On Twitter, a peanut gallery of comedians and viewers mock the Oscars

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NEW YORK (AP) -- You can simply tune into the Oscars. Or you can watch them with the peanut gallery on Twitter.

While Hollywood parades in tuxedos and gowns, grandly celebrating itself, a freewheeling cacophony of quips and sarcasm - something like a digital, million-times multiplied version of those balcony Muppet onlookers, Statler and Waldorf - will provide a welcome and riotous counter-narrative to the pomp.

The second-screen experience is never better than on Oscar night, when a separate (and some might say superior) entertainment experience plays out on social media. The running commentary, in which comedians and others parody the glamorous stars and their sometimes laughable speeches, has become as central to the Academy Awards as the red carpet.

"Following the Oscars on Twitter is like watching the show with one hundred million of your drunkest friends," says Andy Borowitz, the humorist and author who's often been a standout tweeter on Oscar night. Last year, he succinctly summarized the previous two best-picture winners, "The King's Speech" and "The Artist," as "an English dude who couldn't speak" and "a French dude no one could hear."

Live tweeting major TV events, from the Super Bowl to the Grammy Awards, has become engrained in our viewing by now, forming a virtual water cooler that has boosted ratings. But the Academy Awards stream is particularly captivating because it provides an antidote to the on-screen, buttoned-down glamour. It's as if there's not an "SAP" button on your remote, but a "YUKS" one, bringing you play-by-play from some of the funniest people in cyberspace. Comedians assemble as if by duty.

"You gotta say something. Someone has to say something," says comedian Billy Eichner. "To just stand by and watch it happen is almost too tense. It's cathartic. You've got to just get it out on Twitter because if not, we're all going to be bottled up thinking about how awkward Anne Hathaway made it for one billion people in real time. I don't begrudge her the award; I'm just saying she's a ridiculous person."

As host of Funny or Die's "Billy on the Street," which airs on Fuse, Eichner aggressively and comically interviews passersby about pop culture. So he's particularly adept at expressing all-caps mockery when it comes to the stars of Hollywood. In the awards circuit leading up to the Oscars, he's zeroed in on Anne Hathaway, the odds-on favorite to win best supporting actress for her performance in "Les Miserables."

In Hathaway, Eichner recognizes a great actress, but also a striving theater geek.

Nothing is funnier, he says, "than the mix of ego and lack of self-awareness, like Jodie Foster's Golden Globes speech."

"Ultimately, it's just fun because the whole thing is so ridiculous," says Eichner. "It's like, why not comment on it? What is it even there for other than to be commented on?"

The Oscars has become one of the biggest social media events of the year. Last year's telecast at one point set a then-record for 18,718 tweets-per-second. A statuette could be handed out for a new award: most tweeted tweet. In 2011, that honor went to The Onion, which lamented: "How rude - not a single character from Toy Story 3 bothered to show up."

Last year, "The Artist" may have won best picture, but Martin Scorsese's "Hugo" easily bested it with 110,179 tweets to 78,509 for "The Artist," according to Twitter metrics analyst TweetReach.

This year, the academy has partnered with Twitter to track the top categories with an index measuring the percentage of positive tweets about the nominees. Leading as of Tuesday wasn't the favorite "Argo," nor was it Steven Spielberg's "Lincoln," but rather David O. Russell's "Silver Linings Playbook." So if the film, widely considered the dark horse in the best picture race, wins on Sunday, Twitter will have predicted it.

Mark Ghuneim, chief executive of social media measurement firm Trendrr, says that during the Oscars, Twitter is "`Mystery Science Theater 3000,' for real," referring to the cult TV show in which a man and two robot sidekicks wisecrack their way through B-movies.

"It's really like you'll never watch TV alone ever again, if you don't want to," says Ghuneim. "It's a natural evolution in television and that's why it's so prevalent."

With real-time data from services like Trendrr, the Oscar conversation can be tracked, revealing which moments resound and provoke audiences. Last year, Angelina Jolie's leg-baring pose as a presenter immediately put Twitter in hyper-drive, spawning parody accounts from the perspective of her right leg.

It's such moments where Twitter becomes Oscar's dance partner. Viewers celebrate with - and chortle at - Hollywood's self-seriousness, combining together for a TV experience greater than the sum of its parts.

When the 85th annual Academy Awards air Sunday on ABC, countless comedians and others at home will be ready on their mobile phones and laptops with tweets to skewer.

"I just pray we all survive Anne Hathaway's acceptance speech," says Eichner. "And, to be honest, I have my doubts."

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