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Sandra Bullock, for real, has Oscar chance this year

Sandra Bullock doesn't aim for critical acclaim, but now, with 'The Blind Side,' an Oscar is .

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By **Gina Piccalo**

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Inside a stark white West Hollywood studio, Sandra Bullock was between personas. She'd spent the last four hours posing for a magazine cover, an experience that left her feeling a little too vulnerable. She'd traded the ball gowns for a pair of worn blue jeans and a loose-fitting sweater and sneakers, and she couldn't wait to get home to wash her face and walk her dogs. ¶ It was a demure presentation for an actress having the best year of her career. Her summer blockbuster, "The Proposal," made more money domestically than any film in her repertoire, and that's really saying something. Bullock's new film, "The Blind Side," gobsmacked everyone. The film zoomed past the \$100-million mark in only its 10th day of release, beating out the gargantuan hit "The Twilight Saga: New Moon" over the post-Thanksgiving weekend. This real-life story of a wealthy, white, evangelical Christian family's adoption of a homeless black youth who goes on to play professional football captured the attention of the country. It also gave Bullock her first taste of Oscar buzz. ¶ "Really, it had nothing to do with me," she says with characteristic self-deprecation. "I did what I do in everything. It's an opinion here today, gone tomorrow. The film making money has nothing to do with me. It's just all of a sudden the pieces of the puzzle fit."

The question is whether the combination of Bullock's solid performance and the overwhelming appeal of the film to audiences outside of L.A. and New York -- it's done gangbusters in such places as Dallas, Nashville and Birmingham, Ala. -- will rub off on academy voters. Can "Blind Side," an old-fashioned film touting earnest family values, triumph in a landscape normally dominated by dark, independent films?

Welcome at the Kodak?

"There are big differences between academy favorites and heartland favorites," points out David Thomson, author of the 2008 book "Have You Seen . . . ? A Personal Introduction to 1,000 Films." "What you've been seeing in recent years is that the academy membership has been developing increasingly fine tastes. They've been liking independent, difficult, small, audacious films, dark films that not too many people have been to see. I don't think academy members are bowled over by commercial success."

That remains to be seen. There are some Oscar prognosticators who see a reasonable chance of "The Blind Side" slipping into that ninth or 10th best-picture nominee slot. And, indeed, Warner Bros. has begun buying "For your consideration" ads to keep that momentum building.

As for Bullock, she's taking the sudden award attention in stride. She lives a pretty quiet life. Her greatest achievement this week, she says, was cooking perfect vegetarian lasagna for her stepdaughter. Another big goal: buying a Christmas tree. The rest of this, Bullock says, sweeping her hand over a coffee table strewn with celebrity tabloids, is just background noise.

That's not to say Bullock isn't appreciative, and a little overwhelmed by all the attention. After all, she hasn't been graced with much critical acclaim during her 20-year career. Sure, she was beloved as a sort of modern-day Lucille Ball, the approachable beauty with a gift for pratfalls. And her movies almost always made money. Like Julia Roberts, she quickly developed an audience who appreciated her down-to-earth sensibility. But her solid dramatic performances over the years, in the 2006 Oscar winner "Crash," as Harper Lee in 2006's little-seen "Infamous" and even 2000's "28 Days," went largely unnoticed.

Perhaps "The Blind Side," then, is a fitting vehicle to redirect Bullock's career, one that might inspire her very own "Erin Brockovich" moment. Bullock plays the no-nonsense, pistol-packing interior decorator Leigh Anne Touhy, a steel magnolia in pencil skirts and Gucci shades who sends her kids to Bible study and marches around getting things done. She's stopped in her tracks by a guileless teenager with a sad history, stunted social skills and nowhere to go. It was a role teetering on the edge of stereotype. And it terrified Bullock.

"Leigh Anne possesses certain characteristics that audiences love: bold, but a good sense of humor. She's a take-charge woman," says "Blind Side" producer Andrew Kosove. "That's a lot of who Sandra is."

Getting into character

But even after Bullock had signed on to play the role, after she'd spent a whirlwind day trolling around Memphis, Tenn., with Touhy, after she'd worked tirelessly with the dialect coach to nail Touhy's accent, she wasn't convinced she could pull it off.

"The first day I was like, 'I shouldn't have made this film. What am I doing? I'm not going to be able to step up to the plate,'" Bullock says. "It was the worst day of shooting I've ever had. I had that moment of: 'I've made a huge, huge mistake.'"

By Week 2, however, Bullock says she'd figured out "the crack in the Leigh Anne veneer," an Achilles' heel the actress shared with her subject.

"We are very similar in that we are very myopic," Bullock says. "We get our mind set on something and we don't look at the mess we might make. The most important thing is getting something done. We both started from the same little seed. She went right and I went left."

The result is an incredibly subtle performance, striking in the ways Bullock holds back. Some of her best scenes are in the still moments she plays with Quinton Aaron, who portrays Michael Oher, a young man fighting valiantly to keep at bay the traumas of his childhood. Their relationship is moving because of what is left unsaid. And Bullock telegraphs with an expression what could have been pages of dialogue.

"I doubt people will ever fully understand how difficult this turn is, how much of a high-wire act it is" for Bullock, says "Blind Side" writer-director John Lee Hancock.

A bold new Bullock

But whether that's enough for Oscar voters to finally embrace her is still the question.

"I think Sandra Bullock is one of those people a little bit like Jennifer Aniston who's regarded as the bread-and-butter of the film business," Thomson says. "They make successful films. They do a good job. But [the attitude is] 'Come on, they're not really acting, are they?' It's not fair."

This time around, though, Bullock is getting credit for making a career shift that can be perilous for an actress over 40. Just ask Meg Ryan. It's tough, some might say impossible, for audiences to accept the rom-com girl-next-door in dramatic roles. But Bullock says she was willing to "start from scratch" and take risks in such films as "The Lake House" to venture further into drama. She knows her audience. She never aspired to a career of critical acclaim. And she stopped reading reviews years ago.

"You have to stop the flow that everyone else gets comfortable being on with you. You go, 'You know what? I'm not there anymore.' When I stopped and I put it out there that I was willing to start from scratch, I was amazed at what was available."

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