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Thanks for the Oscar recognition, now let's make some TV

Academy Award winners such as Jeremy Irons, Melissa Leo and Timothy Hutton and nominees including Alec Baldwin and William H. Macy find steady work, and exposure, in television.



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Oscar-winner Melissa Leo also stars in the HBO series, "Treme." (Paul Schiraldi / HBO)

By Rande Dawn, Special to the Los Angeles Times

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Long before she won her supporting actress Oscar for "The Fighter" at this year's Academy Awards, Melissa Leo was a television veteran. She played Kay Howard on "Homicide: Life on the Streets" for five seasons before largely moving on to feature films — and almost never looking back.

But on the set of 2003's "21 Grams," she had an epiphany.

"I was working with Sean Penn and Naomi Watts, and it dawned on me that while I was intimidated by working with [top level] film stars, it occurred to me that more eyes had probably seen me on the smaller screen than had seen them on the big screen," she says.

Though Leo, who juggles film and television ("The Fighter," HBO's "Treme" and "Mildred Pierce"), may not speak for all Oscar winners, on any given week there are likely as many actors with Academy Award success making television as there are currently in theatrical movies. So what does it say about television and the film industry when Oscar winners and nominees such as Jeremy Irons, Forest Whitaker, Kathy Bates, Alec Baldwin, William H. Macy and Timothy Hutton — to name just a few — decide that television is as good a place to act as the big screen?

"The phenomenon isn't new," says Tom O'Neil, author of "The Emmys" and blogger for TheEnvelope.com. "Decades ago, Katharine Hepburn, Bette Davis and Laurence Olivier won Emmys, but we're seeing more crossover lately because there are more TV channels and more past Oscar champs desperate to reboot their careers in competitive, multi-platform media."

True, but Hepburn, Davis and Olivier never signed on to a regular series; today's past Oscar winners and nominees are taking on long-term roles that often bring acclaim of their own and offer a certain level of job security — but can sharply limit film work.

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The ability to interact in an extended way with a character is a draw for many actors, says Oscar winner Irons, who took on his first ongoing series in decades with Showtime's "The Borgias" this year.

"Having hours to tell a story allows you to explore the inconsistencies and depth of a character to draw a much deeper rendering than you could in 90 minutes of film," he says.

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Leo agrees: "In the five years as Kay Howard, I grew, and Kay grew and was part of the show — and that was an amazing thing for an actor."

The pace of a TV series also appeals to actors who get much of their feature fix through independent films, like Oscar nominee Macy, who stars in Showtime's "Shameless." "It's not unlike an indie film," he says of working in television. "On a big feature you spend a lot of time in your trailer, waiting. We work fast here, and I like to work fast."

But aesthetics aside, television — and these actors in particular — are benefiting from a confluence of developments. First, independent film is struggling, and that's where many of them had plied their trade between big-budget Hollywood pictures.

"It used to be you could cobble together an income," says Oscar nominee Alec Baldwin, who stars on NBC's "30 Rock." "You weren't going to get paid as much as a studio film, but people would forsake that to make what they considered were better films."

Second, niche cable television in particular absorbed many independent film qualities, improving its scripts and depth of storytelling. Actors responded, money was made, and awards and prestige followed.

"After you ripened and fell off the movie tree, it used to be that TV was the applesauce they made for you," Baldwin says. "But the film market is much more for young people and kids now. Some of what is more adult and thematically complex in entertainment has been consigned to TV."

A third factor is that today's TV offers what movies can't: mass visibility. Even successful films rarely get more than a few weeks in a theater and can't boast the viewership of even mid-rated TV shows. Above all else, actors need to be seen being great.

"At the end of the day, whether you're walking on to a film or a TV set, there's so much that's the same," says Oscar winner Timothy Hutton, who stars on TNT's "Leverage." "The only difference is in how it's seen. People are attracted to strong storytelling, and if you give them that, they'll watch."

All of that said, the actors are not in complete denial: They're doing TV because there aren't so many great film offers out there for them. Whether that's because of the abundance of franchise and superhero movies being made or their own lowered Q rating hardly makes a difference. As Baldwin notes, they don't always get to choose how their career evolves.

"Everybody would love to be Jack Nicholson or Michael Douglas and do a movie every two years, in a run of 15 or 20, where even your misses are good or intriguing — where you have great directors and scripts, and the studio really put itself behind the release," says Baldwin. "But there aren't that many seats at the table. I'm happy to simply try and be good at what I'm doing, regardless of what it is. I've been doing this so long, it's all one blur to me now. All one crazy variety show."

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