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HOLLYWOOD

THE THIN RED LINE

Oscar invite get lost in the mail? Expert party crashers on how to slip past the ultimate velvet rope

By Shana Ting Lipton



OPEN SESAME Do you know the magic words?

In 1974, 33-year-old sex shop proprietor Robert Opal made history. After counterfeiting a press pass and deftly navigating security, this industry outsider and total nobody gained backstage access to the most exclusive event in Hollywood, the Academy Awards. Not content to just soak up the star-studded atmosphere, when the debonair David Niven came on to introduce Elizabeth Taylor at the live taping, the **mustachioed intruder** ran across the stage naked, flashing a peace sign. After being apprehended by security, Opal was ushered backstage to meet the press corps, resulting in a brief brush with fame when he subsequently hit the talk show circuit. The nude gate-crasher's renown ultimately earned him a paid gig as a professional streaker at one of dancer Rudolf Nureyev's parties, but to a handful of hardcore, veteran party crashers, the incident has earned him something more; it's earned him the status of legend.

Opal's experience is a dream scenario for many top-tier party crashers—yes, there are tiers—who've turned this social sport into something of an art form. And though getting into the ceremony itself is something of a Mission:

"The reason you crash a party is not to hang out with the stars; It's all about outwitting the security personnel"

Impossible in a post-9/11 world, sneaking into exclusive Oscar after-parties can prove just as challenging. Would-be interlopers wear costumes, bring props, fabricate scenarios, hide behind overweight people or clusters of celebrities, and make scenes, all in the name of hobnobbing with the A-List—or rather, for the thrill of outsmarting some of the most well-regarded bouncers in the business. Shunned by the ice queen at the clipboard and relegated to bottom-feeder status in the social hierarchy, gate-crashers may be publicly mocked as party pariahs, but on another level they may well be the everyman heroes of the Bling Epoque.

According to Rex Reginald, the self-styled "King of the Party Crashers"—who claims that his story outline and party-crashing handbook were **co-opted** by New Line Cinema when they made the film *Wedding Crashers*—gate-crashers in Los Angeles make up an exclusive society that boasts perhaps 50 "really elite" members. "It's almost like the mafia," he says. "You have to be brought in and become a 'made' crasher."

Reginald's handbook features many ploys he's honed to perfection ("I have a trunk full of tricks, props that I've used"), but he attributes much of his track record to a sixth sense, knowing how to accurately survey a scene and spot its weaknesses. It's a talent that's gotten him into Elton John's and Jamie Foxx's post-Oscar bashes, among others. He even conned his way into the Playboy mansion (notorious for bouncing suspiciously zealous males) year after year, ultimately earning him official invites to the bachelor's lair. Certainly *The Talented Mr. Ripley* effect of going from interloper to inner-circle is a much-coveted consequence of party crashing. "I crashed Saudi Arabian Prince Abdul's birthday party in a castle in Bel Air and he ended up inviting me to live there for the summer," boasts Reginald.



SUPER STREAK Opal at the Oscars

Befriending hosts and guests is a pleasant by-product of gate-crashing, but it's sometimes also a survival method. "It's good to talk to somebody important if you can manage it. Then they think you're important, too," veteran New York party crasher/painter Richard Osterweil advises. This very tactic once saved his hide at a small movie premiere after-party for *The Mirror Crack'd*. Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor, and Kim Novak were among the 100 or so people invited to the intimate affair. "I knew I was being watched very carefully," he says, so he made a beeline for Ms. Novak and began a conversation about her latest passion. "When you're intently talking to Kim Novak about llamas, nobody's going to kick you out," he insists.

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In the prologue to his best-selling book, *How to Lose Friends & Alienate People*, writer **Toby Young** recounts his experience crashing the infamous *Vanity Fair* Oscar party in 1994. The unabashed scribe chatted up and successfully pissed off Amanda de Cadenet and Kenneth Branagh before being bounced while talking to Nancy Kerrigan. Young, who had pretended to be a fellow journalist whose name was on the list, was foiled when his "namesake" showed up at the event.

Yet the door policy for the famed magazine affair can be just as brutal for invited guests as for interlopers. In 1996, this time on the payroll at *VF*, Young managed to snag an invitation to the lowly latter part of the event. He was given orders not to show up until after 11:30 p.m. but defiantly arrived at 10 and finagled his way in with sweet talk. "There are so many checkpoints and its organizers are so officious, it's like trying to get into the headquarters of the Waffen-SS in Nazi Germany," he says. Yet somehow, he recounts, a reporter for *The Star* breezed in sporting a piglet on a leash, claiming that it was the lead in *Babe*, which was nominated for Best Picture that year.

