



Creative Arts Emmys let loose

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It's an event That has honored Sarah Silverman for her song "I'm F***ing Matt Damon" (from

ABC's "Jimmy Kimmel Live"), blasphemed Jesus and featured nonagenarian fitness guru Jack LaLanne leading its audience in calisthenics. The Academy of Television Arts & Sciences calls it the Creative Arts Emmy Awards, but the event -- scheduled for

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Aug. 21 at the Nokia Theatre and telecast in edited form the following Friday on E! Entertainment Television -- might more accurately be described as the Not Ready for Primetime Emmys.

Awards in 71 categories are handed out at the Creative Arts Emmys, more than double the amount at the Primetime Emmys, held a week later at the same venue. While the event has a handful of celebrity-friendly categories, like guest actor in a drama series, the bulk of the awards are for below-the-line disciplines deemed too mundane for the big show, such as art direction, cinematography and sound editing.

Ironically, the show's low profile has worked in its favor, making it one of the looser, edgier stops on the awards circuit.

"Because it's on a cable channel, not a broadcaster, and we know that the show is going to be edited, people tend to relax a little bit more with their language," TV Academy chairman and CEO John Shaffner says.

In recent years, the show has increased its celebrity quotient with high-profile hosts such as Penn & Teller, Neil Patrick Harris (who went on to host the Primetime Emmys in 2009) and George Lopez, and a growing number of TV star attendees and presenters, many of whom turn out to show support for the craftspeople on their shows.

One of the engines behind the evolution has been producer Spike Jones Jr., who started with the show in 1995 when it was just a modest dinner dance at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium.

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"It was noisy, people were smashed," Jones recalls. Although "3,000 people smashed is a lot of fun," he allows, "it was basically, 'Here's your award, here's your salad, have a nice day.'"

When the Emmys were moved to the Shrine Auditorium in 1998, the TV Academy decided to give the Creative Arts Awards its own telecast, albeit a modest one carried by TV Land. Jones was given just three cameras to cover the action and less than 24 hours to whittle the three-hour-plus show down to a 90-minute special airing the following night.

"That was nuts," Jones says. "We literally finished the show and all went to an edit facility. We were making edits that none of us really wanted to make. We'd say, 'Let's look away from the monitors so we don't have to see what's happening, because we're just killing this thing.'"

Although producers are now given four days to edit the show, the cuts can still be brutal, particularly when it comes to acceptance speeches. The TV Academy's generous policy of guaranteeing every winner face time on the telecast means that awardees' rambling lists of thank-yous are often cut down to mere sound bytes.

"People complain, 'How come my son's speech was cut?' Well, he didn't say anything pithy," Jones says.

The most noteworthy acceptance speech -- and arguably the most famous moment in Creative Arts Emmy history -- came in 2007 when Kathy Griffin stepped to the podium to pick up the best reality program award for her Bravo show "My Life on the D-List."

"A lot of people come up here and thank Jesus for this award. I want you to know that no one had less to do with this award than Jesus," Griffin said, holding up the statuette. "Suck it, Jesus. This award is my god now."

The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights denounced Griffin's remarks as "obscene and blasphemous," and the TV Academy announced that her speech would be edited for the telecast. But a funny thing happened on the way to Griffin's eternal damnation: She was invited back to host the ceremonies in 2009.

"Now that I've been around the block a few times, I've learned that's the way these things typically go," says Griffin, who affectionately refers to the Creative Arts Awards as "the Schmemmys." "I curse on CNN on New Year's Eve, I 'get in trouble,' I 'get banned,' then they look at the ratings, and I get invited back next year."

Nonetheless, there are limits to how far the show is willing to go. In 2007, Jones had planned to film a cold open for the telecast in which actors from different shows would sing the words to the Emmy-nominated song "D**k in a Box" from NBC's "Saturday Night Live," but TV Academy officials nixed the idea.

For many, the most controversial aspect of the Creative Arts Awards is the idea that their category is being shunted off to a separate-but-not-so-equal ceremony. But "Mad Men" costume designer Katherine Jane Bryant says she understands.

"It would be nice to be on primetime, like (the below-the-line categories) are in the Oscars, but at the same time I understand that there are a lot more awards," says Bryant, who won an Emmy for "Deadwood" in 2005.

Besides, "the Emmys all look the same," says HBO Documentary Films president Sheila Nevins, who was honored with the TV Academy's Governors Award at last year's event. "A year later, nobody knows whether you got it on the Primetime Awards or at the Creative Arts."

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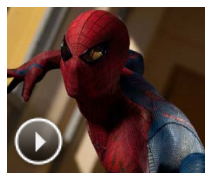
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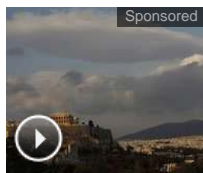
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