



Olympic cultural programming

Interview with Craig Hassall

Before becoming Managing Director of English National Ballet, **Craig Hassall** was Head of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games Cultural Programme. **Mark Sullivan**, a Director of Locum Consulting, went to meet him to find out how the Sydney programme was planned and delivered, whether any cultural legacies emerged from it, and what lessons London can take away from the Sydney experience.

In the early 1990s, Craig Hassall held senior posts with a variety of organisations in the Australian arts world, including the national opera company, Opera Australia, and the Bell Shakespeare Company, a national touring theatre company. At the beginning of 1997, he was appointed as head of the cultural programme for the Sydney 2000 Games, when the previous head returned from observing the 1996 Atlanta Games and promptly resigned. 'The job as head of the cultural programme was perceived as something of a poisoned chalice at that stage. The feeling in Sydney at the time was that the cultural programme might turn out to be a complete white elephant. People didn't really understand how culture linked to the Games; there was a feeling that it was all going to be just about Sydney; there would be no funding and so on and so on.'

The lack of understanding extended, it seemed, to the IOC (International Olympic Committee) itself. 'Most areas of the Games have a very clear mandate. For example, the Athletes Village has to house a definite number of athletes and there are very specific requirements concerning the expectations of the various venues. By contrast, the cultural programme is a very nebulous concept; it can be as big or as small as the organising committee wants it to be.' Did the IOC offer any guidance on the scope of cultural activity to be covered by the programme? 'Above and beyond the broad expectation within, and without, the IOC that you do a four-year cultural programme, there were no parameters about how big or how long it should be, or how much should be spent on it. So in a way, it was difficult to align the development of the culture programme with the overall architecture of the Games.'

Laying the foundations

Nevertheless, in the Sydney bid, the cultural programme was presented as a very important component, and the broad cultural objectives were expressed with purpose and clarity. 'The key issue for Australia was that it wasn't so much a case of reinforcing a world view of Australian culture. It was more about establishing a view of Australian culture, because there really wasn't much known about what the culture of the country was – particularly the indigenous culture of Australia.'



When it came to delivering on the promises made in the bid, things got off to a less than perfect start, however. 'About three or four months prior to my taking on the job, there was a somewhat infamous meeting of all the major arts companies – the galleries, the media, performing arts companies and the actual venues as well! The meeting was set up to discuss how the arts and cultural sectors might be involved in the Games, and was attended by a number of representatives of SOCOG (Sydney Organising Committee of the Olympic Games). Their attitude to the cultural programme left many people shocked and disappointed. 'To be quite frank, they were rather arrogant about the power of the Games, and they essentially adopted the position that the Games would just sweep up the whole of Australia: if people didn't come along for the ride, they'd simply be left behind!'

According to Hassall, when SOCOG were questioned specifically about how the arts could be involved, 'one of the them said something along the lines of, "Well there's no specific funding for the arts. Essentially, whatever happens to be programmed in Sydney at the time, we'll put a proverbial red ribbon around and that will represent the cultural programme"':

Recognising immediately that this sort of approach would neither fulfil the IOC's expectations (however vague) nor do justice to the rich culture of the host country, Hassall set about developing a programme that would deliver on both counts. Before he could do this, however, he had to restore the confidence of those in the cultural arena whose hopes had apparently been dashed by SOCOG. 'We were able to solve the problem of the "red ribbon syndrome" by proving to the arts community that we needed them, were relying on them, and that all we were was a portal to showcasing them. Once we had gained their confidence, they were very enthusiastic.'

Cultural programming

Having overcome this initial hurdle (if you'll excuse the pun), Hassall had to act quickly to add flesh to the bones of the programme plan that he inherited upon taking up the post. 'When I came into the programme in early 1997, all that existed was a modest budget and a vague plan, based largely on the bid, of having four festivals over four years; to be honest there wasn't really much of a structure beyond that.'

With time against Hassall and his team, the first festival was hastily organised and staged in September 1997, in the first year of the Olympiad. 'It was called the Festival of the Dreaming, which was themed around indigenous culture and lasted for about three weeks.' This was followed by a festival called A SeaChange. 'This was originally in the bid as a kind of multi-cultural festival in Sydney, but we changed the brief of that quite early on, so that we could hold a series of events throughout 1998 all around Australia, mainly in coastal areas, in order to highlight the geographical and cultural differences of each area of Australia! Each festival was different – 'different heritage, different culture, different music!'

