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## MARKETING A BEST PICTURE

# In a Crisis, It Was a 'Beautiful' Job

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Ten years from now, it will be hard to know what will be more memorable, "A Beautiful Mind" the movie or "A Beautiful Mind" the Oscar campaign, a watershed moment in the ongoing battle between historians and Hollywood over the custody of our shared heritage.

"It says it was really close," joked producer Brian Grazer as he accepted the envelope and the award for best picture, tacitly acknowledging the battle the film has endured on its way to the Oscar.

"A Beautiful Mind's" route to victory represented a personal vindication for some of Hollywood's biggest players, who launched a massive campaign to win the Oscar. Yet it was a victory, barely snatched from the jaws of defeat as Universal was forced to concentrate most of its effort on defending the film from charges of having whitewashed Nash's life.

This is the first Oscar winner with its own crisis PR manager, the inveterate **Sitrick and Co.** The firm, whose other clients have included Orange County in the middle of its bankruptcy, Enron wannabe Global Crossing and Paula Poundstone, wasn't brought on to squelch tales of Russell Crowe's sex life or hide evidence of discontent on the set, but to inoculate the film from a far graver adversary: the truth.

"I advise the studio on how to deal with journalistic issues, issues about the accuracy of the movie, controversies, which we seem to have more than our share," said **Allan Mayer**, the Sitrick partner in charge of the "Beautiful Mind" account, who also personally advises John Nash, the scientist on whose life the film is based, or rather "inspired by" as the credits state.

"In recent years particularly, journalists have become more sensitive to accuracy issues in movies, which in another time would have never been expected to be held to that

standard," said Mayer, who added that director Ron Howard and Grazer have been totally upfront about their intention, which was to take "the outlines of John Nash's life and [use] the high points, and [fill] in with imaginative speculation what might have been. They weren't pretending otherwise."

"For people to say, we're shocked it departs from the book ["A Beautiful Mind," by Sylvia Nasar] is kind of strange. Maria von Trapp was not exactly the way she was portrayed by Julie Andrews [in the Oscar-winning "The Sound of Music"] back in 1965."

Yet, the fury over "A Beautiful Mind" was particularly intense, with critics complaining of how Howard eliminated the complex and nuanced elements of Nash's messy life (everything from a son from a woman other than Alicia Nash, to a George Michael-type of arrest in a bathroom, which lost him his security clearance). Ironically enough, the basis of the charges came not from alternate histories of Nash's life, or disgruntled ex-lovers, but from the very book on which the film is named, based, and which can now be bought in the bookstores. (Look for the Russell Crowe cover.)

The pressure was unrelenting on the studio marketing machine. At Universal there were weekly strategy meetings and furious claims of a "smear campaign." One involved in the process described his job for the last three months as "going to the war room," the famous epithet that Clinton staffers had named the hub of their campaign headquarters. Like political candidates, Hollywood movies now need to be vetted for the skeletons in their past, and whether they actually inhaled or not.

Ever since Oliver Stone's history-revising epic "JFK" in 1991, a revitalized truth brigade has been on call to examine Hollywood films under the microscope. Presenting an alternate vision of American history, Stone's film attempted to debunk the lone gunman theory behind the Kennedy assassination and the published version of the screenplay came complete with annotations and footnotes, like a doctoral dissertation. That film unleashed a torrent of invective from journalists and authorities of all stripes, from columnist Christopher Hitchens, to the former funeral parlor worker who put Kennedy's slain body into the casket.

In its wake, almost every film, which dealt with living historical characters, has had to contend with the inevitable comparisons between real life and fiction, from "The Insider," (about a whistle-blower in the tobacco industry) which upset newsman Mike Wallace, to "13 Days" (the story of the Cuban Missile crisis), which provoked the criticism of former Kennedy staffers.

In today's climate, a man like Mayer has a busy practice. He was brought in just before the Oscars on "Hurricane," the film based on the life of boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, which Universal felt was torpedoed by claims of inaccuracy. He advised the real-life Erin Brockovich. Her film had the advantage of sticking close to the brash, sexy, miniskirted truth of her life, but nonetheless, Brockovich was plagued by experts who wanted to impugn the science behind her big legal win. Recently, he also counseled the cast of "Black Hawk Down" on how to deal with accuracy questions on that film, which is based on Mark Bowden's nonfiction account of the battle of Mogadishu.

As the success of those films suggest, the truth is one of Hollywood's biggest selling tools. It's hard to imagine that "A Beautiful Mind" would have even gotten made if the story weren't true, because its premise of a schizophrenic who wins the Nobel Prize sounded too Hollywood for even Hollywood. In fact, "A Beautiful Mind" was the second schizophrenic-makes-good project developed by Howard and Grazer's company, Imagine. The first, "Laws of Madness," was based on the true-life story of schizophrenic Michael Laudor, who battled his way through Yale law school. Imagine bought the rights for \$1.5 million in 1995, but the project was derailed when Laudor murdered his girlfriend, thereby squelching any possibility of a happy ending to the Hollywood movie.

Imagine has long been one of Hollywood's most powerful producers, reliably churning out such hits as "Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas", and "Liar Liar," and provoking the usual naysayers that trail in the wake of success. Going into the Oscar campaign, the studio, according to several who work there, was worried that there might be some kind of industry backlash against this Hollywood standard-bearer.

Universal and Imagine instead have faced a wholesale attack on the Opie aesthetics, on Howard's facility for uplift, his penchant for optimism, all heartily enjoyed in such films as "Parenthood," or even the patriotic "Apollo 13," but troubling when applied to the province of mental health. For those who question Howard's vision, the rallying cry has been the truth--the director has glossed over the messy truths of Nash's life.

Yet, like Ronald Reagan or Bill Clinton, sunny politicians who were able to connect to the country's eternal need for uplift, "A Beautiful Mind" has enticed moviegoers from Los Angeles to Providence, earning more than \$150 million at the box office, more than almost every other fact-based drama, from "JFK" to "Ali."

And Ron Howard now has two Oscars, one for best picture and one for best director.

"I'm not a good enough actor any more to really stand up here and make you believe that I haven't imagined this moment in my mind over the years and played it out about a thousand times," said the former child star on the podium. "It's pretty simple really. I'm grateful. I'm very grateful for this."