

Downey Jr wins Oscar for ‘Oppenheimer,’ 31 years after first nod

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Online Desk: Robert Downey, Jr on Sunday won his first Academy Award, a best supporting actor statuette for his villainous turn in “Oppenheimer” — a golden moment in a decades-long career of highs and lows, on and off the screen.

The Oscar triumph for the 58-year-old American capped a glittering awards season, during which he snared a slew of prizes for his portrayal of Lewis Strauss, the jealous rival who orchestrated the blacklisting of the father of the atomic bomb.

“I’d like to thank my terrible childhood and the Academy — in that order,” Downey joked in his acceptance speech before turning serious and thanking director Christopher Nolan and his producer wife Emma Thomas.

“Here’s my little secret. I needed this job more than it needed me. Chris knew it. Emma made sure that she surrounded me with one of the great casts and crews of all time... It was fantastic. And I stand here before you a better man because of it.”

Downey bested a stacked field that included two-time Oscar winner Robert De Niro (“Killers of the Flower Moon”), fan favorite Ryan Gosling (“Barbie”), Mark Ruffalo (“Poor Things”) and Sterling K. Brown (“American Fiction”).

The win came 31 years after Downey’s first nomination, for his leading role in Richard Attenborough’s Hollywood biopic “Chaplin,” and 15 years after his second for a divisive turn in comedy “Tropic Thunder.” In a career defined by playing heroes (he is Iron Man, after all) and seductive leading men, Downey earned the industry’s top honor by going against type.

As the film opens, Downey’s Strauss — who served with J. Robert Oppenheimer on the US Atomic Energy Commission that controlled the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos — seems like just another bureaucrat.

But as the plot unfolds, he engineers a post-Hiroshima campaign to discredit Oppenheimer (Cillian Murphy), working behind the scenes to undermine him at every turn, especially by questioning his patriotism.

Little by little, Downey unveils his bitter arrogance, until his machinations are revealed at a Senate hearing he hopes would confirm his nomination as Dwight Eisenhower’s secretary of commerce. Instead, his cabinet bid is left in tatters.

Nolan’s taut epic came into Sunday night with 13 nominations, the most of any film.

– Rise and fall –

Born on April 4, 1965, and named after his actor father, Downey was always destined for a life in Hollywood.

He made his acting debut at just five years old in Robert Downey Sr’s film “Pound.”

He then became part of the 1980s “Brat Pack,” starring in “Weird Science,” “The Pick-Up Artist” opposite Molly Ringwald and “Less than Zero” with Andrew McCarthy and James Spader.

His career trajectory shifted in 1992 when he stepped into the shoes of the iconic silent film star Charlie Chaplin, a role that earned him a BAFTA award.

But as he soared professionally, Downey was crashing in his personal life, in a spiral of drug addiction. He has said he first tried drugs as a child in the 1970s, thanks to his father, who was also an addict.

Downey was arrested various times between 1996 and 2001, and became tabloid fodder. After several failed rehab stints, he was sentenced to three years in a prison substance abuse treatment facility. He spent nearly a year in lock-up.

His personal problems cost him jobs, including a high-profile and well-received gig on television hit series “Ally McBeal.”

Eventually, he bested his demons. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey in 2004, he said his final arrest had given him pause.

“I said, ‘You know what? I don’t think I can continue doing this.’ And I reached out for help, and I ran with it,” he told the legendary talk show host and interviewer.

– Iron Man –

He returned to the big screen in 2003’s “The Singing Detective” alongside Mel Gibson, with whom he had starred in “Air America” more than a decade before.

That same year, he starred in the thriller “Gothika” with Halle Berry.

His career slowly regained momentum.

Five years later, he starred in “Tropic Thunder,” which would earn him a second Oscar nomination.

Along with acclaim came criticism, as Downey played an actor who darkens his skin to portray a Black character — a decision he has repeatedly defended as a way to highlight how wrong blackface is.

But that same year, he would solidify his A-lister status as the beating heart of the Marvel cinematic universe in “Iron Man,” playing genius inventor/businessman Tony Stark and his superhero alter ego.

His appearances in 10 Marvel films — culminating (SPOILER ALERT) in Iron Man’s heroic demise in 2019’s “Avengers: Endgame” — has helped fuel the multi-billion-dollar franchise for a generation.

Today, Downey is one of the highest-grossing actors in the industry.

Outside the superhero sphere in recent years, Downey has also starred in two high-energy “Sherlock Holmes” action films for British director Guy Ritchie, with Jude Law playing Watson. A third is in development with a new filmmaker.

Also in the pipeline is the HBO Vietnam War spy thriller “The Sympathizer,” a limited series adaptation of a book by Viet Thanh Nguyen in which Downey plays a CIA agent.

Downey has been married for nearly 20 years to his film producer wife Susan, whom he has credited with helping him kick drugs and alcohol. The couple has two children.

Downey also has a son from his first marriage to Deborah Falconer, which broke up amid his battle with addiction.

