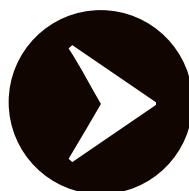




RAMBLE ON
Matthew McConaughey accepts the Oscar for Best Performance by a Leading Actor in 2014 for his work in *Dallas Buyers Club*.

Thanks for Nothing

ONCE UPON A TIME, **OSCAR SPEECHES** WERE ACTUALLY FUN—SOMETIMES EVEN FUNNY (TAKE A BOW, RUTH GORDON). BUT OVER THE LAST 20 YEARS, WINNERS HAVE BEEN IGNORING THE ORCHESTRA AND SPEWING ENDLESS, HEAD-SCRATCHING DRIVEL (WE'RE LOOKING AT YOU, MATTHEW MCCONAUGHEY)



EVERYONE KNEW she was going to win, including her. It was clear from the way Julia Roberts swanned confidently along the red carpet, dressed in vintage velvet-and-satin Valentino, and even more clear by the fact she had already won the BAFTA, the Golden Globe, and the Critics Choice Award for her lead performance in the title role of *Erin Brockovich*. She was the definition of a shoo-in. ¶ So when Kevin Spacey opened the Best Actress envelope at the 73rd Academy Awards in 2001 and announced her name,

it would be fair to assume that Roberts had a pretty good idea of what she wanted to say to the more than 72 million people watching around the world. One can only wonder, looking back, if the incoherent mess that ensued was it.

You knew we were going to be there a while when, right off the bat, Roberts warned the orchestra conductor to sit down, later saying, “Turn that clock off—it’s making me nervous.” After four seemingly endless minutes, she concluded with a plucky “I love the world! I’m so happy!” which was a charming, Julia Roberts-esque thing to hear—assuming you’d managed, of course, to endure her rambling gratitude to the 26 people (yes, 26) she’d just thanked, a roster that did not include the actual Erin Brockovich.

Roberts was hardly the first to drone on in an Oscar speech. But in the two decades since, they’ve only gotten worse, now reduced to a never-ending blizzard of industry names no one’s ever heard of, recited with the passion of a chemistry lecture. A bevy of early-season awards shows, all breathlessly covered by entertainment magazines and blogs, now means the suspense of “Who’s going to win the Oscar?” has somewhat been removed; office Oscar pools are now won and lost on Best Short (Animated) and other opaque categories. While the occasional upset still occurs—witness Anthony Hopkins besting the late Chadwick Boseman for Best Actor just last year—by and large, the Oscar winners are all but known way ahead of the big night. All of which means the winners really have no excuse for delivering a terrible speech.

They do it anyway. Who can forget Anne Hathaway’s disingenuous, wince-inducing “It came true!” for *Les Misérables* in 2013, or Matthew McConaughey, winning Best Actor for *Dallas Buyers Club* the next year, taking over three minutes to deliver a largely incoherent riff that included a reference to his late father in his underwear.

The Oscar speech is now reduced to a blizzard of industry names, recited with the passion of a chemistry lecture.

Or production designer Hannah Beachler, who, accepting with Jay Hart for *Black Panther* in 2019, not only barked at her co-winner for stepping on her dress, but then read her speech on her iPhone.

While memorable Oscar antics are easy to conjure—the streaker behind David Niven in 1974, Jack Palance’s push-ups in 1992, Roberto Benigni climbing over seats in 1999, Adrien Brody macking on Halle Berry in 2003—recalling a truly involving Academy Awards acceptance takes a lot more work. I think of 1994, when Tom Hanks won Best Actor for his portrayal of a lawyer with AIDS. Thanking his gay teacher and classmate (a moment

that would inspire the 1997 Kevin Kline comedy *In & Out*), he concluded, without notes, with this gem:

“The streets of heaven are too crowded with angels. We know their names. They number a thousand for each one of the red ribbons that we wear here tonight. They finally rest

in the warm embrace of the gracious creator of us all, a healing embrace that cools their fevers, that clears their skin, and allows their eyes to see the simple, self-evident, common sense truth that is made manifest by the benevolent creator of us all and was written down on paper by wise men, tolerant men, in the city of Philadelphia two hundred years ago. God bless you all. God have mercy on us all. And God bless America.”

