

2010  
OLYMPIC  
SPECIAL

# Vancouver

Welcomes the **World**



## Bring on the Spectacle

Years of planning with one event to showcase Vancouver to the world. *written by* ALLAN LYNCH

**T**he Olympic opening and closing ceremonies is the biggest gig in the world. They're the grandest spectacle and, for the planner, the greatest nightmare, where every aspect of years of work is scrutinized by a live audience of 55,000 that includes heads of state, royalty, celebrities, an army of media and an at-home audience of three-billion-plus people. On top of that, you carry the expectations of a nation to present its best image to the world. So it's not like there's any pressure.

Two men who have accepted the pressure are David Atkins and Patrick Roberge.

Atkins is the Australian-born producer for the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games. Roberge is the Canadian-born producer of the Paralympic Games. Their resumes are impressive. Atkins, a skier and hiker who is discovering the joy of working on the West Coast, has produced everything from Royal Command Performances, rugby half-time shows and the Australian Bicentennial celebration, to the Opening and Closing Ceremonies for the 2000 Sydney Olympics, the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games, and 2006 Asian Games, as well as Broadway musicals.

Vancouverite Roberge, who says his only chance at competition is if bocce is recognized as an Olympic sport, has 20 years experience working on events as large and diverse as Expo '86, Ameriflora '92, the APEC Summit, the Queen's Jubilee visit to Vancouver, the Opening and Closing Ceremonies for the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano and the 2007 Canada Winter Games.

Atkins was hired in 2007 to begin planning the games ceremonies. Roberge got his commission for the lower-profile Paralympic Games in January, 2009, so has a catch-up job, which he assures will be done in time.

Both planners are extremely guarded in describing either their process or the elements they'll use in the ceremonies. So, for a more behind-the-scenes look, *MC&IT* spoke with Hugh Dunne, the producer and director of the 1988 Calgary Games. (See sidebar on page 19).

The good news is they're used to handling crowds and VIPs. The bad news is that they are following the unbelievable scale of the ceremonies for the Beijing Games, and the elegance and élan of Turin which presented iconic Italian images like Ferrai burning rubber to form the Olympic Rings, and Luciano Pavarotti making what would become one of his last public singing appearances.

So where do you start and what do you do?

Atkins says, "People will generally remember the last Olympic Ceremonies they saw and in this case, it will be Beijing. No one is going to be able to compete with Beijing in relation to the sort of ceremony they created; its scale was unprecedented. So our objective is to try to redefine the ceremonies model and in doing so, move away from the traditional format, which is so dependent upon thousands of cast members and huge spectacle,"



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although he does still need thousands of volunteers. "We want these ceremonies to be more intimate, theatrical and more emotionally engaging."

To accomplish this, Atkins says, "This has to be a Canadian Ceremony and it can only succeed if it's true to its time, place and people."

Atkins says, "Spectacle has to have purpose, some resonance and integrity. There is a story to be told and it has to remain true, while still being engaging and entertaining. In this case, it also has to be able to transmit its message without language or cultural barriers. Whether we achieve that or not will be judged by those who experience the ceremonies."

To get an idea of what should be included, Atkins began his planning with a series of cultural symposiums with representatives of the arts and cultural sectors from across Canada. "From this, the ideas, themes, narratives and concepts for the Opening Ceremony are being developed."

While he won't give any details — a big part of the spectacle is the surprise — he does say that the focus

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will be targeted. Atkins says, “It has always been clear that these are Canada’s games. That being said, the games are awarded to a city, not a country, so our mandate from the Organizing Committee is to start with Vancouver and the Mountain Community of Whistler, then to expand to B.C. and then to Canada. Outside of specific creative and technical challenges that I can’t reveal, the biggest challenge is meeting, and hopefully exceeding, the expectations of everyone involved.”

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While Atkins enjoys the luxury of working in one enclosed venue, Roberge is like Ginger Rogers to Atkins’ Fred Astaire. Astaire got all the attention, but Rogers had to do the same thing backwards in heels. Roberge was hired later, has a smaller budget (\$4.8-million compared to the \$38-million for the Olympics, plus access to Olympic infrastructure, back-of-house and technical support), can’t look

like he’s copying Atkins, and has to plan two ceremonies in two venues. The Paralympics will open in BC Place, but will hold the closing ceremony in the 8,000-person outdoor Whistler Olympic Celebration Plaza.

Roberge modestly says he and his team are committed to presenting unique themes and segments, “making these ceremonies a celebration the athletes will never forget.”

He says that just as the Paralympians “overcome great obstacles and achieve greatness, they inspire our team to overcome logistical challenges. Like with any large event, we will simply plan for the unique requirements of the Paralympians. We don’t see working with athletes with a disability as a challenge. Rather, we see the Paralympic Ceremonies as a unique opportunity to tell a very special story. Making the ceremonies physically and emotionally accessible is our goal.”

