation starters:

"Do you think she should win two years in a row?"

"I liked him in *Ocean's Eleven*, but *Syriana*? Get serious!"

"What was she thinking when she put *that* on?"

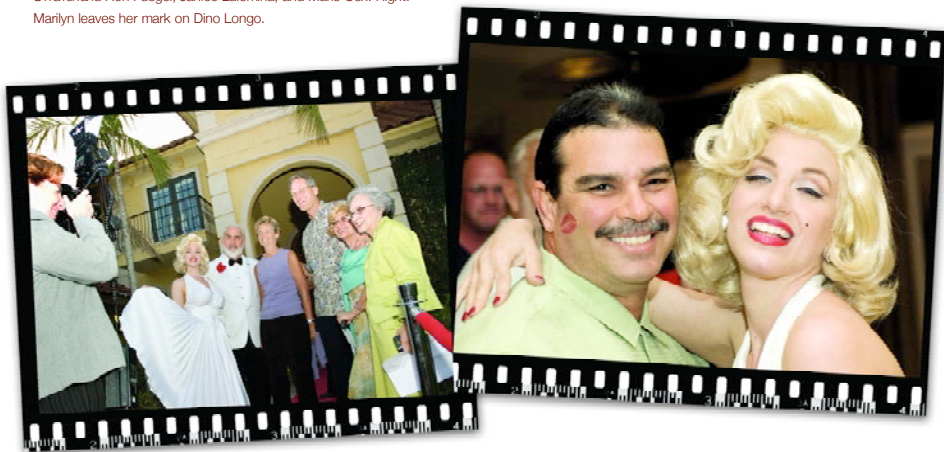
On this occasion, everyone from Barron's former show business colleagues to the young daughter of the sound technician has something in common — the movies. And on this night, that's everything.

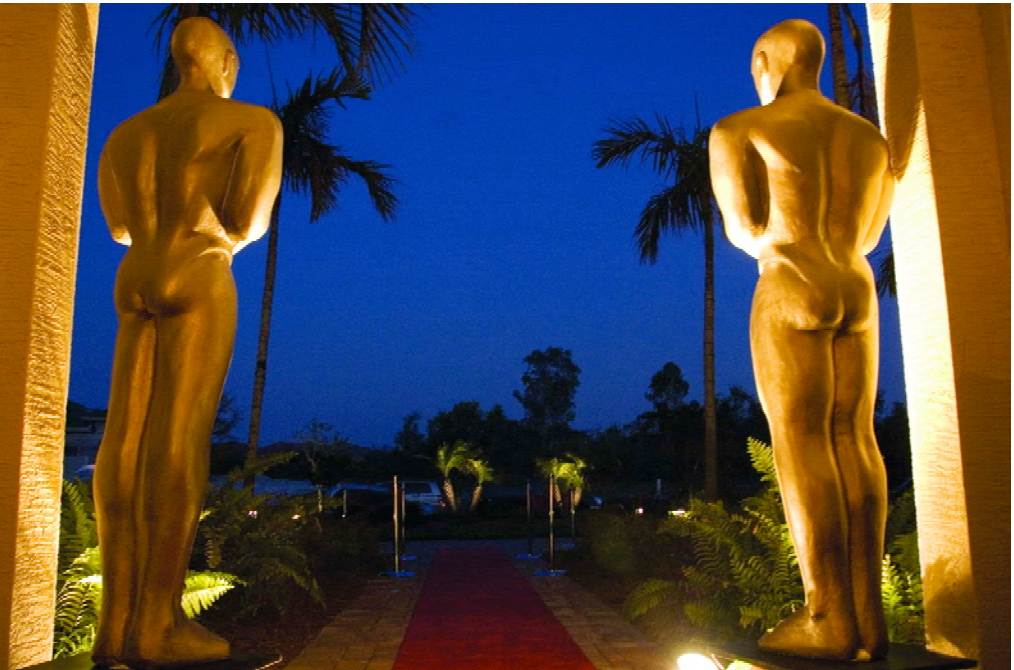
The buffet supper, catered by Artichoke & Co., is simple and light; the Oscar statuette-bedecked tables and gilded faux bamboo chairs are twinkling and glamorous. A rich dessert and coffee are served just as the awards begin. Scores for the numbers of correct guesses on the guests' ballots are tallied during the commercial breaks.

The first Barron Oscar goes to Best Guesser. For two years in a row, the award has gone to Norrie Oelkers, co-chair of Operation Smile in Morristown, New Jersey. A self-admitted movie fanatic, Oelkers made this weekend trip to Naples solely to successfully defend her title. The second Barron Oscar, Best Supporting Guesser, goes to Oelkers' husband, but he may have peeked at her ballot. The winner of the award for Most Aspiring Guesser, for the person with fewest correct guesses, slipped away into the night — maybe out of shame?

Art Barron didn't do so hot in picking the winners, either.

Below, left: Marilyn Monroe and Sean Connery strike a pose with Sharon and Ron Fueger, Janice Lafemina, and Marie Cox. Right: Marilyn leaves her mark on Dino Longo.





"Joan and I usually eliminate ourselves from the competition because we used to guess all of them right. But I guess I've been out of the business long enough now, I just can't pick 'em.

"But keep going to the movies, guys," adds Barron as the guests begin to wander down the red carpet and into the night. "I still need the pension!" *NI*



Above: Marilyn Monroe and Sean Connery flank hosts Art and Joan Barron. Top: Guests watch the Academy Awards after a buffet dinner created by Artichoke & Co.

Golden Man

Art Barron seems an unlikely Hollywood insider. The former Iowa boy became an accountant and moved on to become vice president and general sales manager of Lucille Ball's Desilu Productions. Now retired from a lengthy stint as chief financial officer and executive vice president (and then president) of Paramount Communication Inc.'s Entertainment Group (which included Paramount Pictures, Madison Square Garden, and Cinema International Corp.), and from a later post as chairman of Time Warner International, Barron still seems unaffected and unflappable.

NI: How did your level head serve you in the industry where drama rules?

BARRON: I dealt more with agents and money people than with stars. Somebody has to keep a level head in the movie business.

NI: How do you get to be a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences?

BARRON: There are about 6,500 members in the Academy. You have to be working in the industry to apply and have a couple of sponsors. I'm in the Executive Division of the Academy. At the time I joined, I was [essentially] running [Paramount] studio. Then, you basically pay your membership dues and that's about it.

NI: When the winners thank the members of the Academy, do you ever feel as though they are talking to you personally?

BARRON: No.



Frank Russen watches the show seated in front of Augie and Rina Longo. Above: Oscar statues stand at the front door.