Throughout his 30-year crashing career, Osterweil has opted to stay within his New York stomping grounds. For his inaugural episode, in 1977, he snuck into the premiere of Al Pacino's *Bobby Deerfield* at Tavern on the Green by entangling himself in Jacqueline Onassis's entourage. As a result, Osterweil is still often asked by tabloids to speak as a pundit regarding the political royals and quoted in print as "Kennedy pal." Unfortunately for him, after his documentary, *Painting the Town*, was released in 1992, he was prevented from attending Onassis's funeral two years later. Having successfully navigated three security checkpoints, Osterweil was about to enter using the name of a Kennedy advisor, but "the guy in charge of protocol had seen my movie."



GADFLY Reginald with Brittany Murphy

Though crashers don't always make it all the way into the event, or stay long enough to enjoy the entire party, some get a buzz from just passing a checkpoint or two. San Diego-based crasher **Scoobie Davis** recalls one such experience. Despite the fact that he didn't make it inside the Oscars, he got as far as the red carpet arrivals. "When I did get to the red carpet it was more of a fluke," he recalls. He had had some prior party-crashing experience at the time—mostly post-movie premiere events. On that day, he happened to be helping shoot a commercial for a limousine service on Sunset Boulevard when the flush of fancy to crash struck him. He befriended an Oscar-bound limo driver, convinced him to lend out his pass, and proceeded to make a copy of it at a Kinko's down the street. "We were totally clowning around," he says. "There was all this talk on TV about enhanced Oscar security. This was the first after 9/11." Yet they made it through checkpoint one—the paparazzi ghetto—and even got coverage from the Associated Press and CBS News. "There were throngs of people cheering and flashbulbs going off," he recalls.

Osterweil experienced his own pinnacle flashbulb moment when he came out of retirement to sneak into Liza Minnelli and David Gest's wedding in 2002 (an event he chronicled for *The New York Times*). For this special occasion, he opted to double up, bringing a gal pal as a date. Previously, the two had much success by posing as a bickering husband and wife. "No one likes to interrupt an arguing couple," he points out. This time the plan was a little different. Amid a paparazzo's wet dream of legendary celebrities including Lauren Bacall, Mickey Rooney, and Michael Jackson, they hurriedly pushed their way up to the entrance. Osterweil then stammered, with a dire look on his face, "Excuse me, is there a ladies' room around? My wife is not feeling well." The two were ushered in without question to the star-studded affair. "You know what they want to prevent in an event like this?" Osterweil asks. "Fresh vomit!"



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One might argue that such aplomb and mastery could qualify some of these gate-crashers for Oscar nominations themselves. Role playing certainly figures into much of the advice that the amateur thespians offer to would-be crashers. Acting is part of the game. Davis, though not considering himself a master of the craft, says, "I've done some [film] work. That comes in really handy." So does one of his favorite costumes. "I wear a **cook's outfit**, then I get 'lost' and go to the restroom and take that off." He carries a light change of clothing in a conveniently trendy man-purse.

Young, who has been faking his way into fetes for almost 30 years, says that if he were to attempt the *Vanity Fair* party again this year, he would rent an L.A. fire marshal costume. "The people in charge are terrified of the fire marshals because they can close the party down in seconds," he says. In this case, he suggests wearing a tuxedo underneath. He explains: "As soon as you were in, you'd head straight for the toilets, get rid of the fire marshal costume, and then head back out into the party."

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Reginald has resorted to embedding himself with news crews as a means of getting into Oscar events. "I literally barged into the places like I was commanding the ABC News crews and used them to get in." A nifty trick, but as Davis warns, these types of attention-getting tactics can backfire in the long run. Recognition is a risk repeat offenders take. "When it comes to a lot of the premieres, it's the same security people," he says. "If you do get busted, make a hasty retreat, because you don't want them to learn your face." Reginald has a different perspective on being a regular. He recommends legitimizing yourself by sporadically actually getting invited to events. "You can't just crash everything," he warns.



Pic: Oliver Lim

And so, some will save their best tricks for the most challenging evening of the year, **Academy Awards night**. "You've got to have serious balls," says Davis. Certainly, the fear and adrenaline rush are part of it. "The reason you crash a party is not to hang out with the stars," says Young. "It's all about outwitting the security personnel." When it comes to the Academy, Reginald warns amateurs not to try this at home, so to speak: "You've got to be really good to crash the Oscars."

Something of a gate-crashing snob, Reginald discourages bad apples and scene spoilers, recalling ugly incidents at the Golden Globes and other industry gatherings. He cites a particular crew of "bad party crashers" in the community, one of whom was tried in Beverly Hills criminal court for stealing 80 gift bags worth \$500 apiece. Some of these swag hags are "E-fencers," as Reginald puts it: They obtain merchandise from Hollywood soirees and turn around and sell it on eBay, clearly lacking the sophistication and subtlety required to be members of the elite gate-crashing community. "I've had these people thrown out of parties, and they are parties I've crashed," says Reginald. After all, such unwelcome guests give gate-crashers a bad name.