And while he was only awarded the contract 14 months before the Paralympics, Roberge says, “work has already begun for the Paralympic Opening and Closing. We are working closely with David Atkins’ team. We will obviously look for efficiencies as far as the technical components are concerned, but that being said, we are looking forward to presenting a unique Paralympic Ceremony with its own style.” Roberge is focused on using the “opportunity to continue to celebrate the paralympians in grand fashion. We will endeavour to make the Paralympic Opening and Closing Ceremonies celebrations of inclusion and participation.”

Like the rest of the world, we will have to tune in to see what these two planners won’t reveal before show time. 

## Calgary ’88 BEHIND-THE-SCENES

**While we respect the secrecy required to present the Olympic and Paralympic opening and closing ceremonies, we wanted to give readers a glimpse into the myriad issues and logistics involved in planning and presenting such spectacles. So we turned to Hugh Dunne, who was a producer for the 1988 Calgary Winter Games.**

**DUNNE, WHO IN A CAREER WITH CTV** produced and directed Olympic winter games coverage from Innsbruck, Lake Placid and Sarajevo, started working with the Calgary Olympic team in 1985.

Olympic events really require people skills. “We had 10,000 volunteers for sporting events, and 9,000 performers in the opening and closing ceremonies,” says Dunne. “There’s an enormous pile of people who want to contribute.” But before this army of volunteers got to the field, they had to rehearse, which meant breaking into smaller groups and meeting in secret at venues all over the city, then reuniting just days before the ceremony to rehearse in the full stadium.

In Calgary, opening ceremonies were staged at McMahon Stadium on the coldest

day anyone could remember. He chuckles, “Issues pop up, like how do we keep 9,000 performers warm in cold weather when they’re not on the field? And they all had to have costumes, they all had to be measured and sewn, so we had volunteers to do that.” If that wasn’t enough of a challenge, the organizers also had to provide costumes for the 60,000 people attending the ceremonies.

While he didn’t sleep much before the Games were over, Dunne is sanguine about it all now. “If you logically go about putting the different pieces together, it’s just a matter of getting a transportation system that can move all the people there at the right time and in the right order. We had the Canadian army working on that. And can



you imagine how many buses we needed to get 6,000 people there in the right order and all costumed and ready to go at the same time?”

The secret to making it happen? Dunne shrugs, “You start with an empty stadium and go forward.”

PHOTO: Masterfile

# Olympic Group Programmes

Even though the clock is ticking, there's still time to plan an Olympic programme.

**W**ith ten months to go before the Winter Games open in Vancouver, the good news is that it's not too late to arrange an Olympic programme. However, the longer you wait, the tighter your options, according to Mark Lewis, president of Jet Set Sports, the company the Vancouver Olympic Committee (VANOC) has entrusted as the official hospitality package sponsor.

Lewis, whose company has offices in New Jersey, Toronto and Vancouver, says "Jet Set provides an all-in solution; so we would provide not just the tickets, but the hotel room, meals, hospitality areas, host/hostess support and the local transportation in Vancouver. So we really provide a turn-key service for those kinds of business and groups looking to entertain VIP guests."

So, how big can a programme go, this late? "Fairly large still. Maybe they won't be able to attend the gold medal hockey game, but with the Olympics on for an 18-day period, we can still handle groups from a few couples to as large as 1,000 people."

And how late can you plan? Lewis laughs, "For the Beijing Games we had a company call us seven days after the Olympics started. So we're working right up to the Closing Ceremony. Obviously, as time goes by, the choices become more restricted, but the ideal time is right now, through August."

For those do-it-yourselfers, a second phase of ticket sales will take place in June. According to Jason Macnaughton, a media relations specialist with VANOC, "There will be a second phase, because we haven't finalized the venue configurations yet. We held back a contingency of 10 per cent for each venue, and once we have a better idea of what broadcast positions will be and seat kills and that kind of thing, then we'll be able to release the contingencies."


However, another potential avenue for accessing group ticket blocks is as Friends of the Games. These are available for companies which, while not investing in a full Games sponsorship, have a product or service VANOC could use.

The other challenges will be finding accommodations and transportation. According to Richard Yore, Tourism Vancouver's director of sales, meetings and conventions, the Olympic time frame (Feb. 12 to 28, 2010) is in a state of flux. "At present, a large block of hotel rooms is on hold by VANOC for their sponsors and IOC family. August is the date for the Olympic corporate sponsors to actually confirm to VANOC and pay for their required rooms in advance and then release any rooms back to VANOC."



