

## OLYMPIC REFLECTIONS

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November 1979: It is rehearsal intermission of Tulsa Opera's double bill of Massenet's *La Navarraise* and Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* (that's "Nav-Pag" for opera lovers). I am the production stage manager, responsible for ensuring that all production and artistic activity moves smoothly through the final run-through prior to paid audience attendance. My little brother, Tim, is my assistant. We have been raised in a performing arts family, and as "opera brats" we are a great team, and fairly good at our jobs. Everything must be perfect. A voice over the headset from the IATSE Crew office tells me I have a telephone call.

My lectern/console is downstage right, just behind the main curtain. I am hardwired via headset to the lighting booth, the conductor, the crew office, the special effects and follow spot guys, the fly crew, the house manager, the director, the lighting designer, and my brother, as well as the principals, chorus, and orchestra via the paging system. Tim is stationed stage left, and roves the backstage areas wrangling singers, pyro technicians, and supernumeraries and getting them lined up for entrances. We both get our creative jollies through control and manipulation of a variety of simultaneous well-timed and well-executed technical, visual, and musical expression. We have a few minutes to spare, so I decide to take the phone call. "Exit, Stage Right."

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The call is from the US Olympic Fine Arts Committee. Mark Ross offers me a job to production-manage the Fine Arts Festival in Lake Placid. It starts a few weeks before the 1980 Games, culminating in the Closing Ceremonies, about seven weeks in total. A variety of notable people and groups are engaged to perform and present throughout the Games as a demonstration of the USA's contribution to the cultural component of the event. I am intrigued and I agree to take the job. There are big players in this operation, although I don't understand this yet, never having been to an Olympics. I negotiate that I will drive my company van from Warrensburg, New York, to Lake Placid daily, an easy commute. This turns out to be the best deal in the whole gig.

Adirondack January can be a brutal month, usually with 12–36" of snow and several weeks of sub-zero temperatures. 1980 is peculiar. The High Peaks landscape is a dullish gray-brown, certainly cold enough but without precipitation. Strangely, as I get closer to Lake Placid on my first commute, there are tiny crystals floating in the air. It reminds me of the first signs of oobleck, the sticky substance that first appears as tiny specks in Dr. Seuss's "Bartholomew Cubbins" story. I speculate that ancient hooded Weather Wizards are chanting and churning cauldrons of goo, conjuring the clouds to create snow because there is none at the Olympic venues. This turns out to be true.

The Fine Arts Program is ambitious. The schedule of the National Fine Arts Committee encompasses performing and visual arts events throughout the Games, involving American fine/folk artists and artistic groups of the highest caliber. Chamber, Ballet, Choral and Orchestral Performance, Folk Music and Dance, Experiential Art, Permanent Exhibits, Kids' Programs, Film, Visual Art, Jazz, Pop, and Rock & Roll. This all occurs everywhere throughout the region, on and off the ice, both planned and spontaneous. My initial review of the plan, and my instincts, tell me I will need a staff of 12 to properly prepare and manage the full itinerary. I am told that I will have a lighting designer and three interns.

The lighting designer, Jason Kantrowitz, is a savvy and talented lad from Glens Falls, who had worked with me as a designer for several years at the Lake George Opera Festival before charting a successful lighting design career in New York City. I am happy to have a seasoned veteran to work with. The interns are all terrific kids, theatre majors, seemingly tireless and ready to apply themselves to whatever the challenges of the Fine Arts Festival of the Olympic Games might be. Neither they, nor I, know quite what to expect. The first challenge is the “Solemn Opening,” a highly politicized event for only the Organizing Committee, the International Olympic Committee, dignitaries, and the commensurate security and diplomatic cling-ons. This indoor event will follow the Opening Ceremonies, which are to be held outdoors at the local air strip.

We go to scope out the Agora Theater at the venerable Lake Placid Club, now demolished. I’ve staged corporate events there for GE, so I know the facility. This is where the “Solemn Opening” is to occur. There will be some speeches, music, and a dance segment performed by Toby Towson, “America’s most famous gymnast.” Simple enough, or so it seems. Upon arrival, however, we encounter a bureaucratic hodgepodge of International and US Olympic officials, Lake Placid Organizing Committee, and the Secret Service. We are new to the job, so none of us has credentials to even walk on the property. After much conversation, we convince these groups that all we want to do is get the theater set up for the event, not disrupt the Olympics. After thorough examination of our Swiss Army knives, and a good sniff from the dogs, we carry on.

Cyrus Vance has been dispatched to Lake Placid for this event because Jimmy Carter won’t show up where there is political turmoil over Taiwan’s boycott of the Olympic Games. As the production manager, I respectfully ask the NSA agent where Mr. Vance will enter the theater so that we can feature him with a follow spotlight. I get a dismissive response. I suggest that I won’t be prepared to handle his entrance without knowing its location, but to no avail. Nonetheless, the show must go on. They finally lie to me about this,

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and so he enters in darkness while I have the follow spot trained on the entrance on the opposite side of the room. So much for perfection. I'm sure the agents are proud of their clever deception, and I reflect on the experience as I drive my crew around Mirror Lake after the event. We will need better credentials and better "intel" if we are to succeed henceforth.