A new standard for Oscar oration? Hardly. Hanks won Best Actor again the next year and gave a bland speech that was instantly forgettable.

IT WASN’T ALWAYS this way. Since its founding in 1929, the Academy Awards show has proven to be a platform for some of the loveliest speeches ever recorded—beautiful and heartfelt words that were often poignant and best of all, brief. (William Holden, Patty Duke, and Alfred Hitchcock all said, simply, “Thank you”; Gloria Grahame said, “Thank you very much”; and in 1991, a slightly more verbose Joe Pesci said, “It’s my privilege. Thank you.”)

“I’ve always had the feeling ever since coming into it, that you can only be as good as the other fellow thinks



CLASS ACTS

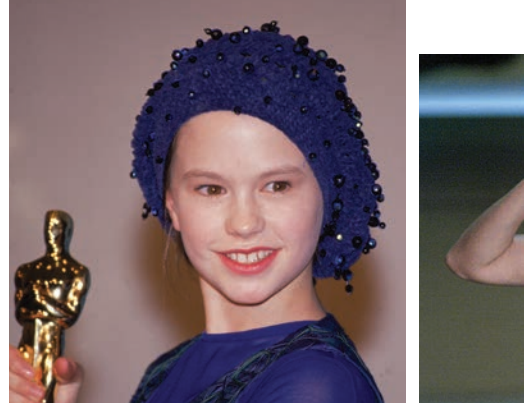
Clockwise from top: *West Side Story* director Robert Wise with Best Supporting Actress Rita Moreno and Best Supporting Actor George Chakiris in 1962; Grace Kelly and Bob Hope at the 1955 Academy Awards ceremony; Yul Brenner holding his Best Actor Oscar in 1957 for *The King and I*.

you are, or, I might add, as bad. And it seemed that quite a number of people have thought a good job has been done, and that makes me very happy,” James Cagney said when he won Best Actor for *Yankee Doodle Dandy* in 1943. Yes, that was the entire speech, and how great it was.

Grace Kelly, winning Best Actress in 1955 for *The Country Girl* in an upset over Judy Garland, said humbly, “The thrill of this moment keeps me from saying what I really feel. I

can only say thank you, with all my heart, to all who made this possible for me,” then calmly exited. John Wayne, winning Best Actor in 1970 for *True Grit*, gave a brilliant, touching speech that lasted 68 seconds and didn’t thank a single person by name.

Humor has also been a touchstone for some of the ceremony’s most memorable addresses. Winning Best Actor for *The King and I* in 1957, Yul Brynner quipped, “I hope this is



not a mistake because I won’t give it back for anything in the world. Thank you very much.” (The exact: Funny *and* brief.) In a 32-second acceptance for *Elmer Gantry* in 1961, Best Actor Burt Lancaster thanked those who voted for him, adding, “And right now, I feel so happy that I want to thank all of the members of the Academy who did *not* vote for me.” In 1969, 72-year-old Ruth Gordon, winning Supporting Actress for *Rosemary’s Baby*, opened by deadpanning, “I can’t tell you how encouraging a thing like this is.”

Sometimes it’s not even the words but, rather, the unvarnished reactions of the winners one remembers. Anna Paquin, winning Best Supporting Actress for *The Piano* in 1994 at the age of 11, spent the first 20 seconds of her acceptance in silence, dazed and speechless. Rita Moreno, gobsmacked by her Supporting Actress win for *West Side Story* in 1962, took the Oscar from presenter Rock Hudson, exclaimed, “I can’t believe it! Good Lord! I leave you with that,” and walked off the stage. And then there was, of course, Halle Berry, breaking the

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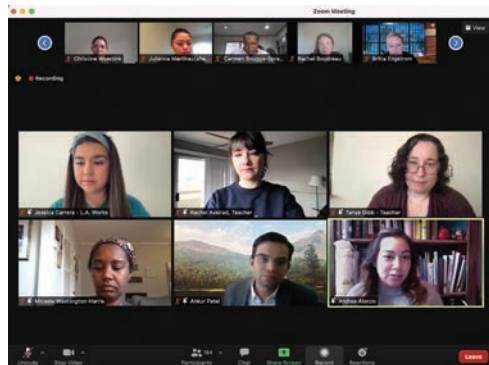
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BREVITY IS . . .

