

BEIJING08

THE 2008 SUMMER OLYMPICS



Putting up a show for four

billion to see

LIM SAY HENG speaks to **Antony Spanbrook**, who helmed the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2004 Athens Olympics

IMAGINE producing a show with 7,300 performers for a television audience of millions at the annual National Day Parade. Daunting, isn't it?

Now multiply that audience thousand-fold and you can understand the scale and pressure that Antony Spanbrook faced four years ago.

The 38-year-old Australian was the lead producer for the Opening and Closing Ceremonies at the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004, charged with taking care of the artistic and technical aspects of the ceremony that involved 75,000 performers and a worldwide television audience of four billion.

And he was thrown into the role just one year from the mammoth event.

"I actually replaced another producer who had a stroke at the age of 36," said Spanbrook.

"And 10 months out the whole creative changed, the whole budget changed and we started almost anew."

He was then working with Jack Morton Worldwide, a renown experiential marketing company which specialises in connecting consumers with brands in personally memorable ways.

In addition to adapting to a staff of 350 from 16 countries quickly, he had to contend with delays in construction, low participation rates among volunteers and last-minute changes to the programme.

"It is very difficult to budget for something of such a mammoth scale," he said. "When a country bids to host the Olympic Games the country has an organising committee that tries to estimate the cost. And a lot of the time you don't know until you're actually in it."

"They had allocated a certain amount of money to ceremonies and along the way they had to reconsider what their hopes and dreams were in creative, compared to what they can actually afford to do," added Spanbrook, who now heads his own experiential marketing communications company Luminous.

While the budget provided a major challenge for Spanbrook's team, it was an eight-minute segment of the ceremony that got Spanbrook sweating over his career.

That portion of the show involved a 60-foot tall statue that was supposed to break apart to reveal a smaller statue, which would then break apart to show a third figure.

"Each time we rehearsed it, the Cycladic head (outermost statue) would come apart," he said.

"But inside it the Kouros (the second layer) would have already been broken because of undue pressure on a particular area."

OUTLANDISH

With time running out fast, Spanbrook had wanted to take away the second layer to minimise the risks of spoiling that portion of the show, but was told to go on as originally planned as the media had already reported about the three-part sculpture.

"Over the years I have done some pretty outlandish things but I always knew how we were going to deliver," he said, who also produced the first ever corporate show in Beijing's Forbidden City, and both the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2002 Commonwealth Games.

"We were at a great level of risk when we did the show."

He added: "When you do large shows, your currency in the industry is your ability to deliver," he said. "As soon as you fail to deliver, it's pretty much the end of your career."

Thankfully for his team, and the rest of the world, the 210-minute show went on flawlessly in the end.

But that was not the fondest memory that



Spanbrook is looking forward to tonight's Beijing Olympics opening ceremony.

TNP Picture: LIM SAY HENG

Spanbrook had during his year of involvement in the ceremonies.

For him, the most rewarding moment came at

the end of the last rehearsal before the opening ceremony.

"It was hot and everybody was just tired, and when the creative director just basically

