

Oscar watch

Filmmaker's magic earns nomination

By Lynn Waldemith
special writer

For the past five or six years, Robert Skotak hasn't even bothered to watch the Academy Awards on television, which is kind of strange when you consider that he has a full-time career in film and lives in North Hollywood.

But this year is different. He'll be attending the glittery and glamorous ceremony in person, because Skotak, formerly of Westland, may win an Oscar.

He and three others have been nominated for an award in best special visual effects for their work in "Aliens," last year's highly successful science fiction thriller starring Sigourney Weaver.

Skotak's older brother Dennis, also worked on the special visual effects, but Academy rules limit the number of nominees in a category to four.

Two other films, "Poltergeist II" and "Little Shop of Horrors," are also nominated for best special effects, but Skotak believes he and his colleagues stand a good chance of winning.

"What we had to do in 'Aliens' was far more demanding and versatile," he said. "There were a lot more types of effects utilized in 'Aliens' than in the other two films."

SKOTAK'S ASSISTANT during the movie was his wife, Elaine Ebford, formerly of Livonia. The two are 1966 graduates of Livonia's Franklin High School. Ironically, they didn't meet each other until the very last day of their senior year.

Skotak says he's been interested in movies for as long as he can remember, and when he was about 10 years old he started making them with Dennis after they bought an 8 mm movie camera for their dad on Father's Day. As it turned out, his parents didn't use it much, so the boys began to experiment with the "toy" that would eventually change their lives.

The brothers made movies all through the remainder of their school years, patterning them after Hollywood adventure films and TV shows.

"We used to spend study hall drawing up story boards and sketches," Skotak said, "then shoot in the evening, and come into class the next morning half-asleep."

JUST AFTER high school, Skotak and his friends filmed their version of H.G. Wells' "The Time Machine."

The movie was shot in and around Plymouth and Edward Hines Drive, in Cinemascope (also known as Panavision), which is the

use of a special lens that achieves a wide-screen effect.

Years later, Skotak learned that the film had been the first Cinemascope movie ever shot in 8 mm. He also used the same lens to shoot some special effects sequences in "Escape From New York," a 1980 film starring Kurt Russell.

During his early years in film, Skotak learned about special effects out of necessity and by using his imagination. If he needed a building in a scene that he was filming at Hines Park, for example, he would place a sheet of glass in the foreground that had a building painted on it, thus making it appear on film as though the building was actually there.

SKOTAK ADVANCED to 16 mm film and made a few Robin Hood movies while he studied art and design at Schoolcraft College in Livonia. He also began making films that were more experimental and more ambitious, while deciding to seriously pursue a film career. During this period he also made some industrial films, which marked the first time he was paid for film work.

Skotak and Elaine Ebford were married in 1972, and he continued to pursue work in film while doing various odd jobs.

"I spent a number of years doing five or six different sorts of things," Skotak said, "but always with the aim of getting into film. But not a lot was happening in Michigan at that time."

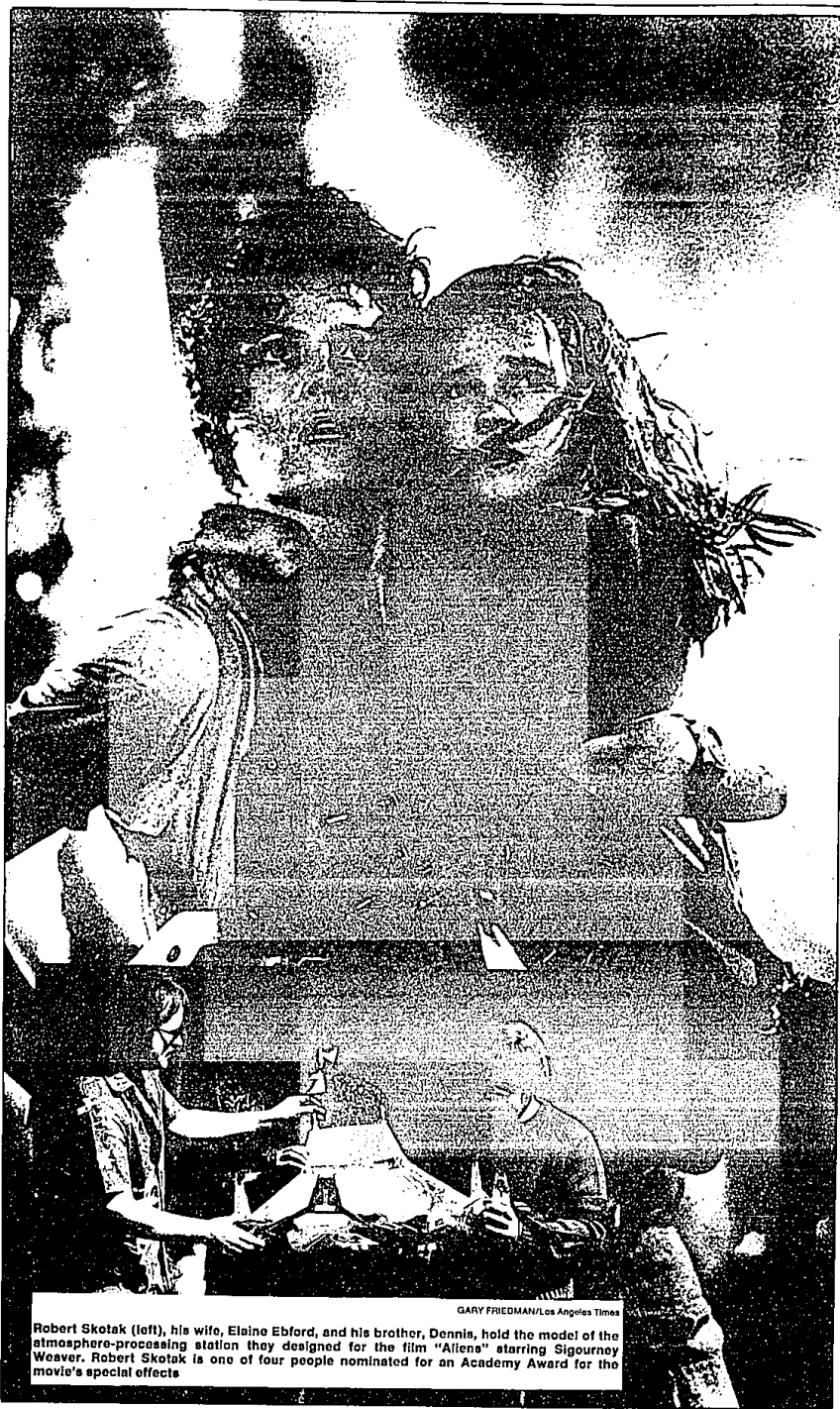
"We were kind of oddballs. None of the schools had film departments or film classes, so speak of, that we could benefit from. And there wasn't a lot of production at the time."

