

The joke's over

Ledger's accomplishments,
untimely death cast gloomy
pall over this year's
Oscars show

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For the second year in a row, the tragic death of Heath Ledger casts a grim shadow on the Academy Awards.

News of Ledger's Jan. 22, 2008, death surfaced about a month before the awards ceremony, and the academy honored the young thespian during its annual montage of deceased Hollywood contributors.

Thoughts immediately turned to the project most recently attached to Ledger, "The Dark Knight," in which the Australian took on the role of renowned Batman villain The Joker.

"Dark Knight," the sequel to Christopher Nolan's "Batman Begins," caps a long list of acting accomplishments for Ledger — creating a lasting impression preserved in Hollywood history.

Nominated this year in the Best Supporting Actor category, Ledger already has won the Golden Globe and the Screen Actors Guild award in the same category, building up steam toward the great milestone.

If Ledger wins the Best Supporting Actor Academy Award for his performance in "Dark Knight," he will be the second actor in Academy Award history to win posthumously.

Peter Finch won the Best Actor award after his death

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ON TV

The 81st Annual Academy Awards

WHERE: Red carpet preshow at 7 p.m.; ceremonies at 7:30 p.m.

CHANNEL: WQAD, Channel 8

ON THE WEB

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for his role in the 1976 film "Network."

While it does sadden me that Ledger's promising star dimmed early, he left behind perhaps the most riveting performance in his role as Batman's foil.

The best picture war

Until late last year, 2008 looked like a bleak year for films. But like any year, the studios saved the best for last. And like any other movie buff marooned in the cinematic black hole of Iowa, I had to wait it out.

While movie-goers in major metropolitan areas

and college students with access to art house theaters got to see the dramatic efforts of Hollywood, those of us here in the Quad-Cities waited, in the cold.

The 81st Academy Awards ceremonies tonight will honor the most recent contributions to film from the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood.

On the A-list this year are five phenomenal movies nominated for Best Picture, each film earning a Best Direction nomination for its director.

Gus Van Sant's "Milk," the biopic of assassinated gay political figure Harvey Milk rallies us behind a gay-rights placard, encouraged by Sean Penn's emotional portrayal of said character.

Penn is among the pool of best leading actors for his role in Van Sant's latest.

Danny Boyle won the Golden Globe for direction with his "Slumdog Millionaire," and like accolades have continued to pour in since the film was first screened. Everyone loves a good underdog story, and it seems as if "Slumdog" has come out of nowhere to vie for the top spot.

"The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" garnered Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Direction (for David Fincher) and Best Adapted Screenplay, and ties "Chicago" and "The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring" for most nominations of the decade with

13 Oscar nods.

"The Reader" director Stephen Daldry earned his third Best Director nomination in just three efforts. His first two films were "Billy Elliot," which is about an 11-year-old boy's aspirations to ballet, and "The Hours," the adaptation of Michael Cunningham's 1999 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel of same name.

Ron Howard, who won the Best Director Oscar for "A Beautiful Mind," also is up for the award this year for helming "Frost/Nixon."

It's hard to root for "Frost/Nixon" behind the powerhouses of "Slumdog" and "Benjamin Button," but it's a great film lead by actor Frank Langella, who portrays former President

Richard M. Nixon.

Even more startling is that four of the five nominations for Best Picture/Director also are nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay. The orphan of the group, "Milk," is up for Best Original Screenplay.

At first glance, the race for Best Picture and Director this year appears wide open, but there's a lot of momentum behind Boyle's "Slumdogs" with "Benjamin Button" and "Frost/Nixon" not far behind.

Tripp J Crouse blogs at myquadville.com/TrippCrouse/blog.