The 2018 Oscars' running jet ski gag was pure genius

After a contentious year in Hollywood – the year of the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the seemingly endless scandals that followed, the year of #MeToo and Time's Up – it was inevitable that the 2018 Oscars would be somewhat political. And they were, with both grave, serious commentary on diversity and inclusion in Hollywood, and copious derisive jokes aimed at Mel Gibson, "white people with clipboards," and Donald Trump.

But the real star of the night was a green jet ski, awarded at the end of the evening to *Phantom Thread* costume designer Mark Bridges to commemorate the fact that his acceptance speech was the shortest one of the night.

For decades now, the Oscar ceremony has been a lengthy affair, usually running three or four hours, and sometimes going overtime. It's usually made even longer by traditional, tedious "this show is so long" jokes from the hosts. This year, host Jimmy Kimmel went in a different direction in his opening monologue:

> *Okay, before we start handing out the awards, some history, because we're going to do things a little bit differently. The first Oscar ceremony lasted, this is true, 15 minutes, from beginning to end. And people still complained.*
>
> *So if you do win an Oscar tonight, we want you to give a speech. We want you to say whatever you feel needs to be said. Speak from the heart. We want passion. You have an opportunity and a platform to remind millions of people about important things like equal rights and equal treatment. If you want to encourage others to join the amazing students at Parkland at their march on the 24th, do that. If you want to thank a favorite teacher, do that. Or maybe you just want to*

thank your parents and tell your kids to go to sleep. What you say is entirely up to you. You don't have to change the world. Do whatever you want.

But with that said, this is a really long show. So here's what we're going to do. Not saying you shouldn't give a long speech, but whoever gives the shortest speech tonight will go home with — Johnny, tell them what they'll win.



Photo by Kevin Winter/Getty Images

At which point a curtain opened, revealing an $18,000 jet ski, presented game-show style by an announcer and actress Helen Mirren. Throughout the ceremony, Kimmel periodically appeared with a stopwatch, reminding winners that he was timing their speeches, and occasionally commenting on who was in the lead. "Why waste precious time thanking your mom when you could be taking her for the ride of her life on a brand new jet ski?" Kimmel asked at one point.

As running Oscar gags go, the jet ski bit certainly beat some of the draggier ones in recent years, like the tedious 2015 bit where Neil Patrick Harris repeatedly asked actress (and 2018 Best Supporting Actor nominee) Octavia Spencer, who hadn't been warned in advance, to spend the ceremony watching an onstage box that supposedly contained his Oscar predictions. The jet ski contest likely didn't actually make any of the speeches shorter – winners like 14-time nominee and first-time winner Roger Deakins, who spend a lifetime working up to an award, aren't going to waste their moment in the spotlight in order to compete for a prize. "I guess I better say something, or else they'll give me a jet ski, and I don't see myself on a jet ski somehow," joked the 68-year-old Deakins just before beginning his speech.

He wasn't the only winner to throw in a spontaneous reference to the gag. "Obviously I'm not going to win the ski," chuckled Gary Oldman, toward the end of his three-minute acceptance speech for Best Actor for *Darkest Hour*. "Run that clock, Jimmy, I wanna get that ski jet or whatever that was," Sam Rockwell said, as he fumbled out his speech notes after winning Best Supporting Actor for *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*.

The entire jet ski idea was inherently pretty silly. Given some of the past controversy over Oscar "goodie bags" – the luxury swag given away to Oscar presenters by companies looking for brand recognition – the idea of awarding an already-rich filmmaker with an ultra-luxury item could potentially be seen as tone-deaf or offensive. And consciously turning the Oscars into a tacky game show in the hopes of getting a few people to shave 30 seconds off their awards speeches wasn't necessarily in the interest of the dignified tone the ceremony often attempts to reach.

But as "Oscars too long" riffs go, the jet ski business was actually brilliant. For one thing, it put an entirely new spin on an old complaint, one that's been around at least since the

1970s with very little variation. The “man, this show is long” jokes have always worked against the Oscars, by turning a celebration of film into a series of complaints about having to spend too much time celebrating film. They’ve always had a nagging, petty tone, to the effect of “Why are we even here doing this? We kinda hate it.”

Instead, the jet-ski nonsense turned the complaints into a sort of faux-positive, upbeat rallying cry, a way for Kimmel and the other onstage participants to imply the same sorts of concerns about the show’s length without actually whining about them or being derisive. The gag turned the Oscars into a shared competition instead of a shared complaint.



Photo by Matt Petit/A.M.P.A.S via Getty Images

And it gave audiences a reason, however mild and tongue-in-cheek, to stay invested in every speech, even if they weren’t necessarily familiar with the winner or the film being

honored. (At the Oscars viewing party I hosted, some of the attendees started yelling “Jet ski! Jet ski!” after particularly punchy speeches, and speculating over whether, when two or three people won in a team and each gave two-line thank yous, their individual time was up for consideration.)

And perhaps most importantly, after the setup, Kimmel and the show writers and runners didn’t beat the gag into the ground. Just having Kimmel turn up with a stopwatch was enough to remind viewers about the joke. The mid-ceremony business where he upped the ante to include a free trip to Arizona’s Lake Havasu was maybe more than he needed — it raised the question, “How much bigger is this going to get?” But ultimately, the show didn’t beat the joke into the ground any more past that point. And the ceremony’s final moments, where Bridges and Mirren were carted out onstage on the jet ski, were pretty delightful. Their big, goofy grins were a reminder that the Oscars are at their best when people are allowed to have a sense of humor as well as a sense of gravitas.

https://www.theverge.com/2018/3/5/17079816/oscars-2018-mark-bridges-jet-ski-phantom-thread-winner-jimmy-kimmel-helen-mirren-prize-contest