

COMMENTARY

Hanks: On Oscar night, thank your lucky stars you're not famous

Anna Hanks, LOCAL CONTRIBUTOR

Saturday, March 04, 2006

It's no coincidence that that Westminster Kennel Club dog show and the Oscars don't happen at the same time. The grooming product supply chain couldn't take the strain.

Like the prize pooches at the pup show, the actors and actresses appearing at the 78th annual Academy Awards Sunday night will be groomed and primped for showtime.

Imagine the horror those poor actresses endure! There's the dieting, the nerve-wracking search for the perfect dress, picking the right makeup and hair team, then sorting through shiny baubles to find just the geegaw for gilding the lily. Ugh.

All their stress and trouble means that no matter what your plans are for Oscar night, chances are you'll be having a better time than those unfortunates nominated for their film work, then forced to spend their Sunday at the Kodak Theatre in borrowed clothing and worried smiles.

Some 40 million-plus people are expected to watch the Oscars, mostly to see who's wearing what. They give out statues too, but we mostly remember the outfits. Think of the American Express Gold Card dress Lizzy Gardiner wore in 1995 when accepting her Costume Design award for "The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert," the magnificent chartreuse Dior that Nicole Kidman flaunted in 1997, and the oversize pink Ralph Lauren that wore Gwyneth Paltrow in 1999 when she claimed her statue for "Shakespeare in Love." Best of all, in 2001 Bjork wore the swan dress.

This year my Oscar dream is that Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal will show up with faux bloodstains embroidered on their sleeves, replicating where Ennis and Jack stained their shirts in a lovers' spat in "Brokeback Mountain." It'll never happen.

Frankly, I'm glad it isn't me up there on Oscar night. The unpleasantness of celebrity life was clearly illustrated the last time I partied with Puff Daddy. Umm, OK, the last time I partied near Puffy.

It was a cold Sunday night in November 2002. I was in the Rum House, a bar adjoining the Hotel Edison near Times Square. Puffy (a.k.a. Sean "Puffy" Combs, P. Diddy, Diddy and defendant) was having his birthday bash at "The Supper Club" next door.

The fuss preparing for Puffy's party included police barricades and a red carpet on the chilly sidewalk outside the Rum House's one-way windows (where you can watch people without being seen, like the interrogation rooms on TV). This architectural quirk meant photographers in parkas lined up facing both the red carpet and us inside the bar, giving us a star's eye view. Like a good tourist, I rushed upstairs for my camera. Inside the Rum

House, everyone was glued to the windows, some noses literally pressed against chilled glass. The Beatles song "All You Need is Love" played in the background.

On the street, rap royalty shed their coats, posing in sequins and bare skin. Unfortunately, celebrity doesn't keep you warm. Starlets' teeth were chattering uncontrollably, despite determined smiles for the paparazzi.

Finally, we glimpsed the back of alpha-dog Puffy's head as he crossed the red carpet. Once Puffy disappeared into his party, the informal Rum House event ended. I wondered exactly why had we been compelled to stay? Perhaps that Beatles song explained why no one at the Rum House could tear themselves away from marginally famous people shivering for the media.

It was clear that Puffy and company had the love and attention of thousands --or at least of the fans lining that cold street. Perhaps we were literally trying to get close to that. Deep down, maybe we wanted to understand why they had crossed over the velvet rope, becoming worthy of adoration.

Of course that kind of love is an illusion. As the "E! True Hollywood Story" often explains, fame and money never bring lasting happiness. While Puffy raps, "It's All about the Benjamins," about the pleasures \$100 bills bring, think how unhappy Elvis was at the end.

Lucky for you, if you're watching the Oscars on TV, you're likely watching them with your chosen "peeps," not "your people," in Hollywood-speak. Perhaps you even have the luxury of alone time with your comfy chair and worn-in slippers.

Whatever the case, you are luckier than those poor Oscar-nominated actresses. You aren't a commodity whose Oscar-night look will soon be selling dresses and magazines. You aren't compelled to wear borrowed clothing and lend your fleeting fame to a fashion house.

Just like the dogs of the Westminster Kennel Club, those actresses have had their hair brushed and their nails clipped by others. As my husband noted, you can admire Rufus, the club's 2006 Best in Show, but you wouldn't want to be him.

Think of these actresses the same way. It's a dog's life being a celebrity. You always have a handler nearby, keeping you from getting into trouble. And just look what happened the last time Tom Cruise got off leash --he jumped all over Oprah's sofa.

Hanks is an Austin freelance journalist.