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How to pen an Oscar speech

By Gloria Goodale | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

HOLLYWOOD – Congratulations! You are an Oscar nominee, which means weeks of frenzied fun getting ready for your big night: new clothes, new shoes, snazzy limo - no detail is too small for your attention. But here's the bad news: If you win, you have to say "thank you." In front of oh, a billion people, give or take a few million. Curiously, if you are like many Oscar nominees, "write world-class acceptance speech" just isn't anywhere on your "to do" list.

You may take small comfort from the fact that you are not alone. The words, "I don't have anything prepared..." have fallen from the lips of more than a few gobsmacked winners. Oscar history is littered with incoherent, mumbled, and just plain bad acceptance speeches. Greer Garson, for example, spoke for nearly seven minutes. In a mere 45 seconds, Renée Zellweger managed to utter "uh" and "um" more than 23 times. Diane Keaton even swore.

Perhaps not surprisingly, as audiences have begun to tire of the endless parade of award shows in which the winners seldom say anything memorable, TV producers have decided to lay down the law. At the annual nominees luncheon recently, Oscar producer Gil Cates announced that winners better not pull out that little piece of white paper full of endless names. "If you do," he told them, "you're done." His advice: "Just say one unexpected thing."

But how is a nominee, either accustomed to being behind the scenes or speaking words written by others, to heed such advice? Forget your hair and nails, for just a moment or two, says LeeAundra Temescu, a presidential-speech analyst. "Style is certainly important," says the media guru, "but these artists could afford to spend just a few moments thinking about the substance of their appearance. I'd love it if they would think about this as an opportunity to present themselves to the largest audience they're ever going to have."

Kirwan Rockefeller, a professor of pop culture at the University of California at Irvine, has a few tips for making the most of the few seconds behind the winner's podium. Speak from the heart, he says, pointing to 2002 Best Actress winner, Halle Berry, as a great example.

"Berry's speech was poignant and full of emotion," he says, adding that viewers are longing to hear something - anything - personal from their favorite stars. "A little surprise lightens things up," he says, citing the example of Shirley MacLaine's "I deserve this"

speech, or the moment when Barbra Streisand looked at her new Oscar statuette and said, "Hello, gorgeous."

While crying on cue is certainly a skill most actors have, real tears are even better. "Everybody loves to see an Oscar winner cry and be humble and be really surprised," says Mr. Rockefeller. "Don't act like you knew it was coming all along. Tom Hanks's acceptance speech for 'Philadelphia' was really touching."

Most observers agree on a basic list of no-no's. Nearly everyone agrees that James Cameron's infamous, "I am King of the World" speech - after his win for "Titanic" - stands as a cautionary tale of what not to do. While Hollywood may tolerate excesses on the set, the industry does not like to reward even the appearance of shameless egomania in public.

Beyond that, cracking a joke is great, but flopping in front of a global audience is not. "Don't pretend you're a humorist if you're not," says Bill Lampton, a communications expert.

He also advises that a great speech needn't be long, noting that President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address - considered by many to be the greatest speech ever made - was fairly brief. To that end, he cautions against reeling off a list of names of personal acquaintances. "Don't feel compelled to thank your third-grade teacher; your junior high drama coach," he says, adding that off-camera contact is better for those sorts of relationships. "Drop them a personal note instead."

While some winners have a paper filled with names tucked into a tuxedo pocket or handbag, others sometimes appear to have put little thought into what they'll say. Adrien Brody excused an utter lack of preparedness by saying he was afraid to jinx his chances. Many performers put off preparation because they are afraid of looking too slick.

But preparedness is the only way to be truly spontaneous, says T.J. Walker, a media trainer. He points to examples such as President Clinton, who routinely manages to look and sound as if he's talking extemporaneously, with a conversational quality to his words.

"He is still working from a scripted speech, but he knows it inside and out and that allows him to feel prepared and therefore relaxed," says Mr. Walker.

He notes that Hollywood stars risk alienating their fans with a poor performance. "If you are a movie star making \$20 million per movie, it's flat out annoying to suggest to people



that you don't know how to speak in public," he says. "A highly paid professional should be able to do this."

A final piece of advice comes from Ms. Temescu. Remember to whom you're talking - these are the people who go to your movies and have tuned in for a quick glimpse of the real you.

"Even though it is still a fantasy, we want to connect with these winners and feel, for perhaps one small moment, that we can connect with these 'demigods' as real people," she says. "We can allow ourselves the fantasy that we can share in the moment of their greatest triumph."



Are political comments in an acceptance speech a no-no?

Political views are perhaps the touchiest topic for an acceptance speech at the Academy Awards. Why? It breaks the unspoken contract between viewers and entertainers, says LeeAundra Temescu, a presidential-speech analyst.

"If Oscar is indeed a nationwide escape-fest from all the bad news in the world, the last thing we want is reality, in the form of political protest, intruding on our fantasy night," she says.

Yet Oscar history is full of those who opted to take advantage of a captive audience. Vanessa Redgrave castigated the US government for its treatment of the Palestinians. Michael Moore criticized the Bush administration. Cindy Crawford and Richard Gere made a pitch to free Tibet from Chinese rule.

There are subtle ways to send a message, says Matthew Felling, director of the Center for Media and Public Affairs. "Lately, [lapel] pins and non-verbal cues have been useful symbols of strong, though unstated feelings," he says. Examples would include the red and pink ribbons that symbolize the fight against AIDS and breast cancer.

But if a winner feels strongly about an issue and is willing to accept that most viewers will either tune out or discount the opinion of someone who is "merely an entertainer," then go for it, says Robin Williams. "You're addressing a global audience," says Williams, who won an Oscar for "Good Will Hunting" in 1997. "Go for whatever is on your mind. Don't waste the opportunity."