

Oscars dip after 'Titanic' year

ABC's stands by Whoopi's marathon-like effort and the switch to Sunday night telecast

By Joe Schlosser

The longest Academy Awards telecast in the 71-year history of the event didn't translate into great Nielsen results, but despite some critical pans, ABC did have some promising results in key demos.

A year after *Titanic* helped ABC sail to lofty heights, the Shakespeare-themed Oscars dropped 18% off last year's course with a 28.6 rating/46 share, according to Nielsen Media Research. Last year's Oscars brought ABC a 34.9/55 on the strength of *Titanic*, which network researchers say brought millions of viewers to the telecast who wouldn't have otherwise been watching. An estimated 87 million viewers watched at least a portion of last year's show, while last week's Oscars only attracted 78 million.

The 1999 Oscars drew the second-lowest household ratings for the Academy Awards over the last eight years and the results were lighter than expected with the switch to a Sunday night broadcast, traditionally a heavy viewing night.

ABC's Michael Davies, the network's executive vice president of alternative series and specials, said he didn't expect to top last year's numbers and that last week's broadcast "fell right about where our expectations were." As for the move to Sunday from the telecast's traditional Monday night position, Davies says he and other ABC executives are standing by the change.

"With the Academy Awards being the crown jewels for the Academy and the network, we make decisions very, very slowly and in a very deliberate fashion," Davies said. "So having decided on moving the show to Sundays, we're going to leave it there. I think it's the right place for the show."

While the ratings were nothing to crow about, the demographics and the comparisons to other recent Academy Awards telecasts were not so bad.

In adults 18-49, the 1999 show was off 22% from last year, but 15% ahead of 1997 and slightly better than 1996. The household ratings were also up from 1997, when *The English Patient* attracted a 27.4 rating/46 share.



Roberto Benigni accepts the Best Foreign Film Oscar from Sophia Loren.

Meanwhile, the reviews for host Whoopi Goldberg were mixed at best, with some harsh criticism for the comedienne's sexual references. Goldberg replaced friend and fellow comedian Billy Crystal at the microphone and the calls for Crystal to return to the

show started coming in soon after the 1999 Oscars were finished.

Davies counters that Goldberg did a "superb job" and wondered why the media has been so critical of her Oscar performance. Davies says the chore of hosting the Oscars is the hardest job on television and that Goldberg kept the show alive throughout its four-hour plus telecast.

"I think there is a very small group of people who are able to host the Academy Awards," he said. "I think Billy Crystal is one, I think Whoopi Goldberg is another and there is probably a tiny little short list of others that can even be considered for the position."

Davies says a decision on whom the network will ask to host the 2000 Oscars will likely be made next fall, but failed to comment on the possibility of Goldberg or even Crystal returning. ABC has exclusive broadcast rights to the Oscars through 2008. ■

Glencairn's dicey LMAs

FCC doesn't want Sinclair to have final say in programming stations

By Elizabeth A. Rathbun

The FCC has asked Sinclair Broadcast Group Inc. to amend local marketing agreements with Glencairn Ltd. in four states. The goal is to exorcise Sinclair's "ultimate power to decide who will program the [TV] stations," according to a letter from Clay C. Pendarvis, chief of the FCC's television branch of the video services division.

Sinclair bought the four stations—WRGT-TV Dayton, Ohio; KOKH-TV Oklahoma City; WTAT-TV Charleston, S.C., and WVAH-TV Charleston, W.Va.—last March for about \$1 billion, along with the rest of Sullivan Broadcasting Co.

In July, Sinclair entered into an LMA with the four stations with the intention of transferring them to its longtime LMA partner, Glencairn,

once the Sullivan merger is completed. The FCC wants to know how that deal breaks down because it is not clear whether or how Sinclair would sell the stations to Glencairn, an FCC spokesman says.

Sinclair's plans call for it to continue holding the stations' LMAs. The FCC is worried about a provision that would require Glencairn to use Sinclair as its programmer in violation of Glencairn's "fundamental right and obligation to determine the type of programming to be aired on its station[s]," the letter says.

Another troublesome provision would allow Sinclair to reassign its LMA to any other company without Glencairn's approval. "A licensee must remain free to choose who will program its stations," the letter said.

The FCC also is inquiring about Sullivan's debt and wants to know exactly how much was paid for the company.

The commission's debt concerns center on an Oct. 8, 1998, declaration by Glencairn President Edwin L.