



## **TRANSCRIPT**

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**Media Film and Technology**

**Film Review**

**The Academy Awards – A Reflection**

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Welcome to Learning Works. Time now for another look at what's happening in the world of films. Here's Learning Works regular commentator John J McGowan.

### **JOHN J McGOWAN**

Phew! The Academy Awards just made it this time – but it was a near thing.

The Writers strike was resolved just eleven days before the Big Night, and the ceremony was able to proceed without blotting its successful record of eighty years without a cancellation.

During the build-up to this year's Awards, and the expressions of concern about the possible effects of the on-going strike, it might have occurred to you to wonder why the absence of an input by writers would have a potentially damaging effect on this massive, glamorous annual television event.

Well, we saw what happened to the Golden Globes awards back in January. This is usually also a star-spangled affair, albeit with much less hoop-la than the Big Show, but this year it was reduced to the level of a brief media conference at which the names of the illustrious award winners were simply read out from a list on a piece of paper. It's almost unthinkable to try to imagine that Mount Everest of bally-hoo - the Academy Awards ceremony – ever being reduced to the level of a press conference.

But, you might well ask, why should it be? How could this enormous enterprise be held to ransom by a bunch of keyboard-clacking writers? Well perhaps the answer to this question is to be found in a remark once made by the great comedy writer and performer Spike Milligan. Back in the 1950's Milligan's radio creation, The Goon Show, was re-defining radio comedy and one of the outstanding performers in The Goon Show was, of course, the wonderful actor Peter Sellers. On some occasion Milligan was asked to comment on Sellers' contribution to The Goon Show and he was reported to have said - waspishly: "Sellers is the vase in which I arrange the flowers."

This rather harsh statement made it clear that Milligan believed that the great Sellers would be an empty vessel without the material which Milligan wrote for him to perform. Milligan's uncompromising statement draws attention to the crucially important role which writers play in most forms of performance art and, for that matter, in the more commercial forms of performance productions – such as the Academy Awards.

This year, the closing credits for the show named about a dozen writers who had worked on the show itself. In addition, there were probably quite a few others who had worked with participants in the show – potential award winners including performers, directors, producers and the rest – to

help them formulate their acceptance speeches. All of these writers would have been very busy indeed in the few days between the end of the strike and the Big Night.

Appropriately, the writers themselves got a mention this year in the introductory remarks by the host, comedian Jon Stewart. In words no doubt provided for him by some of the writers, Stewart said the strike had torn Hollywood apart. However, he went on to say, the approaching Oscars may actually have helped to end the strike. He said that the idea of getting the town back to work and having the Oscars (may have been) part of the impetus (for the negotiators) to get things done.

So much for the remarks of the host which we love to chuckle - or groan - at but when you think back on the ceremony just imagine if there were no writers working behind the scenes who would construct the numerous introductions to the various categories of the Awards. These introductions are an essential element of the show with each one being performed by a glamorous star - usually a former Oscar winner - who sashays onto the stage accompanied by a musical fanfare and applause from the audience and then...*reads* their remarks from an autocue.

Who would write the acceptance speech for the person who wins the Irving Thalberg Award for a lifelong contribution to the motion picture industry? And who - if not writers - would make an initial contribution to the overall design of the show. They provide assistance to the producers and directors in formulating the structure which the show will follow from the moment the opening animated sequence appears to the closing "good night" from the host?

So the big winner at the Oscars this year was tinseltown itself with the Awards ceremony becoming a kind of celebration of the end of the strike. But what about the movies? Well, host Jon Stewart's remarks hit the nail right on the head when he referred to "this year's slate of Oscar-nominated psychopathic killer movies."

They were all a rather dreary bunch. I thought *Atonement* was the best of the nominated movies - a weepie about the long-term destructive effects of a childhood lie. However it only managed to win one of the minor awards - original score - and it wouldn't have won much from me either. I'd rate it at three stars.

I hope that next time we meet I'll have some really good movies to talk about. See you in the back stalls.

### **TONY RYAN**

John J McGowan is an Adelaide-based writer and director, and author of a book on his South Australian-born namesake and Hollywood legend John Patrick McGowan. It's called **J. P. McGowan - Biography of a Hollywood Pioneer**, Published in 2005 by McFarland.