While some groups are holding their breath, waiting to see if rooms are released, Vancouver-based Prime Strategies' president Jonathan Buchwald is less optimistic. "It depends on what the consumption of those rooms are. If people fully utilize their room blocks, there won't be any rooms." Buchwald says, "There is excess demand, compared to capacity. And therefore even if (a sponsor like) General Motors or Nortel doesn't use it, will VANOC have somebody who needs it? It is reasonably likely."

Part of that demand is accommodating 3,000 bus drivers coming to Vancouver to shuttle visitors, athletes and officials around. Buchwald says, "In many cases, nobody has booked rooms for them." So his team, seizing the opportunity, is now working to find accommodations for these and other Games support staff.

Shannon Cooper, CMP, senior operations manager at Vancouver-based TBA Global Canada, warns, "Local chartered transportation is very expensive and limited." With the failure of several local companies, planners have had to go outside Vancouver's Lower Mainland to secure enough buses for the Games — both across Canada and from the U.S. Cooper says, "We've been fortunate to secure the transportation we need for our clients, but others haven't. Some companies that thought they had transportation, now don't. And it's causing a bit of a panic." In late January, some properties, like the Four Seasons Whistler, still had small blocks of rooms available for the Games period. There has been less pressure on room blocks for groups looking at properties in Richmond, B.C., and in February, a company called New West Special Projects 2010 LP announced it was accepting reservations for the Norwegian Star cruise ship, which will be moored in North Vancouver, across the Lions Gate Bridge from Stanley Park, for the duration of the Games. Another option is to plan a programme around the Paralympics, March 12 to 21, 2010. Those tickets, which have yet to go on sale, have fewer bulk buy restrictions, cost less and provide an inspiring opportunity to build programmes around the perseverance of 1,500 top athletes who have overcome disabilities to compete in a premiere sporting event. 

# Beyond the Olympics

A post-Olympics Vancouver region will enjoy an extensive legacy of new and improved infrastructure.



There are three host communities for the Games. In spite of their name, the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games are actually being held and co-hosted by three communities: Vancouver, Whistler (see page 49) and Richmond.

## Dressed up Vancouver...

The biggest new investment in the city is the expansion of the harbourside Vancouver Convention Centre. The new, carbon-neutral expansion, opened in April, has a six-acre grass roof and offers over 223,000 sq. ft. of additional exhibition halls with dedicated loading bays, a stunning glass-walled 55,000-sq.-ft. ballroom capable of hosting 6,000 at a banquet (9,900 for a reception) and 52 additional meeting rooms. The original convention centre has 133,000 sq. ft. of space, including 91,000 sq. ft. of exhibition halls and a 16,600-sq.-ft. dividable ballroom and 20 breakout rooms.

Supporting the centre is a cluster of new and existing hotels. The refurbished 503-room Pan Pacific Hotel, which has 42,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, sits on top of the original convention centre. Across the street is the 489-room Fairmont Waterfront Hotel, and a new, \$200-million, 415-room Fairmont Pacific Rim. At the far end of the new expansion is the 438-room Renaissance Vancouver Hotel Harbourside.

Among the other notable developments on the Vancouver hotel scene is a complete, \$25-million refurbishment of the 372-room Four Seasons Hotel; the return of the St. Regis Hotel after an \$11-million, 14-month renovation of the 1913 property; completion of a \$24-million renovation of the Westin Bayshore; as well as several exciting new-builds: 77-room Loden Vancouver Hotel, 60-room L'Hermitage Hotel and the \$300-million Shangri-La complex, which includes a 119-room luxury hotel.

Cypress Mountain has spent \$40-million to improve facilities, which include the addition of a 48,000-sq.-ft. lodge. UBC has built the \$47.8-million Thunderbird Arena, available for hire, and the \$88-million Vancouver Olympic Paralympic Centre is a sporting and recreational facility which will be re-configured after the Games as a community centre.

## ...And Richmond

The city of Richmond is home to more than 180,000 people. It's an interesting option for groups, because it is off most people's radar. This community, with 4,500 bedrooms and 135,000 sq. ft. of meeting space, is ideally suited to active groups. For example,

**W**hile the world's attention is on Vancouver and the Lower BC Mainland for the Olympic and Paralympic Games, Richard Yore, director of group sales for Tourism Vancouver, says it's important to remember that these two events only occupy 25 days out of the 2010 calendar. After these games, this region will be left with a rich legacy of new and improved venues, transportation systems and accommodations.

Hosting the Games has proven to be a type of a pre-stimulus package that insulated the Lower Mainland against much of the economic roller coaster. Sue Roberts, managing director of Congress World Conferences Inc., who handles a dozen international association and medical meetings a year, says, "If you don't read the papers or watch the media, you wouldn't know there's economic trouble in parts of Vancouver. I was talking to a property management company in Whistler and they're suffering. We (in Vancouver) have not seen the downturn as badly. We're in a little bubble here at the moment because of the Olympics."

