



OUT FOR OSCAR: Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf in "The Hours"; Felicity Huffman in "Transamerica" (inset).

Playing gay's a golden role

By MICHAEL GILTZ

If you want to win an Oscar, playing a real person is always in fashion: Think Ben Kingsley as Gandhi or Jamie Foxx as Ray Charles. Another good tip is incorporating some kind of a physical or mental handicap, like Geoffrey Rush in "Shine" or Daniel-Day Lewis in "My Left Foot."

Now that gay characters are more open than ever in the movies — especially with "Brokeback Mountain" and "Capote" leading this year's field — it looks like gay is the new black for actors and actresses in search of Oscar. But Ennis and Truman are hardly the first gay-themed characters to catch the Academy's eye.

Some notable highlights, including the year the film competed for an Academy Award:

Midnight Cowboy (1970)

The same year John Wayne wins an Oscar for "True Grit," "Midnight Cowboy" breaks down barriers. It becomes the first (and only) X-rated movie to win Best Picture. And Jon Voight and Dustin Hoffman are both Best Actor nominees for playing, respectively, a male hustler and the street rat who loves him.

Cabaret (1973)

Joel Grey wins Best Supporting Actor for celebrating Weimar-era decadence with his Master of Ceremonies.

Dog Day Afternoon (1976)

Al Pacino scores a Best Actor nomination for playing a bank robber trying to pay for his boyfriend's sex-change opera-

All of a sudden, out is in at the Academy Awards

tion. Other nominations follow — like Robert Preston's hilarious turn in 1982's "Victor/Victoria" — but it will be another decade before Best Actor goes to a portrayal of an openly gay character.

Kiss of the Spiderwoman (1986)

William Hurt is the first actor in history to win an Academy Award for a gay character, when he turns flamboyantly delusional prisoner Luis Molina into a man of dignity and strength.

Philadelphia (1994)

As Andrew Beckett, Tom Hanks barely touched his lover (Antonio Banderas), but he wins Best Actor for playing a noble take on a man dying of AIDS.

Boys Don't Cry (2000)

Hilary Swank wins Best Actress for Brandon

Teena/Teena Brandon, a girl who passed as a boy and even dated another girl before meeting a tragic end. In Hollywood's eyes, "transgendered" equals "gay" — see this year's upstart nominee Felicity Huffman in "Transamerica."

The Hours (2003)

Nicole Kidman wins for playing writer Virginia Woolf — who dallied more in real life with Vita Sackville-West than her dutiful husband — with a notable nose and fierce intelligence.

Monster (2004)

Charlize Theron (left) is unstoppable as an exceptionally attractive star who dirtied herself up to play a real-life figure, a serial killer and a lesbian. That killer combination makes her a lock for the Oscar.