In 1999, there was a third festival, Reaching the World, which in the bid had been identified as an international festival. Hassall regards this as the least successful of the four festivals. Intended to take Australian culture to the world, the festival played second fiddle to the cultural events that would be staged at the time of the Games themselves. 'By the time we got into planning the third festival, we realised that what was really important was the Games and what would be happening around the period of the Games. We started to shift our resources towards the 2000 festival, and as a consequence I think the 1999 festival suffered to some extent.'

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It was decided, not too surprisingly, that the iconic Sydney Opera House would play a central role in the cultural activities of the Olympic Year. 'My thinking was that whatever we did on the cultural front, we had to make the Opera House the focus. It was kind of obvious, but it worked. We had an average of 85% occupancy for the Opera House, which was



brilliant, and the walk-up trade was phenomenal. I've never seen so many queues and so much interest. It really proved to me that a cultural element can be integrated into a sporting event very effectively if it is well planned and done strategically.

Hassall is quick to praise the role played by the arts community in the cultural programme of the Sydney Games. 'Without them it would have been nothing, as we were just a small group of people who acted as a catalyst and coordinator of activity. We really relied on the arts organisations to develop appropriate programming' He cites as an example the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, which took the lead in speaking to counterparts in Athens, which had just been awarded the 2004 Games. 'Between them, they planned this extraordinary exhibition of antiquities from Greece that was mounted in Sydney. This was an excellent innovation because it enabled Sydney to have an excellent exhibition on Greek antiquities related to the ancient Games, whilst heralding the 2004 Games in Athens.'

So, a positive verdict on the programme as a whole, thanks mainly to the laudable efforts of those on the arts scene. 'In the early part of the execution, I'm not sure that there was as great a commitment to the cultural programme on behalf of SOCOG as there should have been. In the end, I believe we delivered a cultural

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programme of scale and quality, but frankly that was more down to the commitment and enthusiasm of the various cultural institutions and Australian arts community generally than we as the Cultural Programme were able to marshal!

Cultural legacies from Sydney

Bearing in mind the great emphasis placed on legacy in the London 2012 bid, how highly did this concept figure in the cultural programming for the Sydney Games? 'Legacy was talked about a lot by Sydney, but when it comes down to it you are so focused on what needs to be delivered for the actual period of the Games that, despite best intentions, legacy always represents something of a low priority.' But legacies did indeed flow from the cultural programme, on three levels.

On a popular level, the experience of seeing performance artists, choirs and other forms of free entertainment being staged at 'live-sites' in downtown Sydney every day and night encouraged members of the public to go back for more, after the curtain had come down on the Olympics. 'Sydney is a very outdoor city anyway but the Games really shifted and expanded the expectation of the standard and the potential for outdoor entertainment in Sydney, and that's a real legacy.'

A more indirect legacy has been the progress made by arts



Royal Opera House, London

companies and individual artists as a result of their involvement in the cultural programme and the Games as a whole. Hassall mentions Meryl Tankard, 'a choreographer who was involved in the opening ceremony, created a piece called Sea Dreaming, which involved enormous inflatable sea creatures suspended on copper wires and this was widely captured on international television.' As a result of seeing this piece on television, Tiffany & Co commissioned Tankard to do an event at New York's Natural History Museum – 'as a consequence, Meryl's career took off in some interesting directions.'

The third cultural legacy to emerge from Sydney 2000 has been in the technical area. 'As a result of the scale of some of the cultural events, and their highly successful operation, Australian technical and management expertise is now highly sought after internationally. In fact, a lot of the technical personnel involved in the opening ceremony for the Turin Winter Olympics and the Athens opening ceremony were Australians – lighting designers, creative directors, and so on. So that's quite a nuts and bolts legacy.'

Lessons for London

So what can London glean from Sydney's experience? As far as the four-year programme of activities is concerned, the lessons are clear: stay focused, don't spread resources too thinly, and try to achieve reach without diluting the message. Another key objective for London will be to ensure that communication with the arts community is handled with sensitivity and forethought. In Sydney, these qualities were somewhat lacking. According to Hassall, as soon as the Sydney bid win was announced, the State Government told every regular hirer of the Opera House that everything was up for grabs when the Games cultural programme was on. 'Not surprisingly, this sent panic through Opera Australia, the Australian Ballet, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, the Bell Shakespeare Company and the Sydney Theatre Company. All of them were thinking it would mean they were out of the Opera House for five months, because the Cultural Festival was originally scheduled to run from June to October.'

Knowing all of these organisations from his time in the Australian arts scene, he was able to calm them all down by telling them that they were not going to be thrown out of the Opera House, and that they simply needed to be there on somewhat different terms. 'With careful notice and planning, we were able to have Opera Australia and the Australian Ballet both in the Opera Theatre; the Sydney Symphony Orchestra shared the larger Concert Hall with the Australian Chamber Orchestra and the other main companies shared other facilities. Admittedly it was a challenge to manage all their requirements, and a great deal of creativity was needed in how things were staged.'

Challenges for London

Looking ahead to the London Games, Hassall is optimistic about the prospects of a successful cultural programme. 'From the conversations I have had with various people I don't think you are going to have anything like the struggle we did in Australia. Admittedly, resources will be tight for

London, but the cultural agenda is already significantly higher in London for 2012 some six years out than it was in Sydney, just four years out.'

He is particularly positive about the way that culture is embedded in the fabric of London, and the impact that this will have on the Olympic cultural programme. 'I think that London is already very attuned to the potential and the benefit of the cultural association with the Games, and this will serve it very well. I had so many battles in Sydney trying to explain why I believed the cultural programme could be a really useful tool in selling the Games to Australians and the



rest of the world. In London I don't see such battles occurring – culture seems so much more organically integrated. If you think of culture you think of Paris and London first; the cities are synonymous with culture.'

Given his own Olympics experience in Australia and his knowledge of London's cultural offering, what does he think are the really big opportunities for London 2012 with regard to cultural activities? 'I think the issue here is that because aspects of the culture of London are so strong, the challenge will be to let people know about the extraordinary diversity of culture that exists in London. There are lots of cultural institutions in London that already have a very high profile,

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such as the Tate, the Royal Opera House, the V&A and so on. The trick will be to ensure that other, less well-known organisations, that reflect the diversity of London's culture, get the exposure and recognition they deserve.'

With social inclusion now at the top of the political agenda, and indeed the successful London 2012 bid, Hassall believes that the London Games constitute a gilt-edged chance to bring a more inclusive approach to cultural programming in the city per se. 'There are so many things about London that could be celebrated that aren't celebrated and LOCOG will have to be careful about how it ensures celebrations are relevant to the diversity of London culture.'

One component of the cultural programme for London that has already been revealed is the London 2012 FriendShip. To quote directly from the 2012 website: 'A full-size ocean-going clipper will be launched at the Closing Ceremony of the Beijing Games, beginning a four-year voyage around the globe. The ship will be crewed by young people from all over the world, carrying a "cultural cargo" representing the best of contemporary Britain.'

'It seems to me that the London 2012 FriendShip concept is an attempt to do something very similar to Reaching the World, the third festival that we staged in Australia, and I have reservations about the impact that this will have.' Recalling the disappointment of that festival, Hassall counsels

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caution and expresses doubts about the project's true worth. 'Having a ship sail around the world for four years is necessarily a rather disparate concept and spreading activity over such a long period across an international canvass means that it is difficult to elicit media attention and coverage.'

The Olympic spirit

There is a vital cultural element to the Olympic Games that we have yet to touch upon, but one that we must discuss: experiencing the Games first-hand. Only a handful of people, in global terms, have been fortunate enough to witness the Games at such close quarters. For those lucky enough to do so, the experience has been unforgettable. Craig Hassall is among their number. 'When I was working in Sydney on the Games, I went to as many events that I could find the time to go to, and I loved it. The Olympic experience is euphoric. If people have never been to an Olympic Games, I can tell them it's like nothing else. It is like being on a happy drug. Everyone there is cheerful and helpful and it really is a friendly competition; I guess because it is an international event with a deep ethos of friendly spirit.'

Even as someone who would never normally be found at a football or cricket match, Hassall found himself caught up in the Olympic fever. 'One day during the Sydney Games I went



to watch the beach volleyball at Bondi Beach where they had built an amazing stadium right on the beach. It was Brazil versus Canada, so I thought, as I couldn't support Australia, I'd support Brazil, simply because they had a good band playing in the stadium and they'd been handing out T-shirts to everyone. So there were all these Australians supporting Brazil and it was a brilliant atmosphere. The organisers explained the game to everyone and we got totally into it; for a sporting event that I didn't know the first thing about, it was great.'

As a London resident these days, he is excited by the fact that many Londoners and visitors from across Britain will have the chance to share in the Olympic experience. 'I think back to the Games in Sydney with great fondness, and I'm so delighted that London has managed to land them for 2012. When you're working on the Games it's possible to become very cynical because you think that it's actually all about big business and sports sponsorship and so on. But in fairness the IOC, despite all of their faults, do genuinely believe in the philosophy of Olympism and that does come through at the end of the day.'

**Craig Hassall, English National Ballet
interviewed by Mark Sullivan, Locum Consulting**

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