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1969 Alumnus Richard Jenkins Reflects on Academy Awards

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – When 1969 Illinois Wesleyan University alumnus Richard Jenkins discovered that he was a best actor nominee for his role in *The Visitor*, he said he was “surprised, thrilled and a little humbled.” When he attended the 81st Academy Awards as an honored guest on Feb. 22, he said he was amazed.

“It’s a little surreal, the whole thing,” Jenkins said of the Oscar production.

In *The Visitor*, Jenkins plays the leading role of college professor Walter Vale, who finds that he is sharing his New York apartment with two illegal immigrants. According to 2003 best actor winner Adrien Brody, who introduced Jenkins and was one of five former category winners to present the award for best actor, Jenkins’ performance in the film is a display of “effortless and compelling simplicity.” Brody went on to commend Jenkins for his involvement in over 80 projects since the 1970s.

“I don’t quite remember what he said,” Jenkins admitted. “It’s hard to focus at that moment, but it was very nice. I loved that whole idea of actors talking about actors—I think that’s really a nice way to do it.”

Jenkins’ role in *The Visitor* has received five nominations from ceremonies like the Screen Actors Guild Awards and four wins in ceremonies such as the Moscow International Film Festival. Though he does not claim a “favorite” project, Jenkins was pleased to be recognized for his performance in *The Visitor*, which he considers an outstanding professional accomplishment.

“It’s the kind of project I waited for most of my professional life, so this was really special,” he said. “It was a movie I loved, so I didn’t mind talking about it.”

While Sean Penn received the Oscar for his role as California’s first openly gay government official in *Milk*, Jenkins described the Oscar experience as “really terrific.

“I was moved by it, by the whole thing. I don’t know what it looked like on TV, but it was really amazing to be there. There was a lot of work and a lot of thought put into it.”

With his wife, son and sister-in-law, Jenkins celebrated the evening by attending Elton John's Oscar Party and the Governors Ball.

Hesitant to consider himself a "celebrity," Jenkins did say that more fans have approached him in recent months than ever before in his career. He believes this change is as a result of his performances in popular films like *Burn After Reading* and *Step Brothers* in the past year.

"I would say 99 percent of the people are very respectful and nice, and we all appreciate it," Jenkins said. "We perform for a paying audience, so it's nice when they stop and say, 'I enjoy you' or 'I really like you.'"

Jenkins enjoys working in the entertainment industry and encourages students who have dreams of entering to "keep them and work hard.

"It's a wonderful profession with terrific people in it, and it's hard to break through, but there's room for everybody. I've had so many wonderful experiences as an actor, and I really have been able to work with a lot of incredibly talented people."

The actor was also quick to share positive remarks about his years as a Titan.

"It's a great school and I had a wonderful time there," he said of IWU. "It was the perfect school for me to go to."

This year, Jenkins will be working with Golden-Globe winner Johnny Depp in *The Rum Diary* and performing in *The Cabin in the Woods*, which was written by Joss Whedon (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). Both films will be released in 2010.