The New York State Police, a formidable force, has been reduced to the role of traffic cop for this endeavor. They have, however, been assigned the Herculean task of accreditation, which means they must examine every individual to determine which venues each applicant is able to access. I present my case the next morning in Ray Brook. I don't care about the athletic venues, just about where the Fine Arts events will be occurring, such as Athletes' Village, where Billy Williams is performing with his jazz ensemble in two days, and Bonnie Raitt the night after. They don't get why we need access to the venue, but we are told to come back tomorrow. I have trucks of equipment and a crew scheduled to show up tomorrow to set up staging, lighting, and audio for the concerts at the Ray Brook facility, a future minimum security lock-up. We manage to get temporary clearance.

Now we are on a roll. We get Athletes' Village set up; the Lake Placid Center for the Arts is ready; and the Lake Placid Club and the remote locations in Saranac, Westport, Elizabethtown, and Tupper Lake have been examined and prepared. All the performing groups arrive and we are supporting their gigs with our little crew as best we can. Every day and night there are events and ceremonies to manage, so not much sleep. As insomnia sets in, I get to drive my company van around Mirror Lake at night, and discover many foreigners, mostly inebriated, who don't know where they are going, much less how to pronounce it. Lake Placid is full of Scandinavians, Asians, Soviets, Europeans, Canadians, South Americans, Aussies, not too many Africans, and all their international support operatives. Plenty of KGB, well-advertised in their furry hats, and NSA, being obviously invisible. I am happy to slide the door open, roll them in, and roll them out at their hotels. What a gas!

## *Olympic Reflections*

Meanwhile, I have zero idea how the actual Olympic Games are going. My hands are full with the performing and visual arts activities and issues. I regularly drop by police headquarters to see about accreditation for our team, without much progress. Finally, snow arrives in the Adirondacks and this really annoys the athletes, who have become very fond of the artificial oobleck snow. Apparently, the real stuff slows them down. But we hear that on the ice, the US Hockey Team is doing well, and might get a shot at Russia, and perhaps even Finland, in the medal rounds. Coincidentally, I get called to the Fine Arts Committee office. Apparently, our program is doing well, and they want me to stage-manage the Closing Ceremonies, coming up in about a week. I let them know that I am not accredited to enter the Olympic Arena, so unless we can get our “stinking badges,” we are unable to accept.

In the last two weeks of my Olympic tenure, I am awarded “all access” accreditation by the New York State Police. This is my version of the Gold Medal! Now, if only I had the time, I could visit every Olympic venue, witness every competition, and hang out with the IOC, KGB, NSA, and ABC Sports guys. Too bad we are still working 12–16 hours every day just to facilitate the plethora of Arts Programs. At the meeting of the Fine Arts Committee, I find out that I will be working with Moses Pendleton, founder of Pilobolus, an extraordinarily clever and athletic dance ensemble that we have been supporting for the past few weeks in a variety of magical performances. We are given rudimentary instructions, but Moses is given “carte blanche” directorial authority over the “Arts Segment” of the Closing Ceremony, so we schedule the first rehearsal.

The 1932 Olympic facility connected to the new Arena is called the “Lucy Rink,” and we assemble there for the rehearsal. We have cloggers from Vermont, Greek and Yugoslav folk dancers, the Lake Placid Kids’ Figure Skating Club, regional high school banner-bearers, and a few more groups as the cast, several hundred in all. Moses is as inspirational as Lake Placid itself. He spots the tiniest lass in the skating group and focuses his improvised choreography on

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her. He works with everyone to construct a global statement about civilization swallowing youthful energy in chaos but subsequently embracing and glorifying future human evolution. It's pretty heady stuff, and the staging is a bit confused, but I think that proper lighting and musical accompaniment will help it work. I'm thinking about the Arena audience of 8,000, not the 80 million people watching it on TV. Pretty stupid of me.

We get a second and final rehearsal. My lovely wife, Theresa, has arrived, six months pregnant and bulging. Of course, she has no accreditation to accompany me to my new venues, but somehow we convince the officials to admit her. It must be her rosy glow. The run-through goes fairly well, although without the advantage of black-outs, spotlights, athletes, flags, pomp and circumstance, or orchestral and choral music. It is a "dry run." Simultaneously, next door in the Olympic Arena, Team USA Hockey is beating the Soviets, and the crowd noise totally disrupts our rehearsal process. We finish, but the euphoria that ensues as a result of Team USA's victory over the Soviets overwhelms us, so we all call it a day and celebrate. Afterward, I make my Mirror Lake rounds in the company van with my pregnant wife, and we deliver even more drunken foreign officials, spooks, and operatives to their hotels. USA! USA! USA!

It comes down to the Closing Ceremony. Team USA has defeated Finland for the Hockey Gold Medal, and fortunately for me, the "lightweight" rostrum we built at Adirondack Scenic Studios for the three person awards does not collapse when the entire US Hockey Team jumps repeatedly up and down upon it (there is a picture of this moment somewhere online). The Olympic Games of 1980 have concluded, and now all that is left is the "awarding of prizes to non-participants." The athletes are pissed off. They have been loaded onto buses at the Ray Brook Prison and brought to the Lucy Rink about four hours prior to the event. They are all sitting around on the bleachers, more vociferous by the minute. I've been given four communications devices so that I can speak with my crew, the lighting booth, the conductor, Olympic ceremony production, and the ABC

Broadcast Booth. This is my first opportunity to communicate with ABC Sports.

