

RIC BIRCH

President SPECTAK PRODUCTIONS

Resumé

Ric Birch started his career by studying for a law degree at Melbourne University. After three years he had made his reputation as a student theatrical producer and director - but left little impression on the legal fraternity, apart from producing the Law Revue. His first job was with the Australian Broadcasting Commission as a studio-hand, where he was promoted rapidly and within twelve months was the studio director for 'This Day Tonight' - a current affairs program networked live across Australia five nights a week.

At age twenty-two (the youngest director ever appointed by the ABC), Ric was asked to originate and produce a program that would attract teenage viewers to the network. The result was 'GTK' - a rock music show that ran for over five years and which pioneered many of the techniques now seen on MTV video clips. During those years, Ric filmed extensively in Europe and America, interviewing among others Mick Jagger, Elton John, Jim Morrison and Peter Townshend.

After establishing the success of 'GTK', Ric returned to Australia as a freelance producer and director of videotaped situation comedy and drama series plus a number of filmed documentaries. The Australian Broadcasting Commission contracted Ric in 1978 to produce a new variety series, 'Marcia Hines Music', which was followed by a second series 'Marcia's Music'. Both won acclaim and many awards and Birch went on to produce further award winning series such as 'TV Follies' and 'Farnham and Byrne'. He produced both the 1980 & 1981 'Australian Film Awards', 'The Pacific Song Contest' and various other specials and spectaculars including the 'Diamond Jubilee Air Show' of the Royal Australian Air Force.

In 1981, Ric was asked to produce and direct the 'Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the XII Commonwealth Games' held in Brisbane, Australia October 1982. These ceremonies involved among other things, a cast of over seven thousand performers and a ten meter tall mechanical kangaroo named Matilda that disgorged 'joeys' aged eight years old who jumped up and down on trampolines. Australia had not seen anything like it and the Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremonies became the highest rating television program in Australian history and also received rave reviews from television audiences around the world.

The success of the Commonwealth Games ceremonies led to Ric's appointment as Director of Production for the 'Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games'. He moved to Los Angeles a year before the opening and started planning the spectacle that contained among other memorable moments the 'rocket man' and 84 grand pianos. The opening ceremony of the LA Olympics was a fitting celebration for the home of show business and is still talked about as a turning point for theatricality in major events.

Following the LA Olympics, Spectak Productions was formed in partnership with News Limited to produce special events on an international scale. In 1985, Spectak produced the '1985 Australian Television Awards (the 'Logies')' for the TEN Network and produced the television coverage of '1987 Grand Prix Sailing' for Michael Edgley International.

Spectak produced The Bicentennial Wool Collection for the International Wool Secretariat and the Australian Wool Corporation, staged at the Sydney Opera House on January 31, 1988 before an invited audience including Prince Charles and Princess Diana, and televised world-wide. Nine top international fashion designers and over seventy models appeared live on stage in a multi-million dollar presentation devised by Birch that is totally unique in fashion history. Jean Muir, Bruce Oldfield, Kenzo, Sonia Rykiel, Montana, Versace, Missoni, Oscar de la Renta and Donna Karan all designed special collections in tribute to the importance of Australia's wool industry to the fashion world.

At the same time as he was planning the fashion spectacular, Birch was also the Director of Entertainment for World Expo 88, where his innovative entertainment program was credited as a major factor in the overwhelming success of Brisbane's World Fair. Original attendance projections were more than doubled when Expo 88 attracted almost 17 million visits during its six month run.

Three years before opening day of Expo 88, Birch started work on the entertainment program - and also planned the design, layout and facilities required for each of five new performance venues. He was responsible for an entertainment budget of \$45 million with an additional \$10 million for construction of entertainment venues. These included a 3,000 seat Aquacade with backstage facilities for a cast of 65 divers, swimmers and dancers: an open-air Piazza which incorporated computerized lighting, full aerial rigging for circus acts, a 2,500 square foot dance floor (with understage microphones for tap dance enhancement!), two levels of catwalks for television access, eight followspot positions, plus state-of-the-art sound system, but it was dwarfed by the River Stage - a remarkably versatile venue, where Julio Iglesias, Bryan Ferry and Joe Cocker were among more than 50 rock and music acts that appeared in front of capacity crowds, but the stage was also the venue for theatrical performances of the Rocky Horror Show and Sweeney Todd, as well as hosting the Monterey Jazz Festival - the first time the Festival had appeared outside California. The stage was also used nightly for the spectacular laser projectors, water cannons, 35 mm cine projection, video projection, skytrackers and a massive audio system.

Expo 88 presented more than 50,000 performers during a six-month period: by far the largest entertainment program ever seen in Australia, and one of the largest undertaken anywhere in the world. Administration and operation of the complex program was handled by Birch and fourteen Spectak supervisors, who controlled a production staff and crew of over 600 people.

Birch's success in creating and achieving such wide-ranging entertainment projects led to requests for his services from other countries. He has consulted for theme park developments in Hong Kong, Japan, Spain and France and the entertainment planning committees for the 1990 World Expo in Osaka, the 1992 Universal Exposition in Sevilla, and the 1995 Exposition in Vienna.

