

# The Other Truth About Academy Membership

It's not just very white and male (for now), it's loaded with lots of people who make you go 'huh?' as the outraged underbelly of its A-list veneer fights back By Gregg Kilday

**T**HE ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE Arts and Sciences has spent years burnishing its image as the Hollywood gold standard. It describes itself as “the world’s pre-eminent movie related organization, comprised of 7,000+ accomplished men and women working in cinema.” And the annual Oscar show — with its ceremonial red carpet, its razzle-dazzle sets, its buffed-and-bejeweled parade of modern-day screen gods and goddesses and its obligatory homages to the greatest screen deities of the past — is designed to maintain that illusion.

But all that glistens isn’t necessarily golden — and this year, Oscar has lost some of his sheen, as, for the second year in a row, the #OscarsSoWhite outcry has led the organization to accelerate efforts to diversify its membership in an attempt to transform what many view as an exclusive old boys club into a much more multiethnic, gender-equal but no less prestigious association.

In the process, though, another of the Academy’s secrets has been exposed. The Academy has never released a list of its full membership. The ostensible reason, it claims, is that its members’ names must be kept private to protect them from movie studios lobbying for their votes — even though all the studios have compiled their own lists of Academy members for just that purpose.

In reality, that cone of silence is in place to guard the Academy’s image as an august organization comprised of only the starriest A-list actors, world-class directors and most accomplished master craftsmen. To be sure, there are plenty of those names among the 6,261 voting members. What gets papered over is that there also is a sizable contingent of working stiffs.

Amid all the current controversy, a number of those regular Academy folks, outraged that they could lose voting rights under the new rules, have voluntarily stepped forward — in effect, exposing some of the real men and women behind the Academy curtain. And, as a group, they offer a view of an Academy that isn’t quite so elite.



Consider a few of the Academy members who have voiced their concerns to *THR*: Bill Mummy, a member of the actors branch, wrote, “I, like so many others, have been relegated to a lesser status by the current administration of the Academy.” Rutanya Alda, another member of the actors branch, objecting that older members could be denied a vote if they are no longer “active” in the industry, zeroed in on “the nebulous status of ‘active.’” And Sam Weisman, a member of the directors branch, argued, “If the Academy decrees I am no longer worthy of active member status, they are losing a person of value.”

Now, no disrespect to the individuals involved. Working in an industry where the odds are stacked against any one person making a success of it, they all managed to sustain careers, even if their résumés don’t quite match the glittery standard the Academy likes to project.

Mummy, best known for playing young Will Robinson in the 1960s series *Lost in Space*, has spent most of his career in TV, with only a handful of film credits, like a supporting role in the 1973 prison drama *Papillon*. Alda, who figured prominently in the wedding sequence in the first act of 1978’s *The Deer Hunter*, is most remembered for playing Carol Ann, Joan Crawford’s long-suffering secretary in 1981’s *Mommie Dearest*. And Weisman, a prolific TV director, has turned out only a few features, ranging from 1994’s *D2: The Mighty Ducks* to 1999’s *The Out-of-Towners*.

While they understandably are upset that their ability to render judgment on the year’s

best movies is being questioned, look at the one word that comes up over and over again in their complaints: *status*. That’s the core issue here — for those trying to gain admittance to the Academy and those trying to hang on to their Academy privileges.

As novelist Tom Wolfe has shown, the quest for status is at the center of American life — from prison yards to college campuses to the drawing rooms of New York’s Upper East Side. As he’s explained it, “Every living moment of a human being’s life, unless the person is starving or in immediate danger of death in some other way, is controlled by a concern for status.” And nowhere is that truer than in Hollywood, where status distinctions are recalibrated on a daily basis, whether by the bouncers who maintain roped-off VIP areas at even the most exclusive parties or the valets who race to retrieve a Tesla Model S before a Mercedes S-Class.

In an industry where success can be fleeting and insecurity reigns, simply being a member of the Academy (and receiving those beloved screeners) is a mark of reassuring status. Being a voting member — as opposed to a nonvoting “member emeritus” — marks a further distinction conveying an even higher status. The Academy, which prefers to showcase its fancier show horses in public, never would admit it, but within its current ranks, there is a class of members for whom getting into the Academy is their biggest career accomplishment. And those members, who treasure that Academy validation, are not going to let it go without a fight. **THR**