

Andrea Stretton

Culture in the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games



It is a great pleasure to be here today to speak to you about the cultural component of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. I would especially like to thank Senor Conrado Durantez, President of the International Pierre de Coubertin Committee, and Monsieur Jean Dury, the Director of the National Museum of sport, for inviting me to attend this Congress. It is always interesting to be at an international gathering where people from all parts of the world come together with mutual interest and commitment.

It is particularly good to be representing Australia, because of course there were no Australian delegates at Baron Coubertin's „second International Olympic Congress“ here in Le Havre one hundred years ago! Many people know of Australia's beauty: its variety of landscape, its icons, such as Ayers Rock - now known as Uluru - and the Sydney Opera House, and its great sporting traditions. You might also have heard about our kangaroos, sharks, and Akubra stockmen's hats! But we are delighted that the limelight of the Olympic Games in 2000 provides an opportunity to extend this knowledge, and to highlight our rich cultural life in the best traditions of Olympism as set down by Pierre de Coubertin late last century. We have grasped this opportunity with a strong four-year series of Olympic Arts Festivals, which I will speak to you about in a moment. First I would like to talk a little about Australia.

We have a vibrant cultural life, partly because of our unique geographic position in Oceania, with a population made of people from all over the world. It is said that we are the most multicultural society on earth, and the many waves of immigration over the past 200 years have had an enormous impact on our cultural life. We see ourselves as a young country, full of optimism and flexibility - that is why Sydney is the perfect place to celebrate the Olympic Games on the brink of the new millennium! But we are also an old country. Migrants have arrived in Australia to live alongside the original inhabitants, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, one of the most ancient and revered indigenous cultures anywhere. Australia has increasingly strong debate and discussion about ways in which all Australians, from so many backgrounds, can live in harmony.

Geographically Australia is also diverse, from the warm tropical northern regions, to the dry inland deserts, to the wild and rugged southern coastlines. This too has an influence on our cultural life, and means every major city is different. The Olympic host city Sydney, set on Sydney Harbour, is famously beautiful, and right now it is also very busy preparing for Sydney 2000. There is much anticipation, both in the inner city and at the Olympic site of Homebush in the western region of the city, where architects, designers and sports people are preparing for this major event.

And so to the Olympic Arts Festivals. In the bid for the Games, a series of four festivals was promised to Australia and to the world - festivals that express Australia's spirit of Olympic friendship and vitality. It was decided that each festival would be unique, but together they would form an overall pattern leading to a finale in 2000. That is one of the advantages of a four year program, that you can be inventive with the idea of a festival.

As Jean Durry said, I am the Artistic Director of the two „middle“ festivals, for 98 and 99. The artistic Director of the first festival, which has begun in Sydney this week, is Rhoda Roberts and the final festival in 2000 is being planned by its Artistic Director Leo Schofield. They are each under the guidance of the General Manager of the Olympic Arts Festivals, Craig Hassall, and a six-person Cultural Commission. The four festivals are as follows:

In 1997, „The Festival of the Dreaming“, celebrating and exploring indigenous culture from Australia and other parts of the world. In 1998, „A Sea Change“, highlighting the variety of cultural pursuits in all cities and many regions of Australia, with an emphasis on the impact of immigration.

In 1999, „Reaching the World“, showcasing Australian events and project happening around the world in that year, including the five Olympic rings.

In 2000, „Harbour of Life“, a wonderful presentation of events of cultural excellence from Australian and international artists, to precede and coincide with the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games in Sydney.

In addition to specific events, each festival will emphasise cultural diversity, youth, and education - elements I am sure would meet the approval of Pierre de Coubertin.

Now I would like to elaborate briefly on each of the festivals.

„The Festival of the Dreaming“, for 1997, is on right now in Sydney, and I am pleased to tell you that from press clippings I received by fax this morning it is already being received with much excitement and acclaim. It is symbolic and appropriate that Aboriginal Australians be invited to present the first Olympic festival. It celebrates and explores the world's indigenous cultures, especially Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, through dance, music, theatre, literature, film and the visual arts. Participation includes representation from indigenous cultures in Northern America, Canada, Greenland, Korea, New Zealand, Western Samoa and Papua New Guinea. Events include the inspiring opening event called „the Awakening Ceremony“ held on the steps of the Sydney Opera House; a spectacular outdoor event of stilt walkers telling the story of the Mimi spirits in Arnhem Land; and a first time collaboration between the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre, called „Edge of the Sacred“.

The Artistic Director Rhoda Roberts has ensured that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people retain authorship and control of this major indigenous festival. Along with presenting new and entertaining events, the festival also makes an important statement - a statement that is in accord with the powerful Olympic words about human rights given to us at the Congress earlier today by the I.O.C. Executive Board member Judge Keba Mbaye. I am sure „The Festival of the Dreaming“ will continue to be well received by all Australians, and will be seen as a 'watershed' festival of indigenous culture.

