

Image and reality in Sydney's Olympic opening ceremony

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Last Friday's opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games has provoked something of a controversy. Reactions have veered between two extremes: rapturous praise and bitter denunciation. New South Wales (NSW) Premier Bob Carr, for example, told ABC radio the event was perhaps the most important artistic achievement in Australia's history—taking into account every novel, painting, poem, dance and theatre work. Along the same lines, Melbourne's *Age* editorial crowed that the ceremony “has done Australia... proud”. It was “a triumph”, a “colourful display of what Australia has been and is.”

Deriding the enthusiasts, John MacDonald, head of Australian art at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra, described the event in Monday's *Australian* as “kitsch from start to finish”.

“Kitsch,” he went on, “is crap with pretensions to sincerity. Kitsch takes all the emotions associated with great art, and packages them in the most compact, user-friendly fashion; editing out anything that may be disturbing or complex.”

Both reactions deserve attention. Both, in their own way, point to an essential feature of Olympic opening ceremonies since 1980, when Moscow startled the world with its originality, and 1984 in Los Angeles, when the Games became a commercial project. A unique phenomenon, the ceremony is neither theatre, nor concert; sport, nor military pageant; circus nor parade, but a mixture of them all. Its specific function is to sell the host country: to provide, in the space of just a few short hours, a sample of what it can offer—to both the international and domestic consumer.

So to speak of “art” is something of a misnomer. No matter how well directed, choreographed or performed, can one justifiably describe an advertisement, albeit four hours long, as “art”?

According to director Ric Birch, the ceremony was allocated a budget of around \$50 million. For the NSW premier, for whom the Games has been an advertising coup, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to push Sydney's merits to prospective clients, a lot was riding on it. Like the rest of Australia's political elite, Carr is desperate to overcome the country's image as an “old economy” and attract international investment. The message needed to be unambiguous: Australia as a savvy, energetic, “multi-cultural” country, technologically sophisticated and, above all, “reconciled” with its Aboriginal population.

The latter was especially important in light of growing unease in ruling circles about the impact of the federal government's notorious treatment of Aborigines. Not only has it exacerbated domestic tensions, produced by growing social inequality, it has begun to attract international criticism.

The ceremony delivered in spades. It saluted Aboriginal culture, the Australian landscape and the country's rural traditions. It celebrated the development of technique and technology in the 20th century, the cities and the people that built them, and the country's immigrant population. It veered self-consciously away from overt jingoistic nationalism. The obligatory *Waltzing Matilda*, an unofficial folk anthem that predictably opened proceedings, was delivered in a jazzed-up version, beginning with a shrill trumpet blast from trumpeter James Morrison. The ceremony's themes were “inclusiveness”, “reconciliation”, harmony and hope.

It more than fulfilled the expectations of politicians, business executives, commentators and the like.

At the same time, as in all the most successful advertisements, it resonated with broad layers of the population. The grimly anticipated kangaroos, koala bears, surfers and celebrities failed to materialise.

Instead, the ceremony involved thousands of animated, ordinary young people and contained within it genuine artistry.

Birch, who organised the opening ceremonies in Barcelona and Atlanta, headed an impressive team that included dancer and choreographer David Atkins, as artistic director, and Morris Lyda, producer of world tours for Genesis, Phil Collins, Pink Floyd and David Bowie, as technical director. Lyda was responsible for cauldron and gas technology, rigging, props, special effects and wardrobe prototypes. There was a staff of 24 choreographers; artistic directors and designers for each of the production's several segments; a crew of 4,600 and high-tech equipment of various types drawing on 3.3 million watts of power. More than 12,500 dancers, acrobats and firebreathers participated, as well as 121 horsemen and a 2,000 strong marching band drawn from 20 different countries.

In the opening segment, arranged by acclaimed choreographer Meryl Tankard, the main protagonist, (a little blonde-haired girl) was suddenly hoisted some 30 metres into the air, swooping and diving on an unseen harness. Thus the sports ground was transformed into a three-dimensional space, with the 110,000-strong audience enveloped in a sea of blue light. Exotic sea creatures floated up to 45 metres above the ground.

Djakapurra Munyarryan, an Aboriginal songman and extraordinary performer led the Aboriginal segment, which was not the usual token showpiece put on for official functions. Choreographed by Stephen Page, it involved 1,150 Aboriginal people from clans and tribes in New South Wales and Arnhem Land in far northern Australia, as well as Torres Strait Islanders, in a moving traditional welcoming ceremony.

There was humour and youthful exuberance, colour, beauty and spectacle. Nigel Triffit's zany tap dance on steel sheets, a tribute to the working class performed by hundreds of young amateur dancers, was infectious.

The finale, the lighting of the torch, served to bring it all together. It also had to top Barcelona's flaming arrow, and Atlanta's Muhammad Ali. Aboriginal athlete and current 400-metre world champion, Cathy Freeman stepped into a pool of water holding the flame, as a thundering waterfall cascaded down the stand in front of her. Out of the water, she ignited a circle of fire, which ascended onto a giant cauldron. As the flames grew, the cauldron slowly made its way (after being

embarrassingly stuck for three minutes) up the steep incline to the top of the stadium.

It was clever and delivered all the required symbolism.

If masses of ordinary people were thrilled by the event, it is not hard to see why. Millions of dollars, years of preparation, extraordinary reserves of energy and talent were marshalled, above all, to sell the image of the Olympics as a vehicle for peace, international co-operation and brotherhood. In reality, the Games have evolved into something very different.



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