



## The Olympic Arts Festival

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The Olympic Arts Festival began appropriately with a Greek verb and a promise. The verb is *thaumadzo* – to be seized with wonder, to experience awe, to be surprised and to take delight in discovery. The promise came from Peter Ueberroth, guaranteeing artistic freedom, adequate budget and meaningful involvement in the organisation of the Games of the XXIIIrd Olympiad.

The goal was to evoke the spirit of ancient Greece, where athletes and artists gathered at Olympic to engage in sports competitions, perform new plays and celebrate the sheer joy of being alive.

In the fifth century, B.C., it was possible to suspend war. To put aside differences of language, politics and philosophy and to celebrate not merely physical strength and prowess but the whole human being. Poets, playwrights and musicians performed in amphitheatres ; runners, discus throwers competed in the stadium. Three-time victors were honored with their images in marble or bronze.

For the 1984 Summer Games, the decision was made to honor this tradition by creating a 10-week long festival, most of which would precede the Games rather than compete with them. It would be international, reflecting the character of the Games and the host city, Los Angeles, where 83 languages and cultures co-exist. And it would be interdisciplinary, representing artistic creativity in most of its forms. It would have traditional arts, preserving and presenting the best of our own and other cultures, and contemporary arts, acknowledging artists of today, particularly those who challenge aesthetic conventions.

Los Angeles is poised between two Easts-Europe/New York and the Orient. Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing are as influential here as Boston,

Paris and Milan. Likewise, cultural traditions that date back to the days of the Spanish explorations of North America combine with the city's openness to the new and untested to create an atmosphere unique in all the world. But unlike major European festival cities – Edinburgh with its castle and Avignon with



*The Richard IInd' by Ariane Mnouchkine's Theatre du Soleil.*

its Palace of the Popes – Los Angeles has no great public monument which focuses attention and serves as a backdrop for a festival. Its topography and climate have defined its character. Its disparate elements, its sprawl, its multiple cultures, its micro-climates of mountain, beach and desert all contribute to the city's central paradox – its identity lies in its diversity. This reality, combined with the fact that Los Angeles is essentially vehicular and Private rather than pedestrian and public, might lead one to believe the city is ill-suited to host an international arts festival.

The first step in making Los Angeles a festival city, therefore, was rethinking the very idea of a festival. In this, there are strong parallels between the organisation of the Festival and that of the 1984 Olympic Games. The decision was made to draw on what Los Angeles had to offer, rather than to bemoan what it lacked. The Los Angeles Olympic Organising Committee thus reached out to the city's vigorous arts community to enlist the support of its museums and galleries, its theatres and dance companies, its cultural and community centers. These organisations soon became co-producers of the Festival and have been instrumental in its planning and implementation.

From 99-seat theatres to the Rose Bowl, from intimate galleries to major museums, the scale and type of facility vary, and with them, the nature of the festival-going experience. On any given day, a few hundred visitors may pass through the Municipal Gallery to see "Art in Clay" while hundreds of thousands of motorists will see murals painted alongside the freeway.

Assembling Festival attractions began with countries having previously hosted the Olympic Games. Each was to send a performing group or an exhibition – or both. Secondly, Festival organisers decided to invite performing arts companies from Africa and South America as representatives of these great continents. Lastly, the People's Republic of China was invited in order to commemorate China's first appearance in the Games of the Olympiad since 1932, and the Republic of Korea, host of the 1988 Summer Games, is sending the Korean National Dance Company.

Artists and governments alike responded with remarkable generosity. In Nara, Japan, for instance, the chief priest of the Kasuga Shrine carefully opened antique wooden boxes to reveal Bugaku masks from the 15th and 16th centuries. "Would the people of Los Angeles

be interested in sharing these with people from around the world during the Olympics?" he asked. And so 100 masks, robes, drums and gongs leave Japan for the first time, accompanied by the Bugaku dancers. The incident is typical of the spirit of cooperation that helped make the Festival a reality.

Not everything in the making of the Olympic Arts Festival was quite so easy, of course. Many of the same logistical problems faced in the mounting of the Games confronted the Festival's organising staff as well: the care and feeding of 1,500 artists from around the world; the working out of contractual details in a multiplicity of languages; and the scheduling of some 400 events within the available limits of space and time. Shipping 500-year-old Bugaku masks, or 45 impressionist masterpieces from the Louvre, or three major operatic productions from Covent Garden, including elaborate sets, large casts and a full orchestra, halfway around the world is a formidable task. Putting the Festival together required four years, 300,000 miles of travel and the negotiation of 130 contracts with 18 countries. It involved hammering out myriad details with artistic directors, company managers and curators, and negotiating with ambassadors, ministers of culture and heads of state. Invariably, paths were found through the labyrinth of details, and logistical problems were resolved.

A basic premise for the Festival is that art is not a form of propaganda but an instrument of truth, an opportunity to put aside differences and rejoice in being alive. The Festival seeks neither to preach nor to dictate a hierarchy of taste. Participating countries have agreed to this premise. Governments that might have preferred more traditional representatives of their cultures respected the artistic integrity of the Festival and provided substantial support for artists of untraditional bent.

Not that the Festival ignores more traditional artists or works. Whether one is speaking of the China Performing Arts Ensemble, with its ensemble of musicians playing a variety of Chinese musical styles on traditional instruments, or the American Repertory Theatre staging Sheridan's *The School for Scandal*, or the Ballet Folklórico de Guadalajara or the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, the many traditions of world culture are well represented. But the Festival is also open to the unconventional and offers numerous opportunities to explore new avenues in the arts, Pina Bausch's Wuppertaler Tanztheater presenting four original works, including Bausch's interpretation of Stravinsky's *The*

*Rife of Spring*, to le Theatre du Soleil's cycle of Shakespeare plays re-worked in the dramatic traditions of India and Japan. Both companies make their United States debuts at the Festival.

Finally, it was important that the Festival leave a visible legacy to the people of Los Angeles, much as the bronze and marble statues of athletic heroes are part of the legacy left by the ancient Olympics. Thus, the Los Angeles Olympic Organising Committee commissioned several works of public art. Sculptor Robert Graham's monumental bronze Gateway, facing the peristyle end of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in Exposition Park, will be a gift to the people of Los Angeles from the LAOOC. The 25-foot-high Gateway consists of a post-and-lintel structure supporting the nude torsos of one male and one female athlete. The sides of the Gateway's posts feature base-reliefs of male and female athletes in motion.

Another major commission is the Olympic Mural Project, in which 10 major Los Angeles artists known for their mural paintings were invited to adorn the freeways between downtown Los Angeles and the Coliseum with their creations. Their works range in style and content from the abstract to the real and even the surreal.



*Lewizky Dance Company.*

The Olympic Arts Festival is not a simple, discreet entity. Rather, it is a process involving artists and athletes, directors and diplomats, representatives of the many facets of world culture. For the 1,500 artists, and for the audience of half a million, such a process provides a mixture of exhilaration, tempting one to abandon normal patterns and to try all kinds of new experiences. If the Festival has worked, images will haunt the mind and remain on the retina long after the last performance and exhibition has ended.

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