In August 1990, he directed the Singapore Jubilee Spectacular for the Singapore government - a multi-million dollar production which celebrated 25 years of Independence for that country, incorporating a cast of 15,000 performers in a show that set new standards for spectaculars.

Birch's experience and international credits attracted the attention of COOB'92, organisers of the XXV Olympic Games in Barcelona, and Birch was contracted to be Executive Producer for the Opening and Closing Ceremonies - held in July/August 1992. Birch took up residence in Barcelona in 1991 and was responsible for creative concepts and script development of the Ceremonies - as well as planning, organisation, budget estimates, and selection of production personnel. Birch brought together an international team of experts to work with the local Barcelona production company and the results were hailed as the best ever Olympic ceremonies - until Sydney 2000.

In 1993 he returned to Australia to produce the 35th Annual TV Awards (the 'Logies') for the TEN television network. Other Australian projects included development of the entertainment proposal and presentation of the bid by Crown Casino for Melbourne's casino licence - a bid that was ultimately successful in August, 1993.

Also in 1993, Birch assisted in the preparation of Sydney's bid for the hosting of the 2000 Olympic Games - and was in Monte Carlo to hear the announcement that Sydney had been successful against strong competition from Beijing, Berlin, Manchester and Istanbul.

In 1994 Birch oversaw opening celebrations for Melbourne's new temporary casino and also spent time in Tennessee revamping the production of Dixie Stampede for the Dollywood organisation. Spectak also produced the opening ceremony of a major Medical World Congress for twelve thousand delegates held at the Los Angeles Convention Center in October 1994 and produced Christmas at Dixie for the Dollywood organisation in both Tennessee, South Carolina and Missouri.

In September 1994 Sydney's Olympic Organising Committee officially announced Birch's appointment as Director of Ceremonies for the Sydney 2000 Olympics. His first responsibility was to produce the Flag Handover Ceremony as part of the closing ceremonies of the XXVI Olympiad in Atlanta in August 1996. The highlight of this Ceremony was the use of giant inflatable kangaroos on bicycles which met with acclaim from every country except Australia – whose people felt that the national symbol should be reserved for petmeat and placing on the tail of Qantas jets. Undeterred, Birch went on to offend some Australian commentators in his quest to create the most outstanding Olympic Ceremonies ever seen.

In addition to the 2000 Olympic Games, Spectak was also responsible for the opening of the Sydney Harbour Casino in 1995, the opening of Melbourne's Crown Casino in 1997 and the '96 – '99 New Year's Eve Celebrations on Sydney Harbour on behalf of the City of Sydney. The Millennium Celebrations on Sydney Harbour were hailed the best in the world by many international press and TV commentators. Birch and Spectak were responsible for the creative direction and production of the entire Sydney Millennium festivities on the night of 31 December 1999.

The Opening and Closing Ceremonies for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games were also hailed worldwide as establishing new standards for creativity, performance and technical production. The Australian commentators were unanimous in their acclaim, even those who had called for Birch's 'impeachment' a year earlier. President Samaranch of the IOC told the international television audience that these were not only the best Olympic Games ever, but that the Ceremonies were "the most beautiful Ceremonies he had ever seen". Birch assembled a crew of 650 professionals, 4,600 volunteer assistants and a cast of 12, 700. The total budget for Ceremonies was over AUD\$50 million.

At the end of 2000 Birch returned to Los Angeles and re-established his links with Rupert Murdoch to form a company to produce 'signature events' for major cities in the US. All was going well until September 11, 2001 when plans for celebrations on a grand scale were cancelled in the light of the national tragedy in New York and Washington, and the events company was dissolved. Birch finally had time to write a book – The Master of the Ceremonies – with behind the scenes stories of his biggest shows but instead of becoming a novelist Birch was invited to join forces with Filmmaster Group, a major Italian production company, in a competition to select the producer for the Ceremonies for Torino's 2006 Winter Olympic Games. This went well, to the point of winning the competition in fact and Birch spent the next three years living in Italy preparing for the Olympic and Paralympic Ceremonies that were seen by the world in February/March 2006. The Torino ceremonies were again hailed as groundbreaking, beautiful and quintessentially Italian – featuring Luciano Pavarotti, Sophia Loren, Robert Bollé and Giorgio Armani while also incorporating

Yoko Ono, Peter Gabriel and Robbie Williams. The relationship with Filmmaster was so successful that Spectak and Filmmaster Group have formed a joint venture to create, produce and manage events on an international scale, with head offices in Milano. In 2006 Birch was appointed International Artistic Advisor to the Beijing 2008 Olympic Ceremonies (together with Steven Spielberg who later resigned under pressure from Sudan & Darfur activists) and over the following two years made more than twenty trips to the Chinese capital, working with Zhang Yimou, the acclaimed Chinese film director, and his creative team. The world got to see the spectacular Beijing opening ceremony on 08.08.08 and people who care about these things seemed unanimous that this was not only the best ceremony ever, but also impossible to be surpassed. Birch has been quoted as saying, "We'll have to wait and see".

He can be contacted in Milano at one of his favourite coffee bars, or in an aeroplane where he spends most of his time these days.

Ric Birch
Spectak/Mindance/
Filmmaster Group