

## Backstage at the Olympic Opening Ceremony

I have done a little performing in my time, sometimes to audiences running into their hundreds. I used to run seminars and teach negotiation skills at IBM and now I run fun quizzes for charity and play clarinet with Sevenoaks's Second Wind Concert Band.

On 27<sup>th</sup> July I performed to an audience of three billion. I was one of a thousand working men and women in the opening sequence of the Olympic Opening Ceremony. It was our job to carry off the set for England's green and pleasant land, to make way for the smoking chimneys and smelters of the Industrial Revolution. Each of us had a partner (mine was an affable young man from Brazil). We were assigned four specific pieces to carry off, marching in a particular order along a prescribed route. They impressed on us that we weren't scene shifters, we were actors in full hand-made costume and makeup, performing choreographed actions to music and marching in the weary, determined role. We even had an acting masterclass from Danny Boyle himself.

It started seven years ago when I registered as a potential volunteer for the Olympics. Last August I received an email about the need for 10,000 plus volunteers for the four ceremonies. Last November there were two auditions where we were put through our paces and introduced to mass choreography. After various checks including CRB (nice to know I'm not a criminal!), I was offered the part in January.

The first rehearsal for us was 5<sup>th</sup> May. We were given a bib depending just on when we arrived (mine was 874), oblivious to the fact that this sealed our fate! I was paired and grouped with the random people around this number throughout 150 hours of rehearsal. The thousand of us were split into 12 large groups, each responsible for a different area of the terrain, based purely on bib number. To make it more fun we were called counties, A up to L. I was in J, that is ... er, Jersey.

Early on I met another 'cast member' who had been in the opening ceremony at Sydney in 2000. They had one rehearsal in the stadium. We had 25 rehearsals, of which 15 were in the stadium. Why so many? Well, a lot were for the producers – seeing how things looked in practice with a thousand of us bumping into each other, and some groups finishing ahead of the others. We went through a lot of changes.

I thought it would get boring and repetitive in the middle but they managed the rehearsal process very well (as with so many other aspects of the Olympics the attention to detail was amazing). The overall director was Danny Boyle, the Oscar winning director of 'Slumdog Millionaire', an inspired choice as the event was conceived as a one off 'movie' for TV audiences, although the 80,000 strong audience in the stadium saw a lot of detail that never came across on TV. The Industrial Revolution segment was directed by Toby Sedgwick of War Horse fame. Both were very visible to us at most rehearsals. The guy who ran the rehearsals was a Canadian called Steve and the person responsible for County Jersey was a short straw haired cheeky chappy from Australia called Nathan.

While Danny Boyle was the overall (and very visible) director, the rehearsals were organised by a Canadian called Steve and others from Australia and South Africa. I wondered why they hadn't chosen British people. It turns out that this is what they do: tour the world running opening ceremonies and mass choreography events. They are the professionals and they managed our morale well. There was something new of significance at every rehearsal. And they made us feel special and valued. One moment that was touching was after yet another rain drenched rehearsal when we had carried off the terrain, then reset it and carried it off again. The organisers wanted us to go to enable the next rehearsal to start, but Nathan called us back and told us how we were the greatest team ever and how he felt so proud of us, and it was all from the heart. Then he started crying, and through his tears he said 'it's all right for me to cry, I'm a homosexual'. He was a lovely charming guy, loved equally by men and women.

There was a real feel good factor at the rehearsals, as there was across the country during the Games. We were a complete cross section of society, different ages and backgrounds, and we came together to achieve something fantastic. For the last few rehearsals we were held at Eton Manor, 25 minutes walk across the Olympic Park to the Stadium. There we mixed and posed incongruously with volunteers in other segments, like nurses in curlers, punk dancers and the enormously athletic aerialists. The most emotional moment seemed to be after the first big dress rehearsal (there were three) when we had an audience of 40,000. Even though there were still technical problems we knew we were part of something spectacular and dramatic, and there lots of hugs and tears afterwards.

It was fascinating seeing how much was real and how much was fake. Some of the grass was real – there were sheep eating it – but much was astroturf, lighter and easier to carry. And those 70 foot high solid chimneys? They shrunk into a six foot high space. They were inflated like bouncy castles. When you got close the noise of the fans was deafening!

In the end it took 150 hours of rehearsals involving every weekend for three months, a lot of hanging around, much of it in the rain during the awful summer, with dreary repetitive packed meals. It disrupted family life. And I looked a sight, with two week stubble and four months of hair growth. All for 15 minutes of performance.

I wouldn't have missed it for anything.

## **FAQs**

### **What was Danny Boyle like?**

The nicest bloke you could hope to meet. He spent a lot of time at rehearsals just walking around chatting to us, in small groups or individually. He is gentle, amiable and shy – not at all a luvvie. But he also had focus and determination. A week or two before the ceremony he told us almost tearfully that he had been told to cut one of our segments as the show was over-running. 'But I refused – you are all

volunteers who have given so much of your time freely'.

### **How were we treated?**

We were aware that sometimes we were being herded and being told only what we needed to know (there was a huge emphasis on keeping it secret). But overall we were treated with respect and gratitude throughout. People at all levels were friendly, considerate and appreciative. We wondered if it was like that for extras in crowd scenes in movies. And gave some of us ideas for continuing that way.

### **Did they pay anything?**

No, only some expenses – an Oyster card to use in London, but not train fares to London. Ok for me in Sevenoaks, but not so great for the people I met from Bournemouth, Stoke and Yorkshire. We did get 2 dress rehearsal tickets as a small payback to our families for our absence over 3 months of weekends, and I got up a close up view of the Victory Parade in a reserved area in the Mall. We were provided with hot drinks including a synthetic powdered tea that began to get worryingly nice after a time, and packed lunches. And pallets full of free bottled water.

### **Did you get to keep your costume?**

Yes and I wore it in a pub in Leyton immediately after our performance watching the rest of the ceremony live on TV. I have a picture of our small group in costume with some of the Pearly Kings and Queens who also performed. I also got to keep the brand new steel capped boots, the rehearsal boiler suit and gloves (good for gardening), a 'Ceremonies' tee shirt and 17 small packs of Pringles.

*Colin Johnston*