

# Cultural Daily

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## How to Save the Academy Awards

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, February 28th, 2013

Why do we complain about the Oscars every year?

Because the show is always so much less than it could be. Generally, the host is the fall-guy; this year Seth MacFarlane got his share of well-deserved criticism. But the bigger problem is who hires the host, who approves those jokes, and how the show is operated. We have to look to the producers.

Last Sunday's Oscars were lumpy at best. They lurched along without rhythm or pace, boring us with numbingly long sections that were not about the movies at all, offending half the audience, and delivering scant emotional excitement or real suspense.

"We Saw Your Boobs," the signature musical opening number, wasn't Seth MacFarlane's whim or an ad-libbed remark. It was a full-scale choreographed extravaganza that took weeks to put together and rehearse. That was the producers' call, not the host's.

On Monday, though, the Academy was hailing a comparative success. Forty million Americans watched, up slightly from last year (although 42 million watched in 2010). The Academy was especially proud that ratings for 18-24 year-olds were at a six-year high.

According to [Trendrr](#), there were 13.3 social media interactions about #oscars during the day (an all-time Academy Awards high, 58% female, 57% on mobile phones, if you're curious). That sounds pretty good, I suppose, until you think about the Academy's claim that "1 billion people are watching."

The numbers illustrate a fundamental fact: the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences survives only because of a television show. ABC's huge license fee, justified by commercials that cost \$1.7 million per 30-second spot this year, keeps the Academy in business. That's a little ironic, because the Academy has an ambivalent relationship with TV. They love the revenue, but disqualify films that air first on television or, God forbid, cable or the Internet.

It's an ambivalent attitude, and that's why the Oscars underwhelm every year. The movie folk don't embrace what works on TV. The Academy hires producers to oversee the show, when television works when there's a strong writer in charge. On a TV series, that person is called the "show-runner." It's a creative job that oversees every aspect of the show, especially the long arcs of character development. All the other writers report to the show-runner, and the show-runner is, first and foremost, a writer, too.

Want to make the Academy Awards better? Hire a classy, smart show-runner.

Divide the responsibilities, and give the show-runner creative charge. Yes, you'll still need a different producer to speed-dial celebrities and cajole them into presenting. The speed-dialing, presenter-cajoling producer should work for the show-runner, with the show-runner holding a

grander and more generous vision. It's a TV show, people, and that's how TV works.

Writers are often treated like second-class citizens on movie sets. If the Academy would really like to fix the Oscars, they'd put a writer in charge, a show-runner who would shape and guide, tell a real story with the broadcast, make sure things don't run too long or too short, give the right kind of exciting weight to the best emotional moments, and, especially, bring some welcome good humor back to the proceeding.

Instead of this:

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