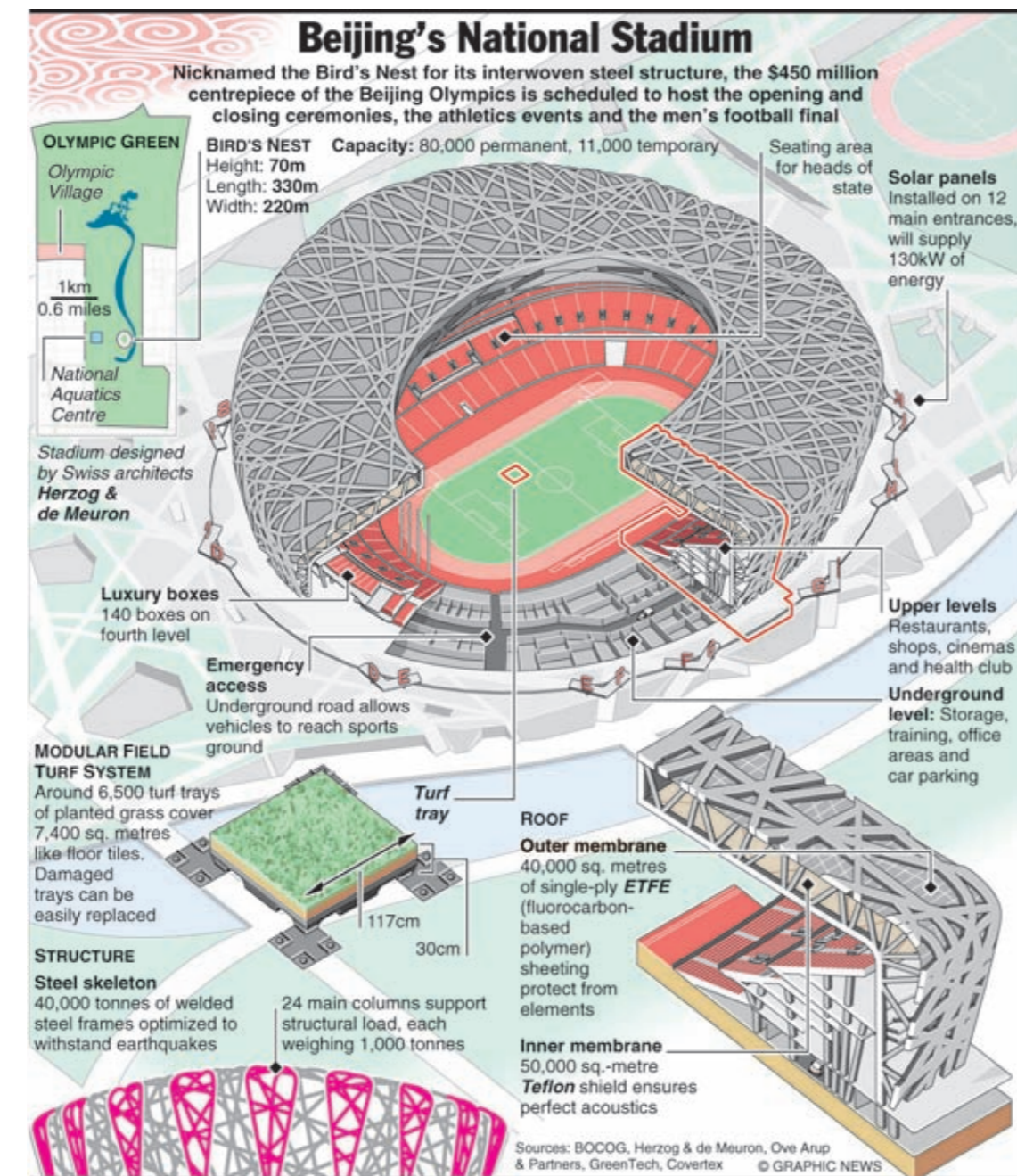
went up to the microphone and told them that they just finished their last rehearsal," he said.

"It was just this moment where we had the entire cast welling up on tears and getting excited by the fact that they were making history. And that was where I saw the human side of what I was working on."

He added: "We were going in to do a big show, but for the performers it was a moment of time that they were never going to forget."

"The Olympics is not going to come back to Greece in their lifetime, they were going to be part of it and were grateful for the opportunity."

"It was just an incredible moment where everyone was quite elated."



Drama during closing ceremony

HE NEVER expected to get his own adrenaline rush, when most of the action on the field had ended.

While most athletes and spectators were settling down for the closing ceremony during the Athens Olympics, Antony Spanbrook was forced into action due to a last-minute change.

Jacques Rogge, the president of the International Olympic Committee, wanted to present a special medal for Brazilian Vanderlei de Lima during the ceremony.

