

# you can't FOOL THIS ROOM

PGA AWARDS EVENT CHAIRS MIKE FARAH AND JOE FARRELL  
RECOUNT THE FUN AND CHALLENGE OF PRODUCING A SHOW FOR  
PRODUCERS ABOUT PRODUCING.



**A**s event chairs of the PGA Awards for the third year, visionaries and Funny or Die veterans Mike Farah and Joe Farrell faced the daunting task of producing a show that gave attendees a welcome opportunity to laugh while acknowledging tragedy. Here's how they did it.

## THE TIMELINE

**Mike Farah:** The first Zoom to plan the show is typically around November. We have a meeting with the writing team soon after that. We had some ideas planned that we were really excited about, but because of the horrific fires, we moved away from those ideas.

We all wanted the show to go on because it employs so many people, but we wanted to handle it in a smart and sensible way. There wasn't a lot of time between the fires and when the show occurred, but the team did an amazing job moving quickly and thoughtfully on how best to handle it.

## THE SCRIPT

**Mike Farah:** We intentionally didn't want to start the show with a comedy bit. So (PGA Presidents) Donald De Line and Stephanie Allain came out and gave a great speech that reminded everyone why we were there and where everyone's hearts were.

**Joe Farrell:** Our way forward is to try and feel as topical as possible and address what's front of mind for people. We did a bit about the eternal struggle of trying to define what a producer does. Then we did a slightly satirical bit about production going out of town, which everyone's very stressed about.

Our big production number was "Miracle," a bait-and-switch musical number about hope and what it means for the next generation. Younger producers may feel that the industry no longer

has the opportunity it may have had for older producers. We wanted that song to speak to the hope that a younger generation might have, which can be inspiring to older generations of producers, while also ruefully recognizing that times are hard.

The writers are thrilled because it's a nontelevised event and so industry-facing. We're able to tell jokes that you can't tell on any other awards show because they're too inside. A national broadcast audience won't get it if you talk about points on the back end or net points not being recognized.

This year, the writers had a bit where they wanted to do a children's book called *Am I a Producer?* It had different scenarios about what it meant to be a producer, and they were all very funny. I had a feeling Alan Cumming would be at the ceremony because of *Traitors*. I also knew he was a children's author. He's got a great voice and an impish quality to his comedy. So we asked him to do it. We were so lucky he said yes.

I don't think he had any concept of how much the room was going to eat up these jokes. The first couple of jokes hit so hard you could see his expression change, like, "Oh, this is going to go really well!" By the end, he had a call-and-response going on with the crowd yelling yes or no when he'd ask, "Am I a producer?" It was really a great moment.

If you honestly and passionately speak to the moment we're in and not be glib about it, the room is pretty open and willing to laugh.

**Mike Farah:** I had a bunch of people tell me they thought these bits were real. They thought we actually had the New Hampshire film commissioner on stage telling people to shoot in his state. They thought *Am I a Producer?* was a book they could buy. They thought a young producer surprised everyone by pulling

out a microphone to sing this incredibly hilarious and well-produced song. I share this because I think it's a testament to the writing and the creative execution. I think people were really ready to laugh.

But to Joe's earlier point, because everything is created and curated for an audience of producers, we shouldn't be surprised that some people took these things seriously. We're grateful that the PGA and Donald and Stephanie trusted us to take those swings.

## THE TEAM

**Joe Farrell:** Like any good producer, you're only as good as the team you put together. (Executive producer) Branden Chapman and (coexecutive producer) Carleen Cappelletti are the true producers of the show, and they do a fantastic job. It's just a marvel to see how they're able to put together all the constituencies, schedules, logistics and design and have it be so tasteful.

Branden and Carleen do big, big events. They're very good at flagging things and saying, "This is gonna be tricky timingwise," or "This might be a little too ambitious for what we can do."

We've worked with the same writers—Matt Oberg, Jody Lambert and Lauren Cortizo—for three years in a row. We've known the two comedy writers, Jody and Matt, for years from our tenure at Funny or Die. Jody knew Lauren. We inherited Branden and Carleen, who have produced the awards for many years. They are the grizzled veterans of the awards who have worked with a lot of event chairs before us.

Carleen focuses on the aesthetic of the evening, the design choices and the actual event. Branden is the master of logistics and scheduling, putting the run of show together and coordinating all the talent schedules. So they're really doing boots-on-the-ground producing.

As event chairs, we're managing the creative process, developing the scripts, getting ideas codified, then delivering those produced elements to Branden and Carleen. Matt and Jody did the (children's) book. I was very involved with getting the song produced with Jody, the songwriter Gabe Gibbs, and Bryce Charles, who performed it. There was a lot of stuff we were doing on our own because Branden and Carleen were doing the ceremony.

Lauren is in her own vertical, writing the actual show copy for the A-list celebrities, which is a massive logistical job. It's not just lip service to say the team works so well together because we don't run into each other. Everyone has a very defined lane that is very busy.

**Mike Farah:** We work a lot with the talent bookers, Jane Sarkin and Matt Ullian, to curate the talent list for the presenters. They do a lot of the work with those who are presenting on behalf of the nominated films.

For the last three years, we've tried to feature great up-and-coming comedians to shine a spotlight on them. This past year, we had Lisa Gilroy, who is continuing to blow up. Chris Fleming is very well known in the comedy community but not to the Hollywood community. Every year, we try and find folks we really believe in and think are funny and give them some stage time to do their thing.

**Joe Farrell:** We're really lucky because Donald and Stephanie have been so great. Mike worked with Stephanie for years and has known her for decades. They're really good at giving feedback and recognizing when Mike, the writers, and I are excited about something.

**Mike Farah:** I'm in the PGA because of Stephanie Allain. I used to be her assistant many years ago, and she's just



incredible. I remember when we did our first Zoom as event chairs. There were like 30 people on, and everyone was so deferential. "What do you guys want to do? It's up to you, Joe and Mike. We'll do anything." It's very rare in Hollywood that people ask the producers what they want to do. That was a unique and fun feeling.

Everyone works so hard and works so well as a team. It makes for boring stories. In the exciting stories, everyone hates each other, but I can't say that happened.

## THE SHOW

**Joe Farrell:** It's very, very stressful on the night. Mike and I have been to a lot of award shows. We've been to ones where you sit there and think, "How much longer is this going to be?" So our big thing is to get people out in three hours and send them home with a breakfast burrito, thinking, "Oh, that actually flew by and was pretty fun!"

**Mike Farah:** You typically learn a lot more from the things that go south. This is one of those rare instances

where we've been fortunate enough to learn a lot even as each year has gotten better. It's a great opportunity for many of us to be creative early in the year. Hollywood is typically a slow starter coming out of the holidays at the beginning of each year, so it's been great to do some creative daydreaming early in the season. It sets a good tone for the rest of the year.

As a fan of entertainment—especially at this moment when it's a challenge to get a lot of things made—to be a small part of people's season of making outstanding things really excites me. I'm grateful that the PGA, Donald and Stephanie keep having us back.

**Joe Farrell:** It's a show about good producing. So we try to right-size our ambition both to the budget and what we can pull off. The last thing we would want would be an awards show run by producers to seem like it's poorly produced. We always joke like it's a nontelevvised room of alphas. Everyone in that room has an internal clock of things running behind schedule. You can't fool that room. ■