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## The accidental 1953 Academy Awards

*It was the last thing the big studio  
bosses wanted*

**By Ed Robertson**

On Sunday night some 40 million Americans will sit down to watch the Academy Awards. It's a wingding of a television event for sure, and every bit a TV institution after a half century, even with all the social changes that have swept across America and the enormous changes in media over those 50 years.

Yet the very fact that the Academy Awards air on TV is a fluke of history. We owe it all to a flap over money.

The year was 1953, and it was late January, with just six weeks to go before the annual Academy Awards ceremony, the 25th. The planners were at their work.

Traditionally, Hollywood's eight major film studios underwrote the bulk of the cost for the event, about 80 percent, with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences making up the difference. It was to be a lavish Hollywood affair at the RKO Pantages Theatre, expected to cost \$100,000, up \$10,000 from the previous year.

But then suddenly four of the studios announced that they would no longer finance the show. The Academy had to come up with a lot of money very quickly or cancel the event.

Today television would seem the first place for the Academy to turn. The networks had in fact been pursuing the Academy for the rights to the broadcast. But the awards had never been televised, and if Hollywood's studio chiefs had their way, they never would be.

Television was so new, and growing fast. In 1953 almost half--45 percent--of all households owned sets. That figure was just 10 percent three years earlier.

Hollywood saw TV as the enemy, the new

medium that would keep people at home, no longer lining up to buy tickets. Box office receipts would tumble.

Film studios routinely prohibited contract players from performing on TV, and some moguls, such as Jack Warner, went so far as to ban the depiction of television sets in their pictures.

But, with the crisis at hand, the Academy had little choice but to turn to television, and it did. Two weeks later the Academy made a deal with NBC/RCA for exclusive TV and radio rights. The price was \$100,000, just enough to cover the cost of the ceremony.

RCA Victor was the sole sponsor of that first Oscar telecast. That was typical. Many shows in the early days of television were broadcast by a single sponsor.

“The spots were for RCA televisions, radios and victrolas,” says Academy librarian Libby Wertin. “The RCA brand was also visible on the side of the stage, as well as on the marquee outside the Pantages Theater, where the awards were held in Hollywood.”

There were just six commercial breaks and two station ID breaks, and the broadcast ran just 90 minutes.

By comparison, last year’s Oscars on ABC clocked in at three hours, 25 minutes, with 27 minutes of commercials from 25 different sponsors. According to Nielsen Monitor-Plus, the network charged advertisers \$1.5 million per 30-second spot, more than 15 times the entire license fee paid by NBC/RCA for that entire first broadcast.

The structure of the 1953 event was also different than today. The Best Picture Oscar—the climactic moment to which modern broadcasts build after three hours of teasing the audience—was awarded at the midpoint, less than an hour into the show.

The 25th Academy Awards aired from 10:30 p.m. to midnight on March 19, 1953. The show was simulcast from Los Angeles and New York, with NBC cutting back and forth from each location throughout the show. Bob Hope hosted on the West Coast, Conrad Nagel on the East. The late start accommodated those nominees in New York who were also performing that night on the Broadway stage.

According to Nielsen Media Research, the show was seen in 10.9 million homes, scoring a 49.7 rating and an 82 share. Variety reported

that the broadcast reached an audience of more than 90 million viewers across the U.S. and Canada.

The simulcast was also an early attempt at satellite transmission.

"NBC was so intent on including both of America's show biz capitals for that first Oscar broadcast, and embracing all of America, they broadcast it coast to coast without the technology to do so," observes Tom O'Neil, host of the awards site GoldDerby.com.

"In those days, whenever they attempted a simulcast, the screen on the TV set would go dark as they switched back and forth—sometimes for as long as a minute. Viewers didn't mind, because they knew what kind of technological daring was being attempted."

The major acting awards that night went to Gary Cooper (Best Actor, "High Noon"), Shirley Booth (Best Actress, "Come Back, Little Sheba"), Anthony Quinn (Supporting Actor, "Viva Zapata!") and Gloria Grahame (Supporting Actress, "The Bad and the Beautiful").

John Ford won Best Director for "The Quiet Man," while Best Picture went to Cecil B. DeMille and "The Greatest Show on Earth."

Once the major awards were distributed, the honorary Oscars were presented, including a special Oscar for Hope and the Irving G. Thalberg Award for DeMille, followed by the Scientific and Technical Awards.

It was a night not without glitches.

"When Shirley Booth accepted the award for Best Actress, she was so excited that she tripped on her way up the stairs," says O'Neil. "It was one of those humbling, revealing moments that makes award shows so irresistible in the first place."

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*-Ed Robertson is a television historian and a regular contributor to Media Life.*

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