„A Sea Change“, for 1998 is a different kind of festival. While „The Festival of the Dreaming“ is taking place in Sydney over several weeks, „A Sea Change“ will highlight cultural activities around Australia over several months. It will emphasise the diversity of cultures, geography and climate that have such a strong effect on the arts in Australia. The phrase itself comes from Shakespeare's „The Tempest“, and is interpreted in two ways. One is the evocation of the sea, and because Australia is an island, and maritime history has had big role in its immigration, there will be many events associated with the sea, such as series of „lighthouse concerts“ held in many stunning places around our coastline. In fact the festival will begin in April 1998 at the Australian National Maritime Museum in Sydney which will be showing a major exhibition exploring 200 years of immigration to Australia. The other interpretation of „a sea change“ is metaphoric, in fact the dictionary describes it as meaning „a radical transformation“. The program for „A Sea Change“ - which will include about 100 events across the art forms - will

highlight the transformation of Australian cultural life in the past few decades, with its new, vibrant emphasis on cultural and regional differences, along with an increasing pride in an understanding of our rich indigenous culture. As an aside I would like to mention the „sea change“ which can be seen by looking back to the Olympic Games held in Melbourne in 1956, an event of great significance to all Australians. Not long ago I accompanied Craig Hassall to an international conference at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, where he was giving a paper as part of the „Sport and Culture“ conference theme. During our visit we investigated the Museum's archival library, finding much interesting history about the Cultural Olympiad, including documentation from the Melbourne Olympics in 1956. Melbourne had an exciting cultural program, stressing all that was new and innovative, but it was a program of its time. It is fascinating to reflect how Australia's cultural life has evolved in the just over forty years since then, particularly in regard to cultural diversity and general confidence. These changes will be highlighted by the „snapshot“ of Australia provided by the events in „A Sea Change“, from performing arts, to seminars and youth education projects.

„Reaching the World“ in 1999 will take Australian culture to many parts of the world throughout the year. As with „A Sea Change“, it will be very inclusive and based on many partnerships between the Olympic Arts Festivals and major Australian arts companies and funding bodies. We are still in the early planning stages for this festival, but we have several priorities. Firstly that the events reach each of the five Olympic rings; secondly that there is an emphasis on our own Olympic ring or region, Oceania; and thirdly that the events encompass as many art areas as possible, including literature, architecture and broadcasting. Examples of projects we are planning at this stage include participation of Australian artists at arts festivals in South Africa, an exhibition of our Sydney 2000 Olympic architecture plans in London, a contemporary art exhibition at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, a project with Australian and Oceanic performers at the new Kanak Cultural Centre in New Caledonia, and a fresh collaborative Australian-Chinese dance work to be performed in Hong Kong.

This festival provides a wonderful opportunity for Australia to showcase its arts to the world under the Olympic 'umbrella'. It is also an unusual occasion for Australians themselves to learn more about what we are doing artistically around the world, and about the many international partnerships we are forming.

„Harbour of Life“ in 2000 will bring our Olympic cultural celebration back to the host city, Sydney, for a dazzling display of Australian and international events. The Artistic Director Leo Schofield plans a festival on a scale to match the grandeur of the Games. It will commence just in advance of the Games themselves (which begin in mid September, 2000) as a prelude to the major event, then continue until the conclusion of the Paralympic Games at the end of October. The theme of „Harbour of Life“ embraces both the physical and imagined notions of our beautiful harbour and there will be a sense of optimism about the new millennium, with youth and vitality playing a key role in the festival. This is an appropriate theme for such a cosmopolitan, buoyant and (mostly!) sunny city. Naturally the festival is still in planning stages, but it will include spectacular outdoor concerts, an entertainment program for the Olympic Village, and involvement from major Australian theatre companies, orchestras, galleries, museums and dance companies.

Just as the Olympic Games is a forum for elite athletes from around the world, this festival will be a showcase for outstanding artists and companies. The creation of international artistic collectives is set to be one of the festival's most interesting initiatives. As I said earlier there is a great sense of anticipation in Sydney at present, and we are well aware that this is an opportunity to highlight events that, like the Games themselves, we are unlikely to see again in our lifetime in Sydney.

So that is an overview of our four year cultural celebration. I hope that you will share it with us by attending Australian events in your many countries in 1999, and most of all by visiting us during the Olympic Games. Having learnt so much about Pierre de Coubertin during this Congress, I cannot help thinking that his spirit will be with us

during the cultural and the sporting events of the Year 2000. And on behalf of Sydney 2000, I would like to say that I hope all of you will be there as well.

Résumé

La culture lors des Jeux Olympiques de Sydney en l'an 2000

L'auteur fait une brève esquisse des quatre festivals artistiques prévus lors des J.O. de l'an 2000 à Sydney. Après une brève introduction sur la géographie et la culture du pays d'accueil, il fait une courte description d'une série de quatre festivals artistiques.

Le premier c'est „the Festival of the Driming“, il est dédié aux civilisations des pays du monde entier, en particulier à celle de l'Australie. Le deuxième „A sea change“ doit exprimer la pluralité des événements artistiques dans les villes et les régions de l'Australie de 1998; une signification toute particulière devant cependant être réservée aux conséquences de l'immigration. En 1999, lors du festival „Reaching the World“, la civilisation australienne sera représentée sous le signe des cinq anneaux olympiques dans le monde entier. Le dernier festival „Harbour of life“ débutera juste avant les J.O. pour se poursuivre jusqu'à la fin des Jeux Paralympiques. Il sera organisé, à Sydney, par des artistes australiens et d'autres venant du monde entier. Ce festival aura un caractère entièrement culturel. En dehors d'événements très particuliers, chaque festival promet de souligner certains éléments, à savoir: la pluralité culturelle, la jeunesse et l'éducation.