

Party like the stars at the Cameo's Oscar viewing party

By James Johnson

Posted Feb 24, 2016 at 12:01 AM

Despite some early controversy, or possibly because of it, many are anticipating this year's Academy Awards ceremony on ABC to be one of the most memorable evenings the awards show has put on in its 88-year history.

This year, local cinephiles are taking extra precautions to ensure they have the best seats in town for Sunday's ceremony, thanks in part to downtown's Cameo Art House Theatre, and its annual Oscars viewing party event. Attendees will be able to watch Hollywood's biggest night projected on the theater's biggest screen, in a 125-seat auditorium with Dolby digital sound, and their choice of popcorn, candy and imported beer.

"It's the Super Bowl for film buffs," said Chris Kuenzel, who along with wife Nasim Kuenzel has owned and operated the small two-screen independent theater since 1998. However, the two say that they have been holding Oscar viewing parties since long before they ever operated their movie theater.

"We had it for quite a few years at our house," Nasim said. "Just in our living room, and we have held it every year at the Cameo."

This marks the first year that the couple considered not holding their annual Oscars party, because of the recent controversy regarding the award show going two years in a row without nominating a single non-white actor for an award.

"That was really disappointing. I definitely saw it as a serious controversy," Chris said. "But the fact that they addressed it so quickly, that the Academy came out and said that they were going to do their best to make some corrections was reassuring, and so we decided to move forward with the party."

In recent years the Cameo has used the annual viewing party as a way of giving back to locals who subscribe to annual membership packages at the theater. Besides attendance at the annual Oscars party, members receive various other benefits, including discounts on tickets, free admittance for guests and T-shirts, depending on their membership level. Memberships will be available for purchase at the event and on the Cameo's website. Currently, the couple estimate that the theater has nearly 200 members.

"The memberships are a huge part of what makes this little theater possible," Chris said.

It is because of the revenue brought in by memberships that the theater was able to afford to show films such as



FILE PHOTO | RAUL RUBIERA

this year's Best Picture nominees even before most of these films had received much in the way of media attention.

"Of the films nominated this year, 'Bridge of Spies' was the only one we hadn't shown," Nasim said. "We try to tell people on our newsletter that they need to see these films showing at the Cameo, that these will end up being the films nominated for Best Picture. We get them as soon as they are available, and they are typically here for about two weeks. People hear about them later after they get nominated for all these awards and they call us - even today - asking when we'll be getting 'Room,' or 'Spotlight,' or 'Brooklyn,' and we tell them that those films were all here already."

The two credit their near perfect track record of predicting which films will be nominated to their paying close attention to early reviews and, of course, more than a decade of experience selecting films.

As in previous years, Chris and Nasim are encouraging attendees to come in movie-themed costumes. As there is no dress code for the event, Nasim says she has seen guests attend the event in tuxes and gowns, T-shirt and jeans, and full costumes.

"One year, a law office came with their entire staff dressed as penguins, from the film 'March of the Penguins,'" Nasim said. "They went

all out. People were photographing them march toward the theater. Then, of course, there's

George."

Cameo regular and former employee George Small had made a tradition of dressing as red carpet fashion diva and comedian Joan Rivers. Small would remain in character the entire evening, asking those attending about their choice in clothing designers, serving as emcee of the event, and encouraging guests to pose for paparazzi-style photos.

"I did Joan Rivers on the red carpet since the inception of the Oscar party at the Cameo," Small said. "At that time the real Joan did it for TV, but had been banned, but the show went on at the Cameo."

Small reprised his Joan Rivers impression for the Cameo's 10th anniversary, but with the comedian having passed away in 2014, he has since retired his heels and blonde wig. "It was a crowd pleaser," Small said.

Those with a brilliant "Mad Max," "Ex-Machina," "Star Wars" or "Inside Out" themed costume in mind may have a chance at walking away with an award. This year, to encourage more creativity in costume choices, the theater will be holding a contest for most creative costume. No word, as of yet, what the winner or winners will be taking home, though it is a safe bet that it won't be made of gold.



