

The Oscars Broadcast, Zooming Way Past Cheeky to Land Squarely on Crass

By Linda Holmes

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- 1 If you like *Argo* (which won Best Picture), the movie *Chicago* (which made a couple of appearances) and jokes about women (which just kept coming), you probably had a substantially better night than the average viewer, who was subjected to Seth MacFarlane's delivery of one of the worst hosting performances in Oscar history.
- 2 In fact, David Letterman is writing Seth MacFarlane notes of gratitude right now for taking all the pressure off of "Uma, Oprah, Oprah, Uma," the most famous bomb of 1995, and more recent troubled hosts James Franco and Anne Hathaway are feeling a little less heat as well.
- 3 MacFarlane opened with a perhaps predictably juvenile and overlong bit in which he sang about all the actresses he'd seen topless in movies, trying to have his cake and eat it too by framing it in a bit where William Shatner visited from the future to show him what it would look like if he were bombing.
- 4 Unfortunately, it was very difficult to tell the difference between pretending to bomb and actually bombing — the laughter he received seemed polite at best, and his conviction that saying "boobs" enough times would cause a room full of tuxes and gowns to quake with hilarity seemed misplaced. And then there were sock puppets. It's better forgotten.
- 5 Throughout the night, MacFarlane returned over and over to the topic of women and how silly they are — how Jessica Chastain's character in *Zero Dark Thirty* is an example of how women never let anything go, for instance — to the point where it seemed like his shtick would have benefited from a simple count of how many times he was returning to the well of "Women, am I right?"
- 6 He kept apologizing for and reframing jokes so that he'd be less responsible for them: If the audience didn't like the joke, he'd comment on how much worse it would get, or how unfair that was, or how he'd thought they weren't doing that joke. He showed none of the willingness to say what you're going to say and not walk it back 10 seconds later that characterizes every legitimately daring comedian.
- 7 His sexist jokes were in poor taste, sure, but if they'd been funny, nobody would have cared. People are forgiving when your women-are-crazy material is funny; they're not so forgiving when it's dull. It didn't help that the patter written for presenters was almost as bad. It takes a lot to make the charismatic

Review: Seth MacFarlane Proves He's An Oscar Guy in Hosting Gig

By Frazier Moore

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- 1 He ruffled feathers. He maybe even turned some viewers off. But it's likely no one turned off Seth MacFarlane.
- 2 Best-known until recently as the bad-boy creator and character voice behind "Family Guy" and last summer's hit film "Ted," MacFarlane seized the camera Sunday as host of ABC's Oscarcast and proved to its vast audience that he's a ridiculously versatile entertainer, a guy who can be as charming as he is famously irreverent, even polarizing.
- 3 Here's a guy who could toss off a joke Bob Hope might have delivered decades ago ("It's Sunday. Everybody's dressed up. This is like church — only with more people praying"), then carry off a deliberate groaner like his wisecrack that, while, an actor like Daniel Day-Lewis really captured Abraham Lincoln in his Oscar-winning performance, "I would argue that the actor who really got inside Abraham Lincoln's head was John Wilkes Booth."
- 4 Viewers could have gotten fair warning of what to expect from MacFarlane last fall when he hosted "Saturday Night Live" with skill. But this Oscars hosting gig was the Main Event, and he earned a large measure of credit for keeping the show in satisfying equilibrium. This was an elegant affair, including a surprise appearance by first lady Michelle Obama, live from the White House, who announced the best picture.
- 5 Few presenters knocked it out of the park in their fleeting turns, but none had viewers' teeth grinding.
- 6 Perhaps inevitably, Mark Wahlberg was reunited with his "Ted" co-star, a digitally rendered Teddy bear voiced by MacFarlane. Ted, at his politically incorrect best, wondered aloud where the post-Oscars orgy would be ("Jack Nicholson's house," Wahlberg finally replied) and professed that he was Jewish to ensure he would "work in this town."
- 7 Yes, MacFarlane had his moments of dubious taste. What did anybody expect who'd ever spent a moment with "Family Guy"? But did he really cross the line when he described "Django Unchained" as "the story of a man fighting to get back his woman who's been subjected to unthinkable violence — or, as Chris Brown and

guys from *The Avengers* come off like charmless dolts, but they managed.

8 It wasn't just MacFarlane making the entire telecast look bad, particularly in the early going. What seemed like a cheeky decision to play people off the stage with the *Jaws* music when they talked too long seemed brutal and tasteless when it was used on the guy who was explaining that a visual-effects company responsible for *Life Of Pi* was going under, or against the guys who made the documentary *Searching For Sugar Man*.

9 It seems like it's very difficult for awards show organizers to learn the lesson that an awards show is not a roast. It's not there to pull the rug out from under Hollywood and zing the heck out of everybody and show 'em a thing or two. People are wearing millions of dollars in borrowed jewelry; trying to teach them a lesson in humility at that moment, you are doomed to fail before you begin.

10 When MacFarlane and a poorly served Kristin Chenoweth ended the broadcast — after Best Picture was announced — with a song calling out all the "losers," by name, it seemed like a discordant, nasty note on which to end right after Affleck's appreciative, upbeat speech. People don't watch awards shows to see the host dump on the show he's hosting unless he's very, very, very good at it. The best hosts tease sharply but graciously; that's what made Johnny Carson a good Oscars host, and Jimmy Fallon at the Emmys, and recent Golden Globes hosts Amy Poehler and Tina Fey.

11 Seth MacFarlane demonstrated Sunday night, perhaps as well as anyone ever has, that hosting the Oscars is not about proving how clever you are. Like being a good talk-show host, it's about making everyone look good, which makes you look confident and capable. And while you're worrying about how blue you can work, how much humor about Jews you can do in your bit with Mark Wahlberg, and how many times you can say "boobs," it's important to keep in mind that the most important thing is that you be funny.

12 If you're funny, people are pretty flexible. If you're not, no stuffed bear can save you.

Rihanna call it, a date movie"? Especially on a night where everyone else seemed to be on their best behavior, MacFarlane's strategic misbehavior furnished welcome relief.

8 In interviews beforehand, he had spoken of his hope to strike a balance between respect for Hollywood and some necessary sass. Mission accomplished.

9 Leading-man handsome with a gleaming smile, he began the broadcast without a net and looking totally relaxed: Alone on the stage, he delivered a series of one-liners, most of which scored. (The Oscarcast was being watched by "close to a billion people worldwide," he intoned, "which is why Jodie Foster will be up here in a bit to ask for her privacy.")

10 Then he opened the door to his reputation for raunch with the appearance on a video screen of William Shatner as "Star Trek's" Captain Kirk, who had arrived from the future to scold MacFarlane in advance for the hosting performance he was just starting.

11 "The show's a disaster," declared Shatner.

12 As evidence, he pointed to an "incredibly offensive song that upsets a lot of actresses in the audience." With that, a pre-taped production number featured MacFarlane singing "We Saw Your Boobs," saluting a roster of actresses who have bared themselves in their films. But then, in an effort to atone, MacFarlane sang a classy rendition of "The Way You Look Tonight" accompanied by Charlize Theron and Channing Tatum in dance.

13 Not good enough, said Shatner, who then revealed a video clip where MacFarlane, costumed in a Flying Nun habit, hit on Oscar nominee Sally Field in the green room. Back and forth went the routine: Bad Seth and Good Seth. Both were very funny, stewarding a broadcast that never went askew.