



photo: Martin Professional

photo: Andy Ciddor

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Melbourne 2006

As the host city of the 2006

Commonwealth Games, Melbourne
had a point to prove after Sydney's
successful Olympics . . .

Andy Ciddor reports.

Below:

L-R: associate lighting designer Paul Collison,
technical director Nick Eltis and production
manager Philby Lewis.



photo: Martin Professional

Australia - One of the biggest problems for the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games in Melbourne last March was that Sydney hosted the Olympics a mere five-and-a-half years earlier. In the land of Oz, there is an irrational, but hotly-contested, rivalry between these two cities that spills over into many areas - including the supremacy of opposing football codes and the location for the national opera and ballet companies.

Despite the undeniable reality that the audience, and hence the budget, for a Commonwealth Games is only a fraction of that for an Olympic Games, there was a determination that the Melbourne ceremonies would be at least as slick and impressive as Sydney in 2000. Such an aspiration was buoyed by the fact that many members of the Melbourne production team had their first taste of ceremony production in Sydney, before going on to work on the Athens Olympics in 2004. Not too coincidentally, Athens is the only city in the world with more Greek speakers than Melbourne.

To the surprise of many observers, the production concept for the opening ceremony was not so much about the country of Australia, but very idiosyncratically about the city of Melbourne and the Yarra River which bisects it. As Ceremonies artistic director Andrew Walsh put it: "We had already seen plenty about the history of Australia and its peoples in the Olympic opening in 2000. Now it's time to get on with celebrating being people living in today's Australia."

Many of the images and motifs used in the opening ceremony were derived from the enigmatic works of cartoonist and social observer, Michael Leunig, who for several decades has produced drawings for Melbourne's Age newspaper, that often feature ducks and umbrellas.

The venue for the ceremony was the famous Melbourne Cricket Ground, home to the Boxing Day Ashes cricket test, and the location for the opening of the 1956 Olympic Games. More importantly, the MCG is the grand temple for Melbourne's obsessive worship of the game of Australian Rules football - a totally home-grown corruption of the noble game of Gaelic football. This may go some way to explaining why Aussie Rules football players kept popping up in the opening ceremony, despite the fact that Rugby Union (played by approximately three men and a sheepdog in Australia) was the only football code contested in the Games.

The MCG, having hosted its usual summer fare of interstate and international cricket matches, was converted into an athletics field for the Commonwealth Games. Once completed this was then covered over by the ground cloth and set for the opening ceremony. This in turn had to be able to be removed in less than 36 hours to reveal the athletics field, which at the end of the competition, would then have less than 24 hours to be converted back again for the closing ceremony.

Such a schedule ought to preclude elaborate stage installations. It certainly allows very limited opportunity for rehearsals in the venue. It dictates that substantial parts of the lighting and sound systems will need to be ground-stacked and easily demountable between rehearsals and ceremonies. It also strictly limits what flying facilities can be installed in a venue with no roof and six concrete light towers that date back over a decade. Nevertheless, the Q-Motion motion control system from Stage One in the UK gave the 27 2kW winches, stage lift and roadway ramp, the flexibility and precision of control that made

Facing page: far left: the spectacular lighting rig in full flow;
Top: the suspended ring of truss, adorned with Mac fixtures;
Bottom: projection from the ETC PIGI fixtures.

the show look much bigger and more complex than you would have expected from this venue.

The bold decision to build a removable stage, in the form of a 100m diameter white dome that rose gently from ground level to reach three metres at the centre of the field, served a multiplicity of purposes. It gave the directors and choreographers a variety of points for entrances and exits without the frantic, ungainly rush that usually comes with moving stadium-sized casts on and off an arena. It also provided the deck in which to mount the 1,500 MR16 RGB LED Pulsar ChromaHearts that made up the pathway of stars that guided the athletes into the stadium. Lastly, and most critically, it provided a projection surface angled back towards the audience and the TV cameras that would reflect the images from the 25 6kW PIGI projectors that formed such an important part of the visual design for the show.

Norwest Productions, who supplied the sound for Sydney in 2000, went on to win the contract to supply an even more sophisticated system for Athens. When it came to Melbourne, they were able to offer that same high reliability, fibre-based all digital system. The dual redundant configuration of Yamaha PM5D consoles for FOH and PM1Ds for monitors, Pyramix 48-channel replays and Optocore fibre rings was essentially the same as for Athens. Where the Melbourne system differed was in the use of ground stacks of L-Acoustics Kudo line arrays, together with EAW BH760 subs, rather than the EAW KF860 line arrays used with the BH760s in Athens.

Once again, as for Sydney and Athens, The PA People supplied all forms of production communications. These ranged from the fibre-optic backbone carrying video, timecode and ClearCom networks, to the 990 hand-held two-way radios. The facilities provided included 80 ClearCom key stations and 60 belt packs, feeds from 15 CCTV cameras covering the entire field of play, and four channels of FM radio feeding the 8,500 FM receivers used as in-ear monitors throughout the ceremonies.

The lighting, whilst featuring many of the same cast members as the Sydney ceremonies, was the area where most changes have occurred since 2000. With today's moving lights having higher outputs, more functionality, higher reliability and greater availability, it was inevitable that a different approach would be taken for this show. LD Mark Hammer and system designers Paul Collison and Nick Eltis put together a rig that included 997 moving lights (766 of which were Martin Mac 2000s, provided via the company's Australian distributor Show Technology) and thousands of LED devices in various formats. Arrayed in five circles around the arena, ranging from ground level to the tops of the grandstands, and a 21m truss circle above centre field, the 32,000 channels of DMX control came from three pairs of dual redundant grandMA consoles. As no one local company could supply such a system, Australia's two major production houses, Bytecraft Entertainment and Chameleon Touring Systems formed a consortium with Procon of Germany to meet the requirement.

Many members of the vast design, creative, stage management, directorial, production management, logistics, costumes, props, pyrotechnics, scenery, choreographic, make-up and operations teams were also seasoned veterans of the ceremonies circuit, which of course contributes to the astounding air of confidence that buzzed around the rehearsals and eventually the spectacular show that so many people enjoyed.

And finally - a word of warning. Be on the lookout for even more Aussies hanging around in the UK over the next few years, as the ceremonies junkies start trawling for work on the London Olympics in 2012.



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