The marathon runner was leading the 42km race before he was attacked by a protester.

De Lima eventually finished third. "It was in the middle of the closing ceremony and I got a call from my executive producer," said Spanbrook.

"Rogge wanted to do a special presentation and this was 20 minutes before it was supposed to happen on live television."

"So I ran from there and it was like

I was in some weird film. I was running, jumping over people and pushing them out of the way, bursting through doors and up to the control tower, where our narrators were sitting.

With little time to spare, Spanbrook wrote the script for the additional part, had it translated into French and Greek, and briefed the three narrators about the change.

STRESSFUL

"After that was done, we looked up at the show caller and asked 'when do we go into the medal presentation?', and he said 'in 45 seconds'.

"So with 45 seconds to spare we changed the show and the narrators announced it. We presented the medal of commendation and everything was fine.

"That was very stressful," he added, laughing at the recollection.

- Lim Say Heng



Seen and heard...

REPORTING FROM BEIJING

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CONFUSION reigned at the entrance of the Main Press Centre (MPC) in Beijing yesterday when hordes of journalists were denied entry by security officers. It is believed that orders were handed down after noon that all journalists must have a red sticker with a crown on their passes before they could be allowed entry into the MPC.

However, the same rule did not apply to journalists like me who entered the MPC premise on a bus from the media hotel I was staying.

The frustrated pressmen created a din outside the security tent which quickly attracted the attention of the other media inside the MPC.

The confusion only cleared about 30 minutes later when the journalists were allowed in.

"I think the rule applies to those who want to get into the Bird's Nest Stadium, but I don't know why the rule should apply to the MPC," said one flabbergasted journalist.

◆ MANY WAYS TO MAKE FRIENDS
 THERE are many ways to make friends with pretty-looking journalists.

This one surely ranks as one of the most effective.

On Wednesday, an old man helped by a volunteer boarded the bus which I took on my way to the Main Press Centre.

There were many empty seats, but he plonked himself in the seat next to a hot-looking Japanese journalist.

He then started a conversation with the girl, who could speak fluent English.

A foreign cameraman even whipped out his equipment to record the proceedings.

After we got off the bus, I asked the Japanese hottie if the old man was a former Olympian.

She told me he was actually an Italian journalist who covered the Olympic Games more than 20 years ago. He was in Beijing to relive some of the memories.

Maybe I should try that trick in 20 years' time.

◆ FROM WALKING WOUNDED TO MEDIA DARLING
 TALK about professionalism.

The US men's gymnastics team was scheduled to hold a press conference at the Main Press Centre on Wednesday.

One of the gymnasts arrived at the MPC with his shoulders and knees wrapped in ice packs.

He was wearing nothing but a pair of shorts.

For a moment, I thought I was in a hospital and not a media centre.

On his way to the press conference room, the gymnast stopped by a dustbin and disposed of the ice packs.

With his shoulders still sore red, he then proceeded to join the rest of his team-mates for the press conference.

Talk about professionalism indeed.



'Show the human side of China'

WHILE he had worked with the Chinese auteur on several occasions, Antony Spanbrook has no idea what Zhang Yimou's opening ceremony for Beijing Olympics would be like.

"I found him quite inspiring and we had a lot of conversations, albeit through a translator since he does not speak English," said Spanbrook. "I saw some of his preliminary creatives and they were quite amazing."

"But no, he is very tight lipped about what is happening in Beijing, so we don't know anything about tomorrow."

He first spoke to the renown movie director during the closing ceremony

of the Athens Olympics, where China had a segment.

But Spanbrook hopes that China would show the "human side" of their country.

"I think the world knows something about China and their history but it would be interesting to see how it is reinforced through the ceremonies," he said.

"I think what people want to see is the human side of China - the young Chinese person, how they are growing up and what their passions are."

"It would be interesting to see how they are going to showcase that."