Clockwise from top left: Anna Paquin accepts the Best Supporting Actress Oscar in 1994 for *The Piano*; Julia Roberts picking up her trophy in 2001 for her performance in *Erin Brockovich*; Adrien Brody kisses Halle Berry in 2003 after winning the Best Actor Award for his work in *The Pianist*; Tom Hanks snags the Best Actor Oscar in 1994 for *Philadelphia*.

glass ceiling winning Best Actress for *Monster's Ball* in 2002, whose heaving, sobbing speech began with a heart-wrenching tribute ("This moment is so much bigger than me") to all of the women of color who came before her.

Memorable moments all.

SO WHAT happened?

Length is one issue: droning speeches have been a bane of the ceremony since Greer Garson's marathon for *Mrs. Miniver* in 1943. (Legend has it Garson blathered on for seven minutes, but due to spotty recordkeeping, nobody can confirm this with certainty.) After that, the Academy started instituting time limits—some years a minute, others as little as 20 seconds—that in the ceremony's heyday were largely adhered to by the winners.

Michael Santana, a publicist for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, says the devolution into seemingly endless speeches can be traced to the late 1960s, after the studio system had collapsed. With no one to answer to but themselves and their burgeoning personal brands,

winners first began to amble off the humility reservation into long and dull diatribes that grew increasingly numbing over the years.

Politics also came into play. Winners sometimes got preachy, a trend that began when Marlon Brando sent a Native American to refuse his Oscar for *The Godfather* in 1973. That opened the floodgates for scolds from everyone from Vanessa Redgrave (booed for her "Zionist hoodlums" comment in 1978) to Michael Moore

(also booed, for his George W. Bush rant in 2003) to, more recently, Sean Penn, John Legend, and Frances McDormand, among others.

A prominent presidential speechwriter, who didn't want to be quoted on the record "giving advice to movie stars," had this to say about the intersection of politics and the Oscars: "They shouldn't use the moment to share their political insights. They don't have insights; they have opinions, and it's boorish to impose them

"Kidjo's music has always been about legacies of women"

— NPR

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on a national audience that tuned in, in part, for a break from politics.”

But the real problem with contemporary Oscar speeches can be found in two words: the list.

“As the rise of the power agent came in the 1970s, people felt they needed to thank their agents,” says Dave Karger, an Oscars historian and host on Turner Classic Movies. “And now it’s their ‘teams’: their stylists and their managers and their lawyers and their yoga teachers. There is a lot of pressure on winners to include the ‘right’ people. If your name gets mentioned from the Oscars stage, that’s huge. It gives you instant clout and power in the industry. It’s priceless.”

In other words, it comes down to egos, which are plentiful in Hollywood. But it also translates into money. Forget to thank the producer who gave you that role or the director who cast you, and you may not work for either again. Is it any wonder, then, why the speeches are almost uniformly awful? God knows how many more people Julia Roberts has amassed to thank in the last 20 years.

But there is hope. While the tent-pole award winners might be a lost cause, swamped by their own self-preservation and image, you can still occasionally mine some gold in the acceptance speeches from some of the less showy categories on Oscar night.

In 2008, the Best Original Song Oscar went to “Falling Slowly” from the art house film *Once*, based on a musical by the same name. In a lilting Irish brogue, cowriter Glen Hansard, face flushed and as excited as a kid on Christmas morning, said this: “Thanks! *Go raibh míle, míle, maith agat.*” (That’s Irish for “Thanks a million.”) “This is amazing. What are we doing here? This is mad. We made this film two years ago. We shot it on two Handycams. It took us three weeks to make. We made it for a hundred grand. We never thought we’d ever come into a room like this and be in front of you people. It’s been an amazing thing. And thanks for taking this film seriously, all of you. It means a lot to us. Thanks to the academy. Thanks to all the people who’ve helped us. They know who they are; we don’t need to say them. This is amazing. Make art. Make art.”

Good advice for acceptance speeches too. ■