

» beyond his oscar win

*Leo's greatest
performance*

LEONARDO DICAPRIO



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*Winning his first
academy award
gave him the biggest
platform in the world
with an important
message to get across.
But a slip-up during
the speech, suggests
that the line between
acting and activism
is thinner than
we imagined.*

URING HIS ACCEPTANCE SPEECH for what may have been the longest-overdue award for “best actor” in the history of the Academy Awards, Leonardo DiCaprio made a mistake. You, like millions of other people watching the show, may have missed it but someone caught it. Someone was bound to catch it.

First some background. The moment Leo took the stage was the most-tweeted-about moment in the history of the awards show with more than 440,000 tweets being sent out every minute (the previous record was 255,000 set in 2014 when Ellen Degeneres tweeted her famous selfie). This is a big deal. Whether you had Twitter or not, it was impossible to be someone who watches movies and not know what was happening.

“Leo is too polished to stumble on stage or become overly emotional,” wrote one *Esquire* blogger ahead of the event. “We’d all like to see Leo break down, but it ain’t gonna happen.”

Indeed he didn’t. When they announced his name, his expression didn’t betray a hint of the relief or joy he must have felt in that moment. He has practiced this. He admitted practicing this after he lost the Oscar to Jamie Foxx in 2005. “Anyone who says they don’t practice is a liar,” he said.

He began with a few remarks about the other nominees’ performances. He thanked his supporting cast, his co-star (and friend) Tom Hardy, and the visionaries at the helm of the *Revenant*. Then, at the point in the speech where normally the orchestra plays every other award-winner except the actors, directors, and best-picture winners off the stage, it was there that Leo’s gaffe came.

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LASTLY I JUST WANT TO SAY THIS: *Making the Revenant was about man’s relationship with the natural world...our production needed to move to the southern tip of this planet just to be able to find snow. Climate change is real, it is happening right now, it is the most urgent threat facing our whole species...*

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His mistake wasn’t in saying climate change is the most urgent threat facing our whole species. Rather, it was his suggestion that the melt at the filming location in Alberta was proof of climate change. It was actually caused by a Chinook, an age-old phenomenon where the wet, warm winds from the Rocky Mountains sweep across the Canadian prairies. Some say the name means “ice-eater” in first nations’ folklore. Even the locals say it’s strange.

“It’s this slow burn”

- LEONARDO DICAPRIO

The interesting thing is, Leo probably knew about the Chinook but didn’t appreciate how quickly it could change the weather. Or, maybe he knew perfectly well and simply couldn’t resist the opportunity to break out such a clear and powerful anecdote on the biggest stage in the world. The latter makes perfect sense when you consider that climate change occupies most of his waking thought.

“It’s this slow burn,” he said in a recent profile for *Rolling Stone*. “...It’s this inevitable thing, and it’s so terrifying.” So maybe it’s not all that far-fetched to say his acceptance speech was, in some sense, another performance – one of the most important and personal in his entire career.

HOLLYWOOD is overrun with causes. Leo is not alone in having made incredible contributions to his causes, but there’s also something different about him.

Case in point: In 2010, he was on a flight to Russia to meet president Vladimir Putin and donate \$1,000,000 of his own money during a summit for the Siberian tiger. Out over the ocean, midway through the flight – a commercial flight, by the way – one of the plane’s engines exploded and the pilots had to dump the excess fuel to make an emergency landing. They came down hard. The tires blew on the runway and ambulances were on standby to tend to the distressed.

It’s worth noting here that Leo has survived some terrifying situations in the past. When he was skydiving in his 20s, both his main and backup chutes failed and he and his instructor survived only after they managed to untangle the backup. More recently he was cage diving with great white sharks off the coast of South Africa when one leapt into cage through the open top, snapping its jaws only a few feet away from him. On an earlier occasion, he was diving the reefs off the Galapagos Islands when his breather failed. Fellow diver and actor Ed Norton saved him only minutes before he drowned. Still, having lived through all this, Leo said watching that engine explode out of the window of that plane was the scariest moment of his life.

In other words, he had a very good excuse to cancel the trip; maybe wire his donation from the relative safety of whichever one of his homes didn’t require him getting on another plane. But he didn’t. He got on a private flight straight to St. Petersburg; only he didn’t make it there the second time, either. They hit bad weather and had to make another emergency landing in Helsinki.

While Leo’s nerves must have been thoroughly rattled at this point, he tried again and made it there safely on his third attempt. Putin even stopped midway through his speech about the tigers to tell the folks at the summit about Leo’s incredible journey, ending by calling him a “nastoyashi muzhik” – a real man.

When Tom Junod profiled Leo for *Esquire* in 2014 he described the decision to get on the second plane thusly: “It’s not like he wants to, because when you fall like that, you realize something about the air. It’s not solid, and it can drown you. But he has – and this is what people don’t realize – *responsibilities*.” Hollywood stars have responsibilities, sure, but those aren’t the kind Junod is talking about. These are more like the kind that drag frazzled parents to little league practice or ballet. The kind that get them up every morning to pack lunches and get the kids ready for school. If not showing up isn’t really an option, those are responsibilities.

