

A MAGIC MOMENT



Opening ceremonies come and go but there is no mingling in the mind. Each remains encapsulated in time and space. That evening in Albertville was a magical moment, charged with invigorating “waves”. A ceremony “a la francaise”, in which the imagination reigned supreme. A playful gift to the child in each one of the two thousand million television viewers.

Seated in this purpose-built twelve-sided theatre (part of which will be reused in Barcelona), as the 30,000 or so spectators filed calmly in, we suddenly found ourselves at the heart of the vast natural arena, framed by the surrounding peaks, stark against a breathtakingly blue sky. These were mountain Games! The air was dry and tingling. The day had been magnificent, and as the sun sank, violet-veiled, outlining the dramatic spectacle of the

landscape as if with a highlighter pen, its memory lingered.

The master of ceremonies, a lanky jumping jack with interminable coat-tails buoyed up by two balloons, and his English-speaking sidekick, struck at once a note of surprise with their carnivalesque rhyming couplets, far-fetched and fantastical, enveloping with a candyfloss of gentle fun-poking a protocol which sometimes

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seems to drag its feet a fraction. But let us not be hasty. After all, we also came to see the parade, to see these athletes, more and more of them each time, some already heroes, spirited to this place from every corner of the world to chase their hopes over snow and ice. The sixty-four delegations, each behind a smiling snowball bearing its name aloft, walked around the ring in the footsteps of the President of the Republic, who was welcomed, as prescribed, by the IOC President and the Co-presidents of COJO, with a tiny girl in Savoy dress, who was to treat us to a soaring Marseillaise a cappella that left its mark.

In these times of geopolitical upheaval, the new national groups were the surprise packages in the parade, which included some islands of elegance, although, in general, a fairly sporty look prevailed. Germany,



the one and only, in a fur collar, preceded the Austrians in their parkas. Bermuda wore bermudas, the British tricolour tracksuits and the Americans, greeted from the VIP stands by Vice President Dan Quayle, sported cowboy hats. Although the exuberance of Tomba “la bomba” was contained in the chic loden and black gloves and hat of the Italian team, he did not go unnoticed. There was applause too for the three Baltic Republics and Croatia and Slovenia, which had created their uniforms in the nick of time and held their banners high with pride. Albert of Monaco, the bobsledd-

ing prince, bore the red and white flag of his Principality, which marched behind the Moroccans in their tarbooshes and the Mexicans in their gaily striped ponchos. Long delegations like Canada and Switzerland were interspersed with small committees from black Africa and the West Indies. Under the Olympic flag, wearing a long grey-green coat, the athletes of the Unified Team displayed on one sleeve some still bashful national colours with, in their midst, an old-style jacket, scarcely concealed, still emblazoned with “СССР”. Finally, bringing up the rear amid thunderous ovations, the French marched in, suited in silver. And now we wait. The “ola” swells and falls, sweeping through the stands, heedless of rank, and seven times the VIPs too are carried along on a tidal wave of delight. No one is too old or too grand to join in the fun... And then come the speeches. Messrs Jean-Claude Killy and Michel Barnier, each in turn, the IOC President, who congratulates them in advance, and Mr François Mitterrand, who declares the Games open. The Olympic anthem attends the flag, which unfurls slowly in the still air. Everyone is awaiting the 5 597th bearer of the flame. It is... Michel Platini. The crowd is surprised, again. The man is a football mega-star, but the crowd hesitates. They are still waiting, it seems, for someone else. Then, taking a child by the hand, Platini leads him up the steps to

The IOC President and the COJO Co-Presidents, accompanied by a young girl from Savoy, welcome the President of the French Republic at the entrance to the Olympic Stadium.



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Skater pirouetting on a turntable.

the topmost rim of the stands. Above them, as the boy tenders the torch, the head of the huge metal lily becomes a mass of flames. The elegant cauldron designed, like the torch, by Philippe Stark, was to be found in replica at every Olympic venue. Choked with emotion, Surya Bonaly, the young French figure-skating hopeful, perched on a rostrum skilfully put together by proud craftsmen carpenters as we watched, struggled with stage-fright to take the athletes' oath.



Dreams emerge...

And then, as night blotted out the peaks, it was time for dreams to emerge. Europe swept across the stage with her shooting stars to the haunting sound of Brobdingnagian sackbuts on wheels, whose proportions would have dwarfed an alpenhorn as surely as an octuple bass a double. Prelude to a succession of improbable tableaux, the work of Philippe Decouflé, choreographer who can turn his hand to anything and a do-it-yourself genius, among whose shifting cartoon circus there moved a panoply of bubble-hatted wader-birds, dancers in jointed wooden dresses, drumming rabbits and whirligig statues, and trampolinists, all cockle shells and silver bells, straight out of the fairytales of the mind. Out of the depths of great shell-like cornucopias poured forth an endless army of dancers on silent skates. Tracing complex



doodles in their dance, schussing gently down rocking-horse hills, skating in stately procession or tracing a sinuous slalom as they move, they circle in geometric imitation of all the winter sports. Then, surprising us again, turning slowly atop revolving stands, silvery space-nymphs endlessly pirouette beneath the camera's searching stare, as the hundred eyes of an electronic Argus piece together their own particular vision of the whole. For the spectacle before us unfolds across the whole arena, swelling over the ground and upwards into the rafters, like the music which throbs in syncopated bursts from the recesses of giant walkie-talkies... And, above us against the star-studded vault of the sky, the jumper, suspended in flight, like fan-tailed



Icarus, his companion In space, inches downwards to the sound of percussionists hanging in c-lusters. lantern-clad, like Calder mobiles, from ethereal cranes.

And magic still, the star turn, puppets in sumptuous flnery who float, rising and falling like Cartesian divers in a mad-cap merry-go-round, catapulted slowly by elastic threads from which they dangle round a central mast. And then, sweeping back and forth across the stage, all the nations flags process en masse as skaters whisk them hither and thither, merging at last to form a round as the five rings hover, wildly twirling, above their heads. And, as all things must end at last, so the dancers drift away leaving us gazing wistfully at the stripy tail of the cartoon kangaroo. "The best way to be Olympic", as Jean-Claude Killy reminded us, quoting from Coubertin, "is to be joyful". Mission accomplished.

As we leave the theatre, still enthralled, to find once more the muddles of living, our minds meander still in the hothouse of this successor of images, an ethereal comedia del arte, full of enchantment. Magical indeed.



Hanging percussionists.

