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From the Baltimore Sun

Winning words are 'short,' 'sweet'

Oscar nominees advised to time and plan speeches, keep lists of names brief

By Nick Madigan
Sun Reporter

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When millions tune in tonight to watch the Academy Awards, the big question will not be whether Forest Whitaker will win an Oscar - that may be a foregone conclusion - but what he will say when he accepts his trophy.

Whitaker, nominated in the leading actor group for his portrayal of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin in *The Last King of Scotland*, already has won an armful of prizes for the role in previous awards ceremonies this year, including the Golden Globes, the Screen Actors Guild Awards and the Broadcast Film Critics Awards. Each time, Whitaker fumbled for coherence.

When it comes to award winners, of course, Whitaker is not alone in his failure of fluency. For decades, some actors and show-business figures have ascended to hallowed podiums amid avalanches of applause only to find themselves virtually speechless when the noise subsided and the true import of the moment sank in. Others - too many others - have boldly launched into lengthy recitations of names of people they wished to thank, glazing eyes the world over.

Officials at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences are sufficiently concerned about undisciplined speechmakers that, this year, they have taken extra steps to help nominees get organized beforehand.

At the nominees' luncheon on Feb. 5 at the Beverly Hilton Hotel - an annual event where nominees get together, pose for pictures and hear a pep talk from Academy officials - each received a small tape recorder with specially-made 45-second tapes so that they could rehearse acceptance speeches that conform to the allocated time limit.

"I want to save them from themselves," the Oscar telecast's producer, Laura Ziskin, says. "I told them,

'You're all at the pinnacle of your careers now, but you've all sat at home and watched the Oscars and groaned and pled for mercy as winners read from a list. Please don't do that to our audience.' "

Speech strategies

When Ziskin last produced the Oscar show, in 2002, she gave nominees 45-second egg timers. It didn't work. The show clocked in at four hours and 23 minutes - the longest in Academy Awards history.

This time, Ziskin says, she will be firm about cueing the orchestra if an Oscar winner goes on too long.

"It's cringe-making when you have to play someone off," she says. "I don't like to do that, but they're cracking the whip on me and I will if I have to. But I think it just makes a bad show for everyone."

Ziskin, producer of the Spider-Man movies as well as *Pretty Woman* (1990), *To Die For* (1995) and *As Good as It Gets* (1997), says she understands "the need, the desire, the obligation to thank lots of people." To accommodate that desire, she says, the Academy this year will, for the first time, provide a "thank-you cam," a camera backstage into which winners, as they step offstage, can say everything they wished they had said when handed their Oscar. The footage, Ziskin says, will immediately be posted on the awards' Web site, Oscar.com.

Ziskin and her colleagues also considered offering the 177 nominees the services of a handful of screenwriters to help with acceptance speeches, but that idea has been abandoned.

"We thought about having an Oscar speech hot line, but then I thought the press would say we were trying to write their speeches for them," Ziskin says. "It was also impractical, with so many nominees. We want their spontaneity, we want their emotion. But we also want them to give it some thought and preparation."

Academy spokesman John Pavlik, who is retiring this year after being involved in 39 Oscar shows, says Ziskin's main concern had been "some of the folks who aren't used to making a public speech of any kind," like nominees in technical categories such as cinematography and editing.

"She wasn't aiming at the stars who already have people who can help them," Pavlik says. "You're not going to find Tom Hanks without someone who can help him. If you have to speak in front of the press on a regular basis, you're used to it. If you don't, standing up at the Academy Awards can be intimidating. I'm not sure I'd want to do it."

Time gobblers

The many winners who, once onstage, pull out a crib sheet show at least some level of preparedness. But that often means testing the audience's patience, both in the theater and at home. In 1998, Jon Landau, the producer of *Titanic*, read an astonishing 45 names from a list after the film won 11 Oscars, including the best-picture award. The telecast's producer, Gil Cates, who once suggested giving a high-definition television to the Oscar recipient with the shortest speech, says after Landau's epic drone that he wanted "to blow my brains out."

Lance Miller, who in August 2005 was Toastmasters International's world champion of public speaking, said, "It's a discourtesy to take more than your allotted time because you're basically saying, 'I'm more important than the other nominees.'"

Miller, who has coached Hollywood actors in public speaking for charity fundraising events, says Oscar winners have a perfect chance to impart something meaningful to a worldwide audience of as many as 1 billion people, rather than simply thanking little-known colleagues.

Whitaker's acceptance speeches so far, he says, have been wasted.

"He plays this role of Idi Amin - what an opportunity to reflect on man's inhumanity to man and to give a message to the world to reinforce something he believes," Miller says. "Not to belittle Mr. Whitaker, but he could have discussed how it touched him to embody Idi Amin, and why it's important that we remember these things."

Many are shy

Elayne Rapping, who teaches a course on the culture of celebrity at the State University of New York at Buffalo, says audiences "are starting to get annoyed with these people who babble on."

Moviegoers' perceptions of actors as lucid, she says, stem from the fact that, in movies and on television, their lines are written for them by a professional screenwriter.

"But there's no reason to think that they're articulate in person," Rapping says. "Many people who go into acting are actually shy. It's a way for them to get out of themselves, and maybe the person who comes out isn't so articulate."

At the same time, winning a big award can be "a very emotionally disorienting experience" for an actor or anyone else, Rapping says. "They're flustered. Imagine if you won an Academy Award. You wouldn't necessarily be at your best."

Example of poise

Among those who typically handle themselves with aplomb, she says, is George Clooney, who last year was nominated for a startling three Oscars - as best supporting actor for *Syriana* and for both directing *Good Night, and Good Luck* and co-writing its screenplay. (He won the acting award.)

"He's smart and sophisticated, and he acts like a grown-up," Rapping says of Clooney. The 45-year-old actor follows in the tradition of Hollywood stars like James Stewart, Gregory Peck and Henry Fonda, "men of enormous dignity," she says.

Audiences who are surprised at what sometimes comes out of an Academy Award winner's mouth on Oscar night might consider that, when making a movie, an actor can shoot a scene multiple times. If you blow a line, you do it again. There is no such luxury at the Oscars.

"What people see onscreen is a polished, edited, finished product," says Todd Boyd, an author and teacher who was a co-writer and associate producer on *The Wood* (1999).

"So you move into a live venue where you don't have the benefit of extra takes - that puts a lot of people on the spot. As we've noticed, some people are unprepared. They're thrown by the emotion of the live moment."

To Kirwan Rockefeller, an avid awards-show watcher and director of the Arts and Humanities Department at the University of California, Irvine Extension, seeing well-known actors stumble in the heat of an Oscar moment only makes them more appealing.

"We look at movie stars as larger than life, as having mythic proportions, 100 feet tall," Rockefeller says. "Sometimes, at awards shows, we get a peek behind the facade of their well-crafted images as performers. When we see them tongue-tied or nervous, it makes us remember that they're human."

Speech excerpts

Over the years, movie stars have surprised audiences with their acceptance speeches. Excerpts from some of the more notable (for better or for worse):

"Wow, wow."

-- Forest Whitaker, at the Broadcast Film Critics Association awards, 2007, for *The Last King of Scotland*

"Members of the Academy, distinguished guests, viewers, ladies and gentlemen: Always a bridesmaid, never a bride -- my foot. I have my very own Oscar now to be with me till death do us part. I wish the Academy to know that I am as delighted as I am honored, and I am honored."

-- Peter O'Toole, honorary lifetime Oscar, Academy Awards, 2003

"I don't know what I did in this life to deserve all of this. I'm just a girl from a trailer park who had a dream."

-- Hilary Swank, Academy Awards, 2005, for *Million Dollar Baby*

"I'd like to thank Jack Nicholson for making being in a mental institution like being in a mental institution. I loved being hated by you."

-- Louise Fletcher, Academy Awards, 1976, for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

"A girl's got to have her moment. Everybody tries to get me to shut up. It didn't work with my parents, and it didn't work now."

-- Julia Roberts, Academy Awards, 2001, for *Erin Brockovich*

"This is the highlight of my day. I hope it's not all downhill from here."

-- Kevin Spacey, Academy Awards, 1999, for *American Beauty*

"I'm practically unprepared!"

-- Greer Garson, Academy Awards, 1943, for *Mrs. Miniver* (After that opening line, Garson prattled on for a record-breaking seven minutes.)

"I'm happy enough to cry, but I can't take the time to do so. A taxi is waiting outside with the engine running."

-- Claudette Colbert, Academy Awards, 1935, for *It Happened One Night* (Colbert had a train to catch.)

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