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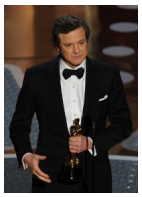

Before getting into what went wrong at last night's Academy Awards ceremony – and sadly, quite a bit went wrong – let's begin by addressing the one portion of the telecast that, for maybe the first time in Oscar history, went magically right.

With roughly a half hour to go before the presentation of Best Picture, a commercial break was followed by the appearance of Celine Dion, who stood on the darkened stage under a pool of light, and launched into a low-key (for her) rendition of the tearjerker ballad "Smile." Every seasoned awards-show viewer knew what this was leading into: the annual "In Memoriam" montage of Hollywood players who had passed during the past 12 months, accompanied by the annual, wince-inducing practice of the Kodak Theater audience applauding some names with greater fervor than others, generally depending on which of the departed was more famous at the time of his or her death.

Yet the strangest thing happened at the 2011 Academy Awards: The audience didn't applaud during the montage. Not once. In the past, these tributes have occasionally *begun* with the crowd's tasteful silence, but they never stayed silent for long; Hollywood genetics seemed to dictate that if you see Katharine Hepburn or Paul Newman on a stage, even only in film clips, you reflexively applaud. This year, however, the names and smiles of such beloved figures as Tony Curtis and Jill Clayburgh and Dennis Hopper passed by on-screen, and the only sounds we heard were those of Dion, followed by Halle Berry's touching salute to Lena Horne, followed by a snippet of the incomparable Ms. Horne's film performance of "Stormy Weather." Then the segment was over. And

then
the audience applauded.

It was, in short, the graceful, moving, classy “In Memoriam” that these tributes should be yet never (until last night) are, and if show producers Bruce Cohen and Don Mischer are to be commended for anything, it’s for their being able to actually – finally! – convince the auditorium’s guests to sit on their hands for the duration of the piece. (One of the friends I watched the show with suggested, correctly I thought, that the crowd was perhaps instructed to remain silent during the commercial break that preceded the segment, as these salutes usually come before the ads but after the presentation of several awards.) So thank you, Mr. Cohen and Mr. Mischer, for the long-overdue overhaul that all future award-show producers should subsequently steal from.

It’s doubtful, though, that they’ll want to steal many *other* ideas from last night’s telecast, beginning with the idea to pair Anne Hathaway and James Franco as co-hosts.

Hathaway, it should be said, wasn’t bad. Looking smashing in a series of (mostly) beautiful gowns – and one tuxedo – and appearing genuinely happy and honored to be there, the star’s ingratiating charm and wide grin got her through even the hoariest of gags, and she was given a lovely solo moment with her rendition of *Les Misérables*’ “On My Own,” in which she tweaked one-time Oscar host Hugh Jackman for refusing to join her on a duet. (The bit was obviously meant in jest, but seriously: Jackman was
there
! Why the hell
didn’t
we get a reprise of his and Hathaway’s wonderful 2009 pairing?)

But what, may I ask, was the deal with Franco? Was he embarrassed to be there? Too cool to be there? Exhausted from the previous night’s Independent Spirit Awards party? Distracted by his studies at Yale? High? From the moment they walked on-stage together, it was clear that Franco’s low-wattage blitheness wasn’t going to gel with his partner’s bubbly enthusiasm – it was actually clear even *before* then, as they shared no chemistry in the *Inception*-themed spoof, either – and as the evening progressed, Hathaway’s co-host seemed to grow more inattentive and sullen by the minute. (The man’s a gifted, Oscar-nominated performer. Couldn’t he have *acted*

like someone who gave a damn?) Franco did deliver one amusing one-liner at Charlie Sheen's expense, but otherwise his performance, like his brief appearance as Marilyn Monroe, was a total drag.

So *much* of the telecast was. To begin with, that initially clever film that found Hathaway and Franco traveling through former Oscar host Alec Baldwin's brain turned out to be an utter mess. Not only was it generally unfunny – Morgan Freeman showed up for a Morgan Freeman joke *at least* six years past its prime – but this *de facto* salute to the year's Best Picture roster climaxed with, of all things, a meaningless nod to *Back to the Future*, and several of the nominees went completely unmentioned. (Astonishingly, the segment's writers ignored a seemingly sure-fire meta-gag, as Franco's *127 Hours* was one of the films not referenced.)

This unsuccessful mini-parody, though, was just the first of the night's errors in judgment – or maybe just errors in scripting. Hathaway's and Franco's banter felt tired all throughout the ceremony, boasting a few too many predictable jokes about how their presences were designed to appeal to a younger demographic. (Despite Franco's continued indifference, you really began to feel for the co-hosts as they slogged through such weak material, especially knowing that both Jackman and legendary Oscar emcee Billy Crystal were in the room.) But presenters Mila Kunis and Justin Timberlake – the latter of whom, whipping out his cell phone, threatened to change the stage design by saying, "I think there's an app for that ... " – were stuck with similarly weak shtick; Josh Brolin and Javier Bardem struggled through lame introductions (and, in their matching white tux jackets, looked like a pair of disembodied heads up there); and while the tribute to Bob Hope began sweetly, it eventually went in exactly the dreadful, Fred-Astaire-and-his-vacuum direction you prayed it wouldn't. (The clips of Hope hosting the Oscars also revealed that the jokes he told 50-plus years ago were funnier, and fresher, than most of what Hathaway and Franco were given to say.)

On another note (pardon the near-pun), is it even worth mentioning that the snippets from the Best Original Song contenders were uniformly meh? After the performances of nominated

numbers, in a roundly unpopular decision, were absent from last year's ceremony, they came roaring back for this year's ... though "roaring back" isn't quite an accurate phrase. Mandy Moore and Zachary Levi delivered a perfectly respectable duet on *Tangled*'s "I See the Light," and Randy Newman did his Randy Newman thing on *Toy Story 3*'s "We Belong Together" (the category's eventual winner), but both tunes just served as reminders of how bland this occasionally eclectic category was this year. Gwyneth Paltrow, meanwhile, looked great but sounded awfully pitchy (dawg) on her *Country Strong* ballad. And if you could discern more than the song title from *127 Hours*' "If I Rise," your hearing is obviously much better than mine (and my party guests'); Florence Welch's and Dido's caterwauling may have been soulful, but lyrically, it was indecipherable.

By the time *The King's Speech* was named Best Picture, just slightly more than three hours after the telecast began, you'd think we'd finally be spared further irritations. But amazingly, there was actually one more to come, as the now-famed student singers of Staten Island's PS22 Chorus were trotted out *wa-a-a-ay* past their bedtimes for a show-capping take on "Over the Rainbow." The number received a standing ovation – or maybe the Kodak's patrons were just eager to get to their limos – but am I the only one in America who thinks these kids are just ... *fine*? What am I missing here? There's a lot of 'em, to be sure, but a big sound is just naturally going to come from 64 voices, even young ones, and the voices I heard didn't strike me as all that remarkable; when I read descriptions raving about the "golden-throated children" of the chorus, I didn't know what the writers were talking about. PS22's appearance last night felt like a blatant arm-twist to get people on their feet, almost as though the producers knew that between Hathaway's and Franco's hosting and the wholly unsurprising Best Picture anointing of *The King's Speech,* there would be little other impetus to get them there.

So beyond that "In Memoriam" tribute, was there anything I *liked* about the ceremony? Despite the tenor of my rant thus far, actually *yes*, and most of it came courtesy of the presenters and winners. Admittedly, I thought the filmed segment that found movie dialogue turned into auto-tuned songs was pretty inventive. But even that carefully planned and well-executed stunt didn't deliver half the enjoyment of Best

Supporting Actor Christian Bale's gracious and unexpectedly emotional speech, or Best Supporting Actress Melissa Leo exuberantly and hilariously dropping the "F" bomb (good save on that one, ABC censors), or Cate Blanchett, after watching Benicio Del Toro turn into a werewolf during her presentation of Best Makeup, offering a deadpan, "That's gross." (
True Grit
went zero-for-10 last night, but
The Wolfman
won an Oscar. Now
that's
gross.)

Of course, there were a number of deserving – and several surprising – victors last night, among them expert cinematographer Wally Pfister for *Inception* (poor nine-time-loser Roger Deakins, though!) and Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross for their superb
Social Network
score. (Quote from a friend: "The guy from Nine Inch Nails was classier than half the people we've seen tonight." He was right.) Colin Firth accepted his
fait accompli
Best Actor trophy with typically endearing, self-effacing good humor; Luke Matheny, director of Live Action Short winner
God of Love
, was the most entertaining recipient you'd never heard of before last night; Best Director Tom Hooper made endearing acknowledgment of his mom for indirectly getting him hired for
The King's Speech
. (I mistakenly predicted David Fincher for the award that went Hooper's way, and also got it wrong in 10 other categories. But considering that I prefaced my Oscar-predictions article by saying I'd likely only get 11 or 12 right, I'm counting my 13 correct as a moral victory.)

The show's emotional highlight came early, with Kirk Douglas' presentation of Best Supporting Actress. Impaired by his stroke but of apparently absolute sound mind, Douglas' moment of glory admittedly got off to a shaky start, with a little too much verbal ogling of Hathaway. But when the man delayed the opening of the envelope by going off on a conversational tangent, and then another one, and then *another* one, it was clear that Douglas knew exactly what he was doing; he had the crowd in the palm of his hand and intended to
keep
them there. His hilariously protracted lead-up to the announcement of Leo's name was an inspiring thrill from a master showman, and when Douglas broke the crowd up with "I will never

forget this moment!", it was a fair guess that, in all probability, neither would we.

As for the ceremony's *comedic* highlight (beyond my friend's impression that Cate Blanchett's dress "looks like an old lady's toilet-seat cover"), it was saved for just before the conclusion, and didn't even involve punchlines of any kind: Sandra Bullock's handling of the Best Actor presentation was quick-witted, beautifully timed, and very, very funny. From addressing Jeff Bridges as "Dude" and demanding that least year's winner spread the wealth to her teasing of the backstage Franco (in one of the few moments all night when the guy deigned to smile), Bullock was a radiant, effortlessly riotous presenter who also managed, as usual, to come off as *sincere*. Any chance that producers might think to call *her* for the hosting gig next year? I'm doubting that Hathaway or Franco – or any of the *rest* of us – would much mind the change.