I explain to the Broadcast Booth that Mr. Pendleton's segment of the Ceremony requires a blackout of the Arena so that a single follow spotlight can watch the tiny skater shoot out into center ice to be swallowed up by the cloggers and folk Dancers in the chaotic world. I get a few chuckles in response. Suddenly I realize that our little "Arts Segment" of this event is not really on anybody's radar. ABC quickly responds that there will be no blackouts during this globally televised production. They are probably being coached by some federal agent who suspects that extinguishing the lights on thousands of global dignitaries in the Olympic Arena might be a bad idea. Now I have angry athletes and a brick wall TV producer about sixty minutes before this thing is supposed to start. I try to explain this to Moses. Fortunately, he is a colleague and he takes it pretty well. I wish we'd had a dress rehearsal, but we will forge on.

The Fine Arts ceremonial performers arrive, the little skaters and high school kids accompanied by adoring parents. The athletes are now becoming obnoxious. I station myself at the south vomitorium of the Arena as gatekeeper. My stage-manager instincts kicks in and I am back in Grand Opera mode, as when I first accepted this job months ago. I wish I were wearing my black tux because it has a calming influence on angry people. I have the athletes lined up with the flag-bearers, etc., ready to enter. We begin the march of international stars. This reminds me of the Grand Procession in "Aida," minus the animals (or not). We go through sixty minutes of marching, speeches, and pomp. The orchestra, chorus, Chuck Mangione, and the divine Michael, McCreesh & Campbell folk trio are ready to start the musical component. It is time for the "Fine Arts" performance.

Moses is pacing on the ice behind me, and tells me when he wants the lights turned out if I can convince the ABC Sports crew to comply. All I get is laughter on the headset. There is an awkward pause. We have reached a standoff, so, in a snap decision, I send the cloggers and the folk dancers, the banner-bearers, and the skaters

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out to their positions in full metal halide brilliance. In spite of the crowd noise, they begin their choreography to Walt Michael's lovely hammered dulcimer solo. In what is supposed to be a blackout with follow spot, I dispatch the tiny girl skater toward the throbbing mass of cloggers, folk dancers, and skaters in the middle of the Arena. I suspect that nobody notices her, or if they do, they believe she just arrived late. The performance proceeds, but it is unlikely that anyone, especially the TV audience, has the foggiest idea what is occurring. Curt Gowdy, the ABC sports announcer, certainly doesn't.

We finish with an orchestra and choral rendition of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" as we celebrate the glory and hope of youth and sport. Chuck Mangione follows with his original Olympic anthem, and the Ceremony winds down. The crowd heads out to get hammered. We have a day or so of post-mortems and self-congratulatory events, and then my wife and I drive home to Warrensburg in our company van. I stop and thank every New York State Trooper we meet along the way. I am disappointed that the Closing Ceremony wasn't a perfect performance, and that it could be the finale of my 14-year professional stage management career. Thirty-six years later, I realize this to be true, but that Lake Placid was a splendid and ridiculous culmination!

Reflecting on this tiny but influential episode in my life, I realize how valuable it is to grow from difficult, challenging, inspiring, and even disappointing, circumstances. I paraphrase Christopher Detmer, my business partner of 42 years, that our experiences teach us that we don't always know the right way to do something, but we have certainly discovered plenty of the wrong ways. This perspective has given us the pragmatic objectivity to foster an organization with global impact in the world of entertainment. The worlds of sports, real property development, government, leisure activity, conservancy, and general public experience are our current playgrounds, for they all require elements of the performing and visual arts, as well as frequent future opportunities to make bad choices.

Every stage of life requires some form of management, some of it superimposed and some internally motivated. My parents never



encouraged my involvement in the performing arts, but I managed to discover a niche for myself that combines the creativity I was fortunate enough to inherit with a personal desire to be my own boss and do good work. This has led me to many venues and ventures around the world. I embrace the creativity surrounding me every day. If not for the extraordinary people I have encountered and engaged with in life and business, I might have been a French horn player, an actor, a numismatist, a librettist, a heldentenor, or perhaps a guitar-strumming folksinger, not that there's anything wrong with that.

Management requires experience, patience, and intuition, the result of which can be rewarding in so many ways. In my case, the reward has been a cumulative momentum that has precluded my retirement, a good and fun thing for me. I do not consider myself as being "at work"; rather, constantly engaged in a productive form of play, and in a pretty big creative sandbox. I worry, however, that those I have admired, learned from, and tried to emulate are either older than me or have passed on. How can I inspire, impart, and perhaps "switch on" the creative impulses of two, three, or even four generations beyond mine? I realize that, later in life, I am not "returning to childhood"; rather, I am embracing the child in me that continues to learn and thrive. I think I will follow this path. "Places, please."