SO THE COUPLE headed for Hollywood in 1976, where Skotak at first did some art work for a newspaper and gradually made the transition to film. He has mostly been involved in design and special effects work, although he is now taking an interest in directing films. And his Oscar nomination has opened the doors to several new projects.

"The focus of my work in the future will be directing," he said. "But in most of the projects I've been offered I'm developing special effects in one way or another. It's a natural evolution, I guess."

Although it's been more than 20 years since he started making movies, things really haven't changed that much. He and Dennis have just finished work on a slapstick comedy about an invasion from space.

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GARY FRIEDMAN/Los Angeles Times

Robert Skotak (left), his wife, Elaine Ebford, and his brother, Dennis, hold the model of the atmosphere-processing station they designed for the film "Aliens" starring Sigourney Weaver. Robert Skotak is one of four people nominated for an Academy Award for the movie's special effects.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

George Baier does the show's many funny voices — including the irrepressible Dick the Bruiser.



Redford Thurston High School graduate Jim Johnson has teamed with Baier for 10 years, making them the long-eel-running two-man team in Detroit radio history.

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THE EARLY-MORNING, four-hour show follows a loosely written script that allows for rock and roll, commercials, news, cash giveaways and call-ins as well as the banter between Johnson and Baier, who does the show's various characters.

"Dick the Bruiser," a Detroit wrestler popular in the '60s, is Baier's mainstay impersonation, a throwback to Johnson and Baier's childhood in the Detroit area.

day, or the week, is anyone who takes him or herself too seriously.

This month, the target off and on, has been the debate over the advertising of condoms.

"The pope has been cannon for our fodder. Liberate was a fun one," said Baier.

Baier has impersonated characters ranging from Dr. Ruth to Reagan to Popeye. But it is much more likely he will be impersonating the closer-to-home Coleman Young, George Kell or Al Kaline.

"We're in Detroit, and we're talking to a Detroit audience that's about the same age we are," Johnson said. "The absurdities taking place here are as absurd as they are anywhere else."

The show responds, Johnson said, "with some smart-ass talk, and much of it in answer to the inundation we've suffered from the experts who are forever telling us how to

have better sex or better kids or how better to save the planet. The more serious they take themselves the harder we hit them."

"Life is such a yuck you get all bent out of shape writing documentaries? Why preoccupy yourself with the great questions of life?" Baier asks. "As long as you have to work for an income, you might as well do something that is fun."

And as long they can keep it going spontaneously, "the less time we have to spend on it and the less harder we have to work," Johnson said.

JJ AND THE Morning Crew are on the air 6-10 a.m., but it is a 24-hour job for both of them as they always are on the lookout for new grist for their morning mills. Both are avid news readers and listeners.

Both said they gravitated to radio with neither big goals nor aspirations; Baier from a student radio sta-

tion at Wayne State University, Johnson from playing football at Redford Thurston High School and chasing women.

Both believe they have a feel for Detroit and what muscle their Detroit-born-and-raised counterparts listen to, think, do, eat and watch on TV. Both are ever-aware of new trends, new fads, new personalities in town, new absurdities to parody.

"Other than that we don't have much in common, and we don't like one another very much," Johnson joked.

"I'm very passive," Baier responds. "I allow for the growth of his ego. He realizes the importance of me."

And other than that, Johnson is a night owl, who eats lunch at 9 a.m. and takes an afternoon nap so he can enjoy the wee hours alert. Baier is an early riser who often arrives in the studio at 4 a.m.

'As long as you have to work for an income, you might as well do something that is fun.'

— George Baier

Early birds get the laughs