

## How Do You Infuse Culture with the Olympics?

Andy Miah

**One of the big questions to confront Olympic Games cultural producers and artists is how to infuse their work with Olympic values, without diminishing the credibility of the art and without just playing lip service to Olympic values and ideas. So what can be learned from London 2012 in terms of how to make this possible?**

Each Olympic host city approaches culture from its own, unique perspective and, in London's case, it was apparent from the start that there were many cultural producers and artists around the UK who were all too familiar with some of the more literal engagements with sports through art, which can end up being quite unremarkable and which offer few opportunities for artists to advance critical and thoughtful ideas.

This is why there are no dance companies trying to represent the movement of athletes in their work during London 2012 Festival and no sculptures or traditional paintings of athletes. Some of these motifs are present in the wider Cultural Olympiad

programme, but the Director of the London 2012 Festival, Ruth Mackenzie, has curated a programme that distances itself from some of these more familiar 'Sport and art' or 'Olympiart' creations.

There may yet remain a question as to whether or not this absence is overall good for the future of the Olympic cultural programme. After all, there are surely many people who enjoy experiencing such work and the size of the International Olympic Committee's 'Olympiart' exhibition at each Games speaks to this audience. Yet, since the IOC has this covered, there is no real imposition for a local Olympic organizing committee (OCOG) to do something similar, which should really open the doors to complete creative freedom.

For London 2012, there are several examples of artistic and creative work that make very explicit connections between the Olympics or sport and art and I wish to consider three. Together, they reveal how creative programmers may adopt different strategies for thinking about the associations between the dominant sport programme and the creative work, but what

unifies them at a strategic, visionary level is Mackenzie's alignment with 'excellence' as the primary Olympic value. Each is an excellent example of cultural work and a sophisticated way of infusing culture with the Olympics.

## Speed of light

Those who know Edinburgh, will be familiar with it as a city with a hint at the Scottish highlands in its backyard, in the form of Arthur's Seat, a beautiful mountainous expanse on the edge of the city centre, a stones throw from the Scottish parliament building and forming part of the Queen's extended premises at Holyrood Palace.

These hills were the site of one of the London 2012 Festival pieces called *Speed of Light* and created by Glaswegian artist company NVA. Experiencing *Speed of Light* offers a great insight into how to programme remarkable, novel experiences during the Olympics, which challenge people's engagement with sport and art and which ticks all the right boxes in terms of Olympic values.

The work consists of hundreds of runners wearing fluorescent light suits, which can be seen for hundreds of metres. The experience takes place at night and audience members ascend Arthur's Seat, while watching the runners create shapes around the landscape. The artists also

consider the audience to be participants and they are also lit up with light sticks, which function as walking aids. Groups of up to 200 people begin their ascent every 15 minutes and can be seen by other groups also making their way across the hills.

The physical demands of the experience for both runners and walkers means that *Speed of Light* engages people with the limits of their own bodies in a way that is not dissimilar from Olympic athletes, though on a clearly different scale. This is the first way this piece engages with the Olympics and it should silence critics who say that cultural producers are just piggybacking on sport.

Another dimension may be the legacy of this project, a core buzz word in Olympic circles. Many of the attendees at *Speed of Light* are unlikely to have been walkers before this experience and, while there is much talk about how the Games will inspire people to bring about change in their lives, here is one event that actually gets people on their feet and moving, rather than just watching something. In this respect, it might be a more credible mechanism for inspiring social and behavioural change and thus create a health legacy to the Games than just having watched an athlete win a medal.

*Speed of Light* delivered what Mackenzie and others associated with the London 2012 Festival

promise of 'a summer like no other' to use the Mayor of London's slogan. Yet, it is also an event that has value as a mediated spectacle. One of the best ways to appreciate the beauty of the piece is through high-speed film, which shows the patterns of the runners emerge as a kaleidoscope of colour. While this has little to do with the Olympic values, it is the means through which it allows the producers to say that they have created work that is artistically credible within an otherwise very controlled production environment. It is also a good example of art that lives on through its mediated form, a key asset of the Olympic programme, as its iconic images pervade history through film and image.

Perhaps a final comment is worth noting over the collaborative nature of the project, which emerges out of a range of stakeholders, not just the organizing committee, LOCOG. A quick scan of the *Speed of Light* website reveals a number of sponsors, including the Edinburgh International Festival, the lottery funded Legacy Trust, a special fund set up for London 2012 Olympic cultural projects, Event Scotland, Dunard Fund, Paths for All, and the London 2012 Festival. This multiple stakeholder approach may play a role in how culture is produced at the Games to avoid the dominance of narrowly defined concepts and production briefs. In short, it might allow artists and

cultural producers much more freedom than they would otherwise have, if just limited to the OCOG's guidance.

## World Shakespeare Festival

Another example of how culture became infused with the Olympics at London 2012 is the World Shakespeare Festival, a vast programme of Shakespeare productions staged with companies from around the world and produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Audiences can watch a Polish version of *Macbeth*, set in a modern day war zone environment, an African *Julius Caesar* with leading British-African actors, and an Indian *Much Ado About Nothing*, among others.

