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AWARDS SEASON UPDATE

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By Michael Schulman
February 24, 2025

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The fresh batch of Oscar statuettes that will be handed out in Hollywood this weekend are actually New York natives—cast in bronze and electroplated in gold at a Hudson Valley foundry called Urban Art Projects. Meanwhile, in Brooklyn, another august award, only six years younger than the Academy's, is being raised from the dead. The New York Drama Critics' Circle was founded in 1935, by a fractious group of theatre critics who were outraged over the Pulitzer board's selections, particularly its snub of the playwright Maxwell Anderson. The next year, the Circle gave its inaugural award for Best American Play to Anderson, for his verse drama "Winterset." The prize was a nickel-bronze plaque with an intricate relief depicting a 1790 performance of "The Contrast," the first American comedy staged by a professional troupe, framed by the billowing curtains of the John Street Theatre, in lower Manhattan.

In the nineteen-forties, in support of the war effort, the Circle announced that the prize would be cast in plaster instead of metal. Along the way, the matrix for the plaque went missing. Brooks Atkinson, the Circle's founding president, later wrote that "the first thing a drama critic has to do when he applies for admission to heaven is to convince St. Peter that he is not personally responsible." For decades, the group handed out paper scrolls. Its current president, the Time Out critic Adam Feldman, used to print them at Kinko's. But "it's a prestigious old award, and it deserves to be something more substantial," he said.

Feldman became president in 2005, and, when he discovered a photo of the original plaque, he went on a hunt. He tried Anderson's archives—no luck. Then, in 2009, he got an e-mail from Caroline Hannah, a design historian at Bard who was writing her dissertation on Henry Varnum Poor, the artist who designed the plaque, and was seeking more information about it. "I told her that I had looked for it, but I hadn't had any success," Feldman recalled. In 2023, Hannah contacted him again: the John Steinbeck estate was having an auction at Bonhams, and the items included the plaque he'd won in 1938, for the stage version of "Of Mice and Men." Feldman nabbed it for three grand. "I wanted to 'Jurassic Park' this," Feldman said the other day, at his West Village apartment. He took the subway to Greenpoint, where he was meeting Hannah and the sculptor Anna Poor, the artist's granddaughter.

(They're distantly related to the Standard & Poor's Poors, but "we didn't get any of the money," Anna said. "We were the artist Poors.") They convened at Bedi-Makky Art Foundry, whose steward, a stout, kindly man named Bill Makky, had agreed to reproduce the plaque in bronze. The century-old workshop occupies a brick building surrounded by auto shops, with cinder-block walls covered in antique tools. On one table was a giant human arm, part of a monument of Father Capodanno bound for Staten Island; in back was a plaster mold of the head of Martin Luther King, Jr., for a bust that sits in the Oval Office. The foundry is also responsible for the Iwo Jima memorial, the Wall Street bull ("I made eight of them," Makky said), and his weirdest job, "an eighteen-to-twenty-inch bronze dildo, for Madonna."

The Steinbeck plaque was face up in a metal contraption called a casting flask. Makky was using a method known as French-sand casting, which he'd determined was used for the original plaque—possibly at the very same foundry. (The Oscars are now made with 3-D printing and lost-wax casting.) In the corner, he had a vat of silty brown sand from a French riverbed, which the foundry has used and reused for a hundred years. First, he dusted the plaque with talcum powder, then sprinkled on fine sand with a sieve. He layered it with more sand, until it looked like a chocolate sheet cake. "A lot of what I do is almost like cooking," he said, as he patted the sand down with a mallet. The Steinbeck plaque was face up in a metal contraption called a casting flask. Makky was using a method known as French-sand casting, which he'd determined was used for the original plaque—possibly at the very same foundry. (The Oscars are now made with 3-D printing and lost-wax casting.) In the corner, he had a vat of silty brown sand from a French riverbed, which the foundry has used and reused for a hundred years. First, he dusted the plaque with talcum powder, then sprinkled on fine sand with a sieve. He layered it with more sand, until it looked like a chocolate sheet cake. "A lot of what I do is almost like cooking," he said, as he patted the sand down with a mallet.

"This is the moment of truth," Makky announced, carefully lifting the sand mold from the plaque: a perfect negative.

"Beautiful," Poor said, gasping. Makky would make at least ten molds off the Steinbeck plaque, then cook them in a kiln at a thousand degrees, pour in molten nickel bronze, break the molds off, and water down the sand for reuse. Come spring, the Circle will award a playwright a metal plaque for the first time in eight decades. "It's a thrill to see it rejuvenated," Poor said, of her grandfather's creation.

Makky learned his trade from his father, a Hungarian immigrant, and is teaching it to his three sons. But the foundry, among the last of its kind, may not survive. Makky can't afford to buy out his sister, so he's planning to sell the foundry, perhaps as soon as this spring. "This place is going to be bulldozed," he predicted. Some things, once they're gone, can't be resurrected.

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