



We'd like to thank our favorite speechmakers



USA TODAY's **Mike Snider** talked to Lance Miller, the 2005 Toastmasters International World Champion of Public Speaking, about the highlights.

Oscar host Ellen DeGeneres just had to ratchet up the expectations for the speeches by the winners.

The stakes were already high, what with the media piling on best-actor nominee Forest Whitaker for failing to come up with a good speech on his pre-Oscar rounds.

Although she was only joking, DeGeneres said: "It's not that we don't have time for long speeches. We don't have time for boring speeches."

Rather than be boring, she said, "Make something up."

Presumably none of the winners did that. Despite all the pressure, the winners delivered a better-than-average crop of acceptance speeches. "We started to see a really strong finish in the message and delivery of the acceptance speeches," says Miller, who watched the awards show with more than a dozen Hollywood-area Toastmasters members.

Whitaker rose to the occasion and delivered the most personal and best speech overall, Miller said.

The 45-year-old actor evoked his days as a youngster watching films at the drive-in from the back seat of his family's car. He also thanked the people of Uganda, who embraced him for his portrayal of Idi Amin in *The Last King of Scotland*.

"It really was night and day," Miller says, compared with Whitaker's unprepared, rambling acceptance speech at the Golden Globes last month. "If he was in a Toastmasters club, he would have been voted most-improved. When he ended with his Oscar in the air, we all cheered.

"He really connected on that. It was really from the heart, even though it was read. He held together and pulled it off phenomenally."

Rating the rest:

•**Most eloquent.** Thelma Schoonmaker, who won for best editing on *The Departed*. "Her wordsmithery was phenomenal," Miller says. In winning her third Oscar — she won in 2005 for *The Aviator* and 1981 for *Raging Bull*— Schoonmaker complimented "a fantastic panoply of actors' and the "tumultuous, passionate, funny" director Martin Scorsese. "She was very composed," Miller said.

•**Most emotional.** Best supporting actress Jennifer Hudson (*Dreamgirls*). "There are several things about her speech that were well-crafted," Miller says. "She started with 'Look at what God can do' about from where she was a year ago to where she is today."

Hudson then dedicated the win to her grandmother, "who had the passion but never had the chance." What a great line, Miller says. "It expresses the complete thought so concisely. And her

closing was so nice in thanking all the people for helping her keep the faith even when she didn't believe. ... It was tremendously emotional and articulate."

•**Most heartfelt.** Supporting-actor winner Alan Arkin (*Little Miss Sunshine*). He said he knew "you're not supposed to" have written comments, but he produced a slip of paper and used it effectively. "He talked about (the film) being a team project and he had a great message," Miller says. "He was getting emotional about what it meant to him."

Arkin said he was "deeply moved by the open-hearted appreciation our small film has received. In these fragmented times, (that) speaks so openly of the possibility of innocence, growth and connection."

Next, Arkin thanked directors Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris and the entire crew for creating on the set "the same sense of joy and trust and community the film speaks about."

That was a strong ending, Miller says. "We felt the sincerity was there."

•**Best message** Viewers may not have been paying attention to which film won the award for live-action short film. But director Ari Shandel (*West Bank Story*) probably got their attention with his description of his film, "a comedy musical about Israelis and Palestinians that takes place between two falafel stands."

After saying his win suggested that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not hopeless, Shandel thanked the academy for continuing to honor short films. "A lot of them are made by directors who are trying to get noticed. In a lot of ways, we represent the little guy," he said.

Shandel did not use notes, but he succinctly covered many topics, Miller says.

"It really caught you at the beginning, and I was so impressed by what he put together. And he did it in time," Miller says. "It was a great message and a very nice clean delivery."