The WSF website describes the scale of the project:

Almost 60 partners are coming together to bring the Festival alive. Thousands of artists from around the world will take part in almost 70 productions, plus supporting events and exhibitions, right across the UK, including London, Stratford-upon-Avon, Newcastle/Gateshead, Birmingham, Wales and Scotland and online.

There is one primary aspect of this project that speaks to the

integrity of the programme from the perspective of linking with the Olympics.

First, it doesn't just deliver another Shakespeare programme, which might have been an expectation for London 2012, as it would have been inconceivable for Shakespearian performances to be absent from the cultural programme. Instead, it is a festival that draws on *internationalism* as its core theme and, in so doing, engages with the international context of the Olympic movement. However, this isn't just to do with the fact that the Olympic Games are a global event.

On a deeper level, what ensured the success of the Olympic Games revival over 100 years ago was this international dimension, which demarcated it from other attempts to revive the Games. In this respect, foregrounding a national icon in a global context is an eloquent way of attending to core Olympic ideas, the value of which may require a little historical awareness to fully appreciate. The credibility of this from a programming perspective is born out in the statement that:

we know that 50% of the world's children study Shakespeare in the classroom - that's over 64 million children worldwide (WSF website).

Of course, internationalism is not a theme that is unique to the

Olympic Games and one may argue that this World Shakespeare Festival could have happened and had value regardless of this association to the Olympics. While true, its inclusion speaks to another dimension of Olympic cultural programming, which is the importance of curating work by drawing on what else is happening within the cultural sector at the time.

Indeed, to optimize the local ownership of a Cultural Olympiad, it is necessary to align it with the interests and aspirations of established cultural organizations. Finding the right fit among these institutions and the work they are developing may be the most secure way to build a coherent programme that has a valuable legacy for those presenting partners.

While in this case it was clearly more than just curating the WSF to align with the London 2012 Festival, this principle may serve future host nations well in securing visibility for cultural institutions without requiring significant additional funding.

### **Playing the Games.**

My final example in this essay is a comedy piece that was presented by the Criterion theatre in the heart of Piccadilly Circus. Over the Games, the theatre presented a series of events described in press material as follows:

lunchtime conversations between well-loved entertainers and top Olympians; late-night comedy performances from top British talent; a retelling of Homer's *The Odyssey* through puppets, live cinema and a three piece band; and world premieres of two new plays commissioned from emerging British playwrights Serge Cartwright and Adam Brace in response to the presence of the Olympic Games in London

The finale titled '*Sporting stories before bedtime*', brought together a trio of iconic British comedians – Brian Blessed, Eddie Izzard and Stephen Fry and this final event beautifully articulated how to bring culture to the Games without forcing unnatural connections between sport and art.

The evening comprised of three individual 30 minute stand-up segments, where each performer came on the stage to read an extract from a book they had chosen. As the evening progressed, it became apparent that each was reading from a script that spoke to their own individual sporting interests and achievements. Brian Blessed read from WE Bowman's mountaineering exploits in *The Ascent of Rum Doodle*, Eddie Izzard read a cycling tale by Tim Moore's called *French Revolutions*,

and Stephen Fry's sport of choice was golf, reading a story called *Clicking of Cuthbert* by PG Wodehouse.

Each performance was distinctly amusing and each engaged viewers with themes relevant to sport, but which resonated beyond sport.

Blessed's second career as a mountaineer was the backdrop of his reading, which was interspersed with comical stories from his life – he never made it to the end of the extract.

Eddie Izzard rushed through his script so he could get to his next gig that night, managing to mispronounce haemoglobin as 'homo goblins' when outlining details of a doping scandal.

Stephen Fry's finale was the most eloquent and beautifully read of the three. It told a story of unrequited love – an elite golfer who falls for a literature buff. She finds no value in his sporting success, only in the pursuit of intellectual endeavor until the most celebrated Russian writer visits and reveals that he believes golf is the greatest pursuit known to man. The story engages listeners with themes about the relative worth of intellectual versus physical achievements, bringing even some degree of philosophical inquiry to the Olympic Games cultural programme.

In this case, the integrity of the piece appears in the selection of

the extracts by the performers and the intimate connection they had with the script's story. It did not speak directly to the Olympics, but did illicit connections, again revealing the capacity to programme cultural activity in a way that links sport and art, without undermining the value of either.

In closing, one might traditionally ask the reverse of this question – how can the Olympics be infused with cultural content? However, the latter question asks more of the infrastructure of the Olympic programme and how cultural activity might fit within it. By

reversing the question and asking how the content of cultural activity within that programme should be infused with Olympic values, we are directed more to the level of programming and production, than that of management.

This question is crucial for any Olympic cultural programmer, so as to ensure they manage expectations within the cultural and creative sector, but also to ensure that historians are more attuned to the intentions and subtleties of Olympic cultural programmes.