

BEIJING'S GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

•2008 Summer Olympics Opening Ceremonies



by Sarah Rushton-Read

The opening ceremony of the 29th Olympiad in Beijing was perhaps the most extraordinary example of visual magic the world has ever seen. It was seven years in the planning, with full dress rehearsals for many of the complex scenes taking place well over a year prior to the event. At 8pm on 08/08/08 – a lucky number in Chinese culture – this devotion to perfection paid off. Whatever the politics, in performance, in sport, and behind the scenes, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was, indisputably, the greatest show on earth.

Centered around the theme of “Civilization and Harmony,” the Opening Ceremony featured costumes, sets, and overall production effects realized by the producer and artistic director Zhang Yimou, best known as the director of such films as *Raise the Red Lantern* and *House of Flying Daggers*. Yimou's aim: to convey the conception of harmony from an international perspective.

Leading-edge projection, lighting, and mobile sculpture technologies, along with an entertainment production stage and huge globe were integral parts of the technical production. These, along with extravagant firework displays, kept the 95,000-strong live audience – including more than 80 heads of state, innumerable international celebrities, and other VIPs – absolutely mesmerized.

In the months leading up to the event, technical specialists, designers, and engineers came from all over the world to prepare, install, operate, and program some of the most technically advanced entertainment systems available in the world today.

From the start, the stadium (the so-called “Bird's Nest”) was painted with light, color, movement, and imagery. The event morphed from epic scenes of mass choreography to intimate, emotional moments of individual performers. It opened with 2,008 fou drummers – the fou is an ancient Chinese percussion instrument made of pottery or bronzeware – set out in a vast grid, beating countdown to 8pm. Each drum, framed with an LED light, lit up when beaten. This effect transformed the stadium floor into a vast, pixelated display screen, parading numerous fade-in and scrolling effects of huge Arabic and Chinese numerals.

The countdown ended with the 29 pyro footsteps that appeared to march down Beijing city's central axis, culminating at the National Stadium and signifying the arrival of XXIX Olympiad. CGI fireworks images were used as if they were live, via HD video animation.

A meteor shower of fireworks fell into the Bird's Nest, echoed by an ethereal starfield of LEDs embedded into the whole of the stadium floor; the sequence concluded with the appearance of the Olympic ring logo at the center of the field. Twenty fairies – actually, representations of Buddhist spiritual beings – clad in LEDs, descended from the roof, appearing to magically peel the rings from the LED floor and lift them into the air. Each ring, 10m (33') in diameter, was comprised of an incredible 45,000 battery-powered white LEDs woven into a black net. This marked the beginning of the “Splendid Civilization” sequence – a visual celebration of 5,000 years of Chinese cultural achievement.

In the center of the field, a huge, Chinese-style scroll, 147m x 22m (482' x 72'), became the focus of the action. The surface of the scroll was an LED screen across which images could flow. As the screen unrolled, at its center was an 11m x 20m (36' x 65.5') sheet of paper on which 15



The 2008 Summer Olympics Opening Ceremonies at the “Bird's Nest”

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The Themed Entertainment Association's 15th Thea Awards

dancers drew the outline of a simple landscape with paint-soaked mittens. Throughout, a mesmerizing river of electronic images was displayed beneath. This sequence paid tribute to Chinese ink and wash art.


In the second segment of the show, the huge LED scrolls unrolled further, while performers in LED-lit costumes converged to form the shape of a dove, then broke away to form an even more impressive human sculpture of the Bird's Nest as, fittingly, the stadium filled with the sound of singing birds. At the same time, brightly colored images were projected onto the 600m (1,968.5') long screen around the stadium's upper rim.

Five thousand LEDs in the stadium floor, along with the huge LED screen, turned into a single

starfield. Three "astronauts" flew from the roof, the floor cracked open and a blinding shaft of light blasted from the hole. There then emerged a huge globe, on top of which Sarah Brightman and the Chinese singer Liu Huan sang, as 58 acrobats stood with arms outstretched on its nine latitudinal rings.

This impressive set piece was used to join the idea of the globe (one world) with an image of aspiration (one dream). The performance began with the globe internally lit as the music reached its climax, with projections of a slowly revolving Earth. Images then morphed into those of athletes, swimmers and silk dancers, vaulters and runners. A total of 2,008 performers moved onto the stage and, as Brightman and Huan sang the final verse, the lighting brightened, the acrobats

disappeared inside the globe, and each performer opened up an umbrella to reveal 2,008 smiling faces. At the same time, images of thousands more smiling faces were projected onto the rim screen of the stadium as fireworks exploded overhead.

As quickly as it appeared, the sphere vanished into the floor. Two hundred and five national teams paraded through the stadium, followed by the final torch bearer, Li Ning, a Chinese Olympic gold medalist. He appeared to run around the rim screen, high above the audience, as images of China unscrolled behind him. Flown from a winch car on a perimeter track mounted behind the fascia, he lit the taper to ultimately ignite the Olympic flame. 

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