True, the head of a world superpower doesn’t acknowledge parents just for doing their parental duties, but I can’t help but think a similar kind of devotion animates Leo. That seemed even clearer when he was asked, for the *Rolling Stone* profile, whether he would like to have children one day. “Do you mean do I want to bring children into a world like this?” he responded.

LEO’S WORK as an activist exists at the intersection of his public and private lives; two things he has spent his entire career trying to separate. He seems to have succeeded. Long gone are the days of Leo-mania, the post-Titanic craze during which time he prowled the streets of New York with a group of semi-famous pals notoriously known as “the pussy posse.” Today, aside from the occasional shot of him sunbathing on some super-sized yacht, you don’t see much about him. Even the endless parade of supermodels that is his love life rarely gets much coverage.

During one of the press junkets for the *Revenant*, an interviewer asked him about this curious phenomenon. “You’re really good at disappearing in between projects,” she began. “When did you first learn how to take on this mega-fame? Do you still struggle with it at all?” He said it came from an early age. Growing up watching other actors, he never had the desire to know what their real lives were like. “I want to see them do what they do,” he said. It made the characters “that much more believable.”

“It’s a really obvious thing to say, but the more people know too much about who you really are, the more the mystery is taken away from the artist, and the harder it is for people to believe that person in a particular role,” he said in another interview. It’s the same reason why, for many people, Ben Affleck will always be the guy who felt up J-Lo in a music video.

Unlike Affleck, Leo doesn’t really have any of those persona-defining moments. In fact, he’s so polished that a short clip of him looking surprised when Lady Gaga accidentally brushed his arm on her way to the stage at the Golden Globes became tabloid fodder. It’s as if the world needed a little reminder that he could feel non-choreographed emotions.

REVENANT: EL RENACIDO



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LEONARDO
DICAPRIO IN
MEXICO CITY
PROMOTING THE
REVENANT

REVENANT:
EL RENACIDO

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This is the ironic bit: He's the perfect movie star. That makes it difficult to find the seams separating his persona and the "real" Leo. Through no fault of his own, it makes his whole public life look like a performance. But his success as an activist relies on a display of true passion; on convincing you that he really does care about the planet, that it really does occupy much of his waking thought, and that one of the reasons he has not had children is because he is genuinely afraid for their future. So how does he reconcile the two? How does he convince you that he's for real? The answer is that he has to do things other movie stars simply wouldn't do.

WE DON'T often think about how celebrities earn their platforms, but assuming you're a person who cares what movie stars said (which I would assume you are if you're still reading this) it's worth thinking about. Because if Leo had come out as an avid climate change denier, I'd wager that he wouldn't have lost many fans. In fact, he might have even changed a few minds, which is scary to think about.

That said, I also think it's unfair to place this burden of authenticity on him. Celebrity culture has become this messy thing we gawk at from a distance: the sex tapes, the surreptitiously recorded racist rants, photos of haggard actresses stepping out of limos. Those are the things we think of when we talk about their 'real' lives, which makes the clean-cut environment-loving Leo an anomaly. But maybe it shouldn't be. Maybe he's just a decent guy.

I personally have no idea whether his speech at the academy awards was a performance. I also don't know if all the other incredible things he's done for the environment – the \$45 million his foundation has contributed to organizations across the globe, his speeches to the United Nations, the documentaries, etc. – are all part of some bigger performance. Here's what I do know for sure: the world's biggest movie stars don't have to do things they don't want to do. But Leo, who is arguably the biggest, does. He takes care of his *responsibilities*. And if that requires him



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to get onstage at the Oscars and fudge a few of the finer points about global warming, or get on another plane after his nearly fell out of the sky, then that is what he's going to do. Performance or not, behind it all is something he cares about deeply.

The *Revenant* is another good example of this. The whole crew rehearsed in minus 20-degree weather for months before filming began. Then there was that scene where Leo, a staunch vegetarian, chewed and swallowed a mouthful of bloody bison liver because the prosthetic didn't look real enough. Or the scene where he was carried down a frigid river wearing close to 100 pounds of heavy furs. The process of making the film deliberately reflected the spirit of the finished product – man, nature and suffering; to some degree, the performance was real.

Leo's currently working on another documentary – his second – about climate change ("Original working title: *Are we all f*cked?*" which *Rolling Stone* reported and I am choosing to believe is not a joke) and he's optioned the film rights to the Volkswagen emission scandal.

He's constantly looking for better ways to tell stories about the natural world, hoping that maybe our species isn't doomed to extinction, and that maybe he can wake us up to the fact that we will be if we don't change. "I don't know how to crack this yet, but I would love to do something that isn't about waves crashing on the Empire State Building," he told *Rolling Stone*.

While he may hope that you're paying attention, he's not going to stop if you aren't. And that, I think, is how you know he means it.



Save Tigers Now is a global campaign by World Wildlife Fund and Leonardo DiCaprio to build political, financial and public support. If you want to help save the tigers visit, [SaveTigersNow.org](https://www.savetigersnow.org) and donate!
