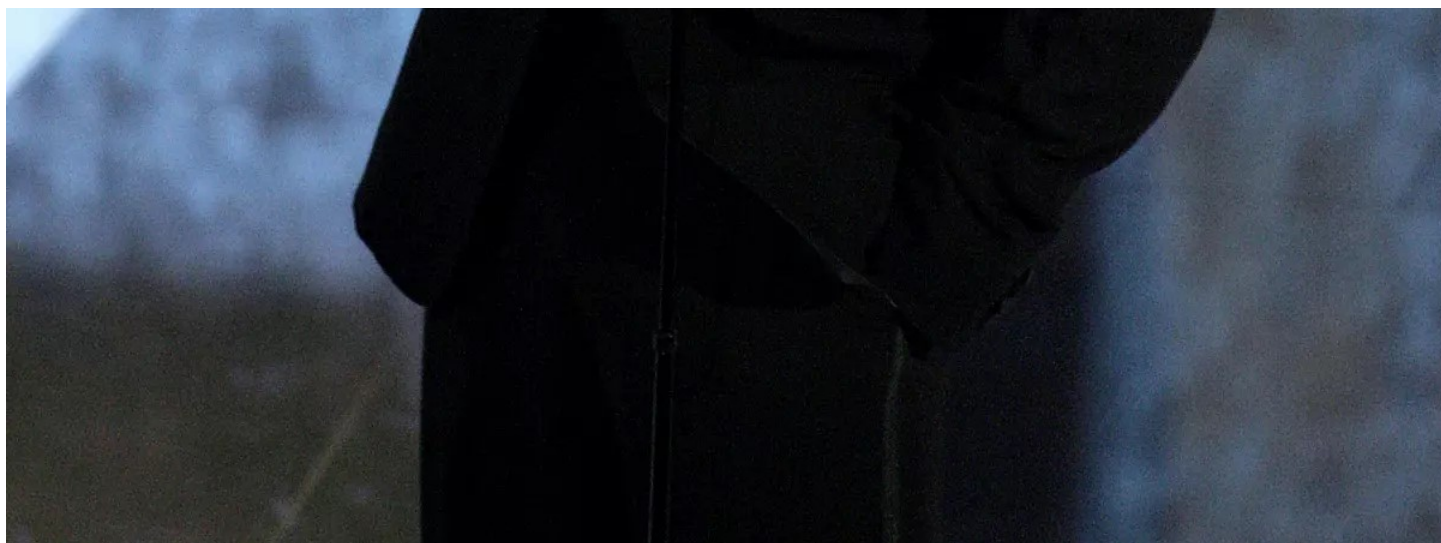


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AWARDS

Oscars rewind — 2004: Sean Penn steps up for his work with Clint Eastwood





Winning lead actor for his role in “Mystic River,” Sean Penn thanked his then-wife, Robin Wright Penn, and worked in a reference to the Iraq War in his speech. (Brian van der Brug / Los Angeles Times)

BY RANDEE DAWN

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Sean Penn and Clint Eastwood may not see eye to eye when it comes to politics, but these two big personalities and talents made movie magic in 2003 when they paired for “Mystic River.” And on Feb. 29, 2004, both were present at the 76th Academy Awards at the Kodak Theater in Hollywood when the film — directed by Eastwood and starring Penn as an ex-con turned convenience store owner — earned Penn his first Academy Award.

Politics and personal

After being announced as the winner by Nicole Kidman, Penn walked to the stage in a fitted Giorgio Armani suit and accepted the prize, making references to both his children with then-wife Robin Wright Penn and the Iraq War in his speech.

“If there’s one thing that actors know — other than that there weren’t any WMDs — it’s that there is no such thing as ‘best’ in acting,” he said. “And that’s proven by these great actors that I was nominated with, as well as the Giamattis, Cages, Downey Jrs., Nicholsons, etc., that were not nominated. We know how great all of you were. My

daughter Dylan and son Hopper find it presumptuous and embarrassing to write a speech, and so I'm gonna give it a go without. God, I really thank Clint Eastwood professionally and humanly for coming into my life. The great, great cast that I had to work with, my friends. ... Where do you go? [Writers] Dennis Lehane, Brian Helgeland. Ma. Dad. Robin, for being an undying emotional inspiration on this roller coaster I'm learning to enjoy."

Robin Wright and Sean Penn would stay married until 2010.

Penn had clearly been on a road to winning an Oscar at some point; the question was when. He'd been nominated in the lead actor category three times before that evening, in 2002 for "I Am Sam," in 2000 for "Sweet and Lowdown" (his co-star in that film, Samantha Morton, also was nominated at the Oscars in 2004) and in 1996 for "Dead Man Walking." The last film was directed by Tim Robbins, his "Mystic" co-star, who was in the audience with his then-partner, Susan Sarandon; Penn and Sarandon had briefly been romantically linked. Penn also once dated Charlize Theron, who would win the lead actress award that night. Hollywood is complicated!

But also in the audience was Eastwood, who seemed pleased at Penn's praise. But as Penn told Oprah Winfrey in an interview in 2005, he'd initially rejected "Mystic River's" script when Eastwood first brought it to him. "I wasn't interested because the theme was too similar to a movie I'd just made," Penn said. "But I really like Clint and we've had a lot of chuckles. A year later, he called again and I figured, 'This guy will never talk to you again if you turn him down.' I got about 10 pages into the script when I called him and said, 'This just hammers me.'"

Tough competition

The actor was up against serious competition. Johnny Depp earned his first nomination for "Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl," and would go on to earn two more nominations in the future. Ben Kingsley, nominated for "The

House of Sand and Fog,” already had an Oscar from 1983 for “Gandhi” and two other nominations. Jude Law earned his second nomination but his first for a leading role, for “Cold Mountain,” and Bill Murray earned his first and so far only nomination for “Lost in Translation.”

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