

When you think about what hosting the Academy Awards really entails, it's a job any one of us can handle. After all, once they deliver their opening monologue, most Oscar hosts disappear from the stage, reemerging every 15 minutes or so to introduce a presenter, read another joke off the teleprompter, and basically keep things moving. Doesn't matter if it's Billy Crystal, David Letterman or Ellen DeGeneres. An Oscar host is basically a traffic cop, only in nicer duds.

Still, some Oscar hosts are better than others. Crystal is considered the standard bearer, while Letterman fell flat on his face. We asked Professor Robert Thompson, director of the Center of Popular Television at Syracuse University, to weigh in on what makes a good host, what makes a bad one, and how first-time Oscar emcee DeGeneres will fare. The 79th Academy Awards broadcast airs Feb. 25, beginning at 5 pm on ABC.

TW: What's the trick to hosting the Oscars?

RT: I think you have to be "good enough," but not "too good."

TW: In other words, do the job without taking attention away from the event itself.

RT: Exactly. You're not there to distract. You have to remember that you are, in fact, a traffic cop. You've got to be amusing, you've got to be funny, you've got to have a couple of good moments, whether it's your opening monologue or you're taking part in the production numbers, but in the end, you have to remember it's not "The Academy Awards, Starring You." It's the Academy Awards, which happen to be hosted by you. So you also need a certain degree of humility.

I think when Chris Rock hosted the show [in 2005], he showed a good deal of savvy in reining himself in. Whereas when Letterman hosted [in 1995], he was trying to do the Letterman show, and it didn't work because (1) a good chunk of that audience just didn't get him, and (2) the audience within that pavilion didn't want a show that was about him. They wanted a show that was about them.

TW: But if that's the key, why didn't Dave work out? Isn't he the king of self-deprecation?

RT: Letterman can be self-deprecating with the best of us, but his self-deprecation is always with a sense of superiority. And that's not what they [the academy] want to see.

TW: Well, if "good, yet humble" is the formula, then Ellen should do very well.

RT: She ought to. She's funny, without being threatening. She's versatile, she can do her goofy dances, she can be in the production numbers if it's asked of her, and she's really, really good at telling a joke. Not only that, she has experience hosting major awards shows – she hosted the Emmys, for example, at a very difficult time, when they were twice delayed because of 9/11.

The other thing about hosting the Oscars is that you have a presentation that's very structured. Between all of the reading of the names, and giving out the awards, and the production numbers, and the speeches, the amount of time you've got to play with within that structure doesn't leave you much space. Not many people can work a good comic act in a straitjacket. I think Ellen DeGeneres is one of them. [TW]

Got a favorite Oscar host? Let us know at writeus@thewavemag.com.