The bubble is due to the infrastructure developments and salaries, plus a steady supply of officials, athletes, spectators and media who have already booked 60,000 room nights attending the nine world cup competitions leading up to the Games. The tangible legacy of the Games could reach \$6-billion-plus in public spending on venues, infrastructure and facilities, like the \$880-million addition to the Vancouver Convention Centre, which will be the media centre for the Games. This is supplemented by another billion dollars in private-sector spending.

Naturally, with any large-scale public spending, there is a lot of negative news, but Jack Tillar, general manager of TBA Global Canada, thinks it's unfair. "We are so negative as a people. I don't know if it's been done, I haven't seen one, if someone would do an honest ROI on what the Olympics cost us and three years later, say, this is where we are," and factor in "all the people who worked building the infrastructure and the extra money we pumped into the economy, I believe Vancouver will do well."




The Fairmont Waterfront

Richmond has 80 km of cycling trails. Without leaving the community, visitors can see eagles and otters and go whale watching from the quaint little fishing port of Steveston, with streets lined by specialty shops, cafes and restaurants, a marina and a National Historic Site, the Gulf of Georgia Cannery, that is popular for receptions and dinners.

Richmond also offers the John MS Lecky UBC Boat House, a glass pavilion on the shore of the Fraser River, which can host 190, and the BC Federation of Sports' facilities' five fully-wired, light-filled meeting rooms.

The biggest addition to the community is the Richmond Olympic Oval, a \$178-million, green, multi-purpose sporting facility built to host the Olympic speed-skating competitions. The 343,000-sq.-ft. Oval has room for two NHL-sized ice surfaces at one end, plus space for eight basketball courts and a 200-metre running track and 8,000 spectators, plus restaurants, fitness facilities, clinics, meeting space and outdoor river-side event venues.

On the accommodation side, the hotel collection includes the 185-room Radisson Hotel Vancouver Airport, which has just undergone an \$8-million renovation. The 390-room Best Western, next to the Marriott, re-flags in May as a Sheraton. Since this property shares ownership with the Marriott, planners can work with both properties and have everything placed on one master account. Other Richmond properties include a 200-room Westin Hotel, opening in January, 2010; the 237-room Hilton Vancouver Airport; the 415-room Delta Vancouver Airport Hotel set on 7.5 acres of waterfront property which has 16,500 sq. ft. of conference space; and the 392-room Fairmont Vancouver Airport Hotel. 

— Allan Lynch is a New Minas, N.S.-based freelance writer.

## Games Give and Take

**PRIME STRATEGIES' PRESIDENT JONATHAN** Buchwald says he has lost staff to the Vancouver Olympic Organizing Committee, but the upside is, he's developed a new business division as a result of his Games experience.

"We've lost some staff," he says. "The Olympics create a sense that things are greener on the other side of the fence or that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for staff in their own backyard that they may want to pursue." Some did. "PRIME is working on Olympic business, but if somebody actually wants to work for the Games Organizing Committee themselves, I can't provide that. We've also lost a handful of people to other organizations, because it's become a very competitive marketplace and we have many of the best staff in Vancouver."

Is this short-sighted on the part of those who jumped ship? Buchwald says, "You're asking me to look into a crystal ball; I don't know. It depends on what the demand for

event services is once the Games are done. My counsel to my own staff is, if you want a long-term event career opportunity, stick with PRIME, we're going to work on the Games, and you'll have a job after the Games, whereas for the people who are going to what they believe are greener pastures, there are no guarantees."

The jumpers may become part of an itinerant worker force of Olympic 'gypsies' who follow the Games around the world or work on projects for national sporting federations or events like the Pan Am or Asian Games. Buchwald smiles, "It's like being the child of a diplomat, where you're constantly traveling around the world; for some that's enticing and for others, they consider it and say, 'I'd rather build my home and life in Vancouver.'"

For those who want to build their home in Vancouver, Buchwald has found a niche to exploit. "PRIME has consciously chosen to build a sports services division, with a view

to manage games opportunities. It's to establish our services based on the Vancouver Games, and to set it up as an event agency, which will be relevant to organizations on a year-in, year-out basis, no matter where the Games are. We're less inclined to worry about maximizing every opportunity, we want the right opportunities that we can grow with into London in 2012, into Sochi in 2014, and for other major sporting events, and as a result, we're looking to work directly with corporate sponsors, build those relationships and not only service their Game-time activities needs, but also work with them on an agency basis in core meeting and incentive and conference business as well" in the off-Games period.



PRIME Strategies' president Jonathan Buchwald