

1174 words

One Highgate Lady's Olympic Experience

by Jacquie Pedersen

I first applied to be an “ambassador” for the London 2012 Olympic Games in January 2011. Having been lucky enough to have been seconded by the BBC to work with the European Broadcasting Union on the 1984 Olympic games in Los Angeles, and been rewarded with a ticket to the opening ceremony there, I had many wonderful memories of a very special experience.

As the Olympics were coming to my home and favorite city. I wanted to be part of the action. I had requested to be based in Trafalgar Square and was delighted when I found out that I had been assigned five 5 hour morning shifts during the first week of August. It was guaranteed to be busy there and, with the largest “pod” with a computer, and various touch screens as invaluable resources, we did pretty much feel we had our fingers on the pulse. We were able to send visitors off with maps, free copies of Time Out and details of the day's events and how to get to them.

Some time in March I had heard that volunteers were also being recruited to take part in the opening and closing ceremonies. By this time the Olympic ceremonies were already fully subscribed but I could still apply for a role in the Paralympic ceremonies. I used to do some jazz ballet thirty years ago and more recently have taken up salsa dancing, but I have never performed in front of an audience until recently, and then only as a member of a choir. After struggling to perform five different routines in the space of one hour at the audition, I was amazed to be selected to perform in the opening ceremony. Of course the initial excitement was followed by panic and absolute terror.

Did these people know what they were doing? I felt somewhat reassured when I realized that Olympic ceremonies would precede us and, as they were also going to be cast from inexperienced volunteers, at least they would be changing the expectation from the precise uniformity of the Chinese ceremonies to something more organic and individual. Panic returned when the first of 13 five hour rehearsals began at 3 Mills studios in Bromley by Bow in two groups of 300. It became apparent that the dance captains themselves had little idea of the routine they were supposed to be teaching us and constantly had to resort to “guys you are AMAZING” when we managed to do what they couldn’t – until they changed it – which they did every time! Terror became a constant companion when we were given tickets to the dress rehearsal of the Olympic opening ceremony and felt how close the audience would be, and realised we were trying to deliver a more structured and challenging routine, with only half the rehearsals.

Then rehearsals moved to Dagenham – a two hour journey on the underground (which I had carefully avoided for the last 30 years!). Laminated cards with

“concentric circle” numbers, “umbrella block” numbers, column numbers and details of umbrella colours for all of those were clipped to our numbered bibs (I was number 428). Still not at all confident about our every changing routine, we were introduced to mass choreography. Now we met a true professional: Gina Chan Martinez. She kept 500+ of us (because by now I would estimate at least 30 had dropped out) focused during several hours of pacing out our positions, sometimes in cold, wind and rain, and one afternoon in 32C on hot tarmac, always thanking us for our patience and (quite credibly in her case) reassuring us that she really did know what she was doing. We were constantly told that we would have plenty of time to practice our choreography (which we never actually did, except amongst ourselves, from notes we had collectively emailed to one another).

Happily we said goodbye to Dagenham and stepped into the stadium. This was a “goosebump moment” like no other – especially for someone who has suffered from stage fright her entire life. I now began to actually enjoy the rehearsals, of which we had only four and just one full dress rehearsal, without an audience, when we were confined to our temporary plastic structure of a holding pen for the rest of the show (as well as the final event itself!) with only water, tea and ghastly granulated white coffee to drink, doorstep sandwiches, boxes of Pringles, honeyed oat bars and apples. As our routine formed the opening section of the performance, the high spirits of the cast pent up for the rest of dress rehearsal led to much dancing and whooping around the “pen” as well as outside until the conga dancing was driven back to its allocated confines.

Not content with giving us a highly structured routine, an umbrella prop with coloured lights which would often take on a life of their own, IERMs (in ear radiomonitors) through which we received not always clear instructions (when they didn’t fall out of our ears and weren’t faulty); with three days to go we were given neon hats with a primitive battery pack and a small switch which, whilst hidden under two layers of costume, and still had to be found by the hand which wasn’t holding the umbrella and turned on at exactly the right cue from the radio. These devices were strapped to our bodies as though we were suicide bombers. When bright orange gloves appeared (matching the hats and make up) one woman quipped that she was beginning to feel she had signed up for “You’ve been framed”. Fortunately, either our creative team realized that the gloves were a “bridge too far” or the suppliers failed to deliver because thankfully they were not seen again.

Finally the big day arrived and I felt curiously calm. Still not having any idea how the whole thing fitted together, but knowing that the camera would be above the umbrella, I relaxed and on the night, for the first time, got the whole routine right. I had minor difficulties with the umbrella but mainly could not believe how quickly it all was over. Exiting the stadium the crowd were wonderful - giving us high fives and beaming “well done” to us. We were able to watch the rest of the show on a screen in our pen but mostly we were taking photos, exchanging emails, cementing friendships, arranging reunions, and hearing from friends and family how much they had enjoyed watching us. We took our last

steps into the stadium for the finale and waved our arms as our hats illuminated the “Agitos” sign and soaked in the atmosphere.

Home at 3 am and we were finally able to see our section on tv . The next day with the newspapers full of photos and wonderful reviews made us all feel very proud and privileged to have been part of such a beautiful, sensitive and clever show.