

Truly a Vanity Fair

by Mark Achbar

LOS ANGELES -- Hordes of fans were cordoned off on the opposite side of the street. Checkpoints along the approach would have put the Israeli army to shame. Not only did you have to have an invitation. Your limo had to have an invitation.

There was only one person who arrived at the Vanity Fair Oscar party in a \$17.50-a-day rented Suzuki subcompact. And there was only one person who carried an orange knapsack: me.

Everyone else knew better than to carry anything that might hamper the grace of their entrance. Coats and bags were left in one's limo under the watchful eye of one's driver—of course.

As I walked through the metal detector, my camera was confiscated denying me even one trophy photo of my presence inside. Regardless, they had to let me in. After all, I—and my rented car—had an invitation.

"Once you get inside, you'll see what all the fuss is about," said Emily Poenisch, a stunning blonde in black fur holding a clipboard.

Emily recognized me. I was the other card-carrying Canadian. The one without the Oscar. (My film, *The Corporation*, wasn't even entered this year.) And I was invited because, in last month's issue of *Vanity Fair*, if you turn to page 312, and flatten your copy, you'll see me, down there in the gutter of the pages, just to the left of the Maidenform bra ad.



Back in November, Emily, a fan of my previous film *Manufacturing Consent*, made a decade ago with Peter Wintonick, was partly responsible for whisking me off to Los Angeles for the shoot on a secretive, all-expenses-paid trip including door-to-door limo service, a first-class plane ride, and a stay at the hotel of my choice, to be picked from a list of a dozen legendary Hollywood hotels.

On the advice of local friends, I opted for Raffles L'Hermitage, where, my limo driver told me, Angelina Jolie lives full time. He assured me she was very down-to-earth and could be seen walking her dog if one's timing were fortunate. Mine, it turned out, was not.

When I told him about my latest film, *The Corporation*, he launched into a tirade against the limo corporation he worked for, which gave new employees a suit to wear on the job, and then, without their consent, charged them for it on their first paycheck. I hear a lot of these stories lately.

I'd never heard of Raffles L'Hermitage, but I was suitably impressed by the bell man's ten-minute run down of all the features of my euro-posh five-star, five-diamond choice: including business cards and letterhead printed with my name and my one-night address, the location of my five phones (with my own private number), 40-inch TV, and the sheer size of the place—standard guestrooms are a cozy 675 square-feet. A plate of three exotic cheeses and a personalized welcome note waited on a small marble table.

I had been summoned to be photographed with eight of the year's documentary hitmakers. *Masters of the Real*, we were labelled: Andrew Jarecki (*Capturing the Friedmans*), Dana and Bruce Brown (*Step into Liquid, The Endless Summer*), Jeffrey Blitz (*Spellbound*), Kevin Macdonald and Joe Simpson (*Touching The Void*), Nick Broomfield (*Aileen: The Life and Death of a Serial Killer*) and Errol Morris (*The Fog of War*), the last of whom would win the Oscar but couldn't make it to the shoot, and was added to the spread prior to publication.

The Corporation hadn't even been released in the U.S. yet, but Emily and her editors were betting on it having a big future. What did they know that I didn't? At that point I hadn't even secured a US theatrical deal. I smelled a corporate conspiracy at the highest levels.

Everyone featured in the pre-Oscar, Hollywood issue of *Vanity Fair*, even me, plus all the Oscar contenders and every celebrity superstar, was invited to the *Vanity Fair* party.

I approached the entrance to Morton's, the restaurant named after its billionaire owner Peter Morton, where the party was held.

There were two bleachers full of photographers, each several rows high. A wall of cameras flashed like so many Cartier



diamond necklaces, but paused at me. The photographers were momentarily puzzled. A delivery person, perhaps? A technician? Next. . . .

It was an odd feeling entering this rarefied gathering. You recognize almost everyone, but you know absolutely no one. The decor was simple, elegant. A lot of indirect, soft, flattering light. Pink and purple spotlights. Spacious enough. Officially sanctioned photographers and video cameras here and there.

I passed Bill Maher to get to the bar where Bill Murray was casually having a drink. (Is he ever anything but casual?) Rubbed shoulders with Sean Penn as he sorted out where his entourage would sit. Got close enough to Daryl Hannah to overhear her concern about being promised a photographers' "blackout" so she could make an undocumented exit when the time came. Pretty sure I caught the squinty eye of Renée Zellweger across the room. But we didn't really "connect," if you know what I mean.

They don't call it Vanity Fair for nothing. There were huge plasma screens lining the walls throughout the party space with live video images of -- who else -- people in attendance at the party.

Your first impulse when you see these famous faces is just to walk up and say, "Hi." You feel you know them. And in a way, you do. But they don't know you from a hole in the ground. And I felt I had to respect that. Maybe I was star-struck.

Anyway, I wondered: What do I really have to say to this person? "Congratulations on your film -- sorry I haven't seen it yet." Or, "You were so hot in Blade Runner 20 years ago." Actually, I knew Hannah to have been a supporter of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, which is what made her really sexy.

Waitresses carried trays with cellophane-encased lollipops. But these weren't the ones on offer at the cash register of your favourite Chinese restaurant. No, these were an inch-and-a-half in diameter, a quarter-inch thick, and each one had an edible (one assumed) semi-transparent close-up photograph imprinted in it, taken from the cover of this month's Vanity Fair. The cover with Gwyneth Paltrow, Julianne Moore, Jennifer Connelly and 11 other screen goddesses. The choice forced upon me was: which of these women would I prefer to lick? I shamelessly nabbed a handful and stuffed them in my pocket.

At one point I saw Donald Trump and his hair making their way through the crowd. I thought I'd just walk up to him and invite him to do a guest commentary on The Corporation DVD. I'm looking for a really high-profile right-wing critic to fill the spot. But

he plowed through the room looking like he was on a mission. Probably to fire one of the waitresses.

Since no one knew or cared who the hell I was, I thought the least I could do for my cause was advertize. The hand-calligraphed invitation from Mr. Graydon Carter, the Vanity Fair editor, said "black tie optional," so under my jacket I wore a black The Corporation brand T-shirt with the halo/devil tail/ businessman logo and with the name of the film spelled out in big white letters (available through www.thecorporation.com). I kept my jacket open all night so you could see the logo clearly and took it upon myself to meander. All the better to increase brand recognition, I thought. Yet, despite my best efforts, I didn't really feel noticed by anyone. Anyone but security, that is.

Security had searched my knapsack on the way in, but once I was actually there, the humourless men with the little earpieces and curly wires leading into their collars wouldn't let me put it down anywhere. "For security reasons," they explained. "I'll show you what's in it," I offered, "T-shirts, buttons and a toothbrush." No go. Had to keep it with me. So I lugged it around in the hope I might have an opportunity to give at least one shirt to someone famous.

Back at the Sundance Festival a couple of months earlier (where The Corporation won an Audience Award), my co-director Jennifer Abbott and producer Bart Simpson had already showered Oscar-winner-to-be Tim Robbins with our branded buttons and T's. So when I saw him and his newly-acquired Oscar, I thought it would have been redundant (and economically extravagant) to give him another one. Maybe little Oscar-sized T-shirts I thought, my marketing lobe kicking in.

Later in the evening, a tuxedoed security guard approached me and asked yet again about the knapsack. He was slightly apologetic, and confessed he'd received a report on his earpiece about "a guy with suspicious orange bag." Rolling my eyes, I opened it once more. I offered him a T-shirt. He skulked away sheepishly, thinking perhaps he had offended someone important.

Finally, when the security men were distracted, (and with everyone from Nicole Kidman to Charlize Theron around, there was plenty to distract them) I found a spot to hide the knapsack next to Nicolas Cage, who was sitting in a translucent chair illuminated from within. A beautiful Asian woman in a miniskirt was sitting on his lap, Santa style, for much of the night.

I was known by reputation to at least one of the partygoers: Fran Leibowitz, the wit of the New York intelligentsia. She was sitting nearby, so I just said "Hi," and told her—

truthfully—that I'd been a fan of her writing since her Andy Warhol's Interview days. To my amazement, she said she'd seen Manufacturing Consent, liked it, and would watch for The Corporation when it came to New York's Film Forum in June. Sadly, she did not exercise her famous wit during our short exchange. She was very gracious though.

Then I saw Jeff Goldblum, whom I'd actually met on one of my first jobs in film. I was an assistant on 1981's *Threshold*, in which Goldblum played the inventor of the first self-contained artificial heart. I had personally delivered him his per diem—hundreds of dollars in cash—at his hotel room at the Four Seasons in Toronto. I immediately reminded him of the incident, which seemed to have made a bigger impression on me than on him. He too was gracious, and, laughing, thanked me again for the cash.



It didn't matter if you were a rock star or movie star or literary star. As long as you were famous, you were in. Young, old, hot, cold, it didn't matter. Tony Curtis, Hilary Swank, Robbie Robertson, Diane Keaton, Tony Bennett, Joni Mitchell. Sting. Oprah. Ben Stiller. And hundreds more who seemed totally familiar but whom I couldn't name to save my life.

What a waste, I thought. If they'd have only allowed me the "plus-one" I'd begged for, I could have taken a personal guide to the stars. How else was I to identify the leftists who might attend a

Los Angeles premiere of *The Corporation*?

It was like walking into any cliquey party. The superstars pretty much kept to themselves. They weren't looking for new friends wearing logoed T-shirts. Their relatives, however, were more accessible. I asked one unusually congenial person how he came to be at the party. He said his brother was in *The Lord of the Rings*. Another man was unmistakably of the Baldwin clan. Brother Bill it turned out. Nice guy, but dodged the question of whether the whole family was as political as his Oscar-winning brother. Nonetheless, he said he was looking forward to seeing *The Corporation*. Great. New York and L.A. -- covered.

In the end, I found myself hanging out with fellow documentarians Broomfield (whose gentlemanly style did not extend to introducing me to his friend Jacqueline Bisset) and Weather Underground filmmakers Sam Green and Bill Siegel. They were genuinely

excited to get The Corporation T-shirts, and promised to wear them with unfailing regularity. I gave them buttons too. They kvelled.

I was among the last to leave. After a security official returned my camera in a sealed sandwich bag, I fired off a couple of shots for lame evidence of my attendance. A young Hispanic car jockey fetched my Suzuki subcompact. She held the door for me and I slipped her five bucks, thinking it the Hollywood thing to do. She was ecstatic: "That's the only tip I got all night."

The next day I flew home to the east side of Vancouver, where, for the foreseeable future, I belong.

Mark Achbar produced and co-directed The Corporation. He will stop at nothing to increase profit and market share for his film.