

Culture wide open

A bold artistic triumph at the Paris 2024 Olympics opening ceremony

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Every four years, the world is treated to a grand spectacle of sports, where the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games transform arenas into immersive theatres. These large scale, mega productions showcase the host nation's artistic excellence, offering global audiences unique and memorable moments that blend cultural heritage with contemporary expression.

As a theatre director, I've always marvelled at the scale and ingenuity of these ceremonies. From the allegorical tableaux of Greek history in Athens 2004 to the stunning drummers of Beijing 2008, the James Bond and Spice Girls cameos of London 2012, Rio's Samba schools in 2016, and the poignant tributes of Tokyo 2020 to health care workers and fun representation of Olympic pictograms, each edