

Beside the red carpet: The view from the glittering gulag

By David Carr

Published: February 22, 2007

Back in the fall I went to the Museum of Modern Art for the New York premiere of "Little Children." It was the beginning of the film industry's red carpet season, five long months that I would spend covering galas and awards shows right up until the Oscars Sunday night, as the Carpetbagger, a blogger for the newspaper. But on that night it was all new, all lovely.

I interviewed Kate Winslet, a movie star who doesn't act like one. Later we found ourselves on the sidewalk. We chatted about normal things — weather, children, spouses — and then she said goodbye to me by name, resting a friendly hand on my arm as she did.

Generally speaking, I lack the gene that vibrates to the presence of celebrity. Beyond telling people that I "love their work," if in fact I do, I find I have nothing else to say, in part because the reverse is always manifestly true: What do they really have to say to me? But Winslet and I had had a moment, spoken as familiars might. I walked



Mark J. Terrill/AP

Kate Winslet at the Golden Globes in Beverly Hills last month.

away feeling oddly validated. Ten minutes later, she was in a black car going to dinner with the rest of the cast, and I was on my way to the 66 DeCamp bus queue at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, going home to New Jersey. Celebrity may be fleeting, but far less so than proximity to it. I could have told my fellow busgoers that the hand that held the bus ticket also beheld the light touch of the movie star, but whatever sparkle had been bestowed had evaporated.

The awards season has been like that. There have been lovely moments — a quiet joke with Clint Eastwood at the National Board of Review, a dishy laugh with Jennifer Hudson at lunch — but mostly it left me feeling embarrassed. There was even a car ride with Kevin Bacon at Sundance, a metaphor for connection if there ever was one, but I knew better. I've been a serious journalist most of my life, and the red carpet reminded me of a national political campaign without the stakes. Juggling an endless array of badges, I had a great deal of access, but very little insight.

The carpet is as much a conceptual as a physical space, a thin ribbon separating those who have fame and the masses who bestow it. The "reporters" on the margins of this zone are not really reporting in any conventional sense of the word. They don't investigate, explain or even filter very much, which is part of why the movie stars are willing to play ball. Instead they inspect frocks, repeat sound bites and shout into the cameras about what the stars are "really like." In truth carpet reporters like me serve as grubby floor traders whose cumulative hunger (or lack thereof — few sights are more pathetic than B- listers biding time alone) determines the market value of the glittering commodities on display.

Out of a mutuality of interests — we both serve our publics — the stars smile, I smile and we call each other by name. But the pantomime is difficult to sustain. I remember walking outside for a smoke during the Screen Actors Guild Awards show and seeing the carpet that just a few hours ago had hosted all manner of glamour and star-power. Already the ropes were down, the bleachers had been struck, and the carpet was being rolled up for the next event. The moveable feast is so, so fleeting. Very little was left besides the empty water bottles.

On the carpet at Chelsea Piers in New York for the Gotham Awards — the indie-oriented awards that kick off the events culminating Sunday night at the Kodak Theater in Hollywood — a string of luminaries made their way inside. Garrison Keillor, hardly a usual suspect, was there, too, to honor Robert Altman, the recently departed director of "A Prairie Home Companion." Spotting a familiar face — we are both from Minnesota — I buttonholed him.

"There seems to be a rope between us," Keillor said dolefully, pointing down to the velvet barrier. "What is the purpose of that?"

The rope, which over the course of the season was followed by drapes, hedges and barriers, was there to remind me that even though the people on the carpet are friendly, they are not my friends. Reporters get to dress up and stand adjacent to, never on, the carpet. Yes, they sometimes take apart the human jewelry before them. Who told her she could get away with that dress? But by any analysis, the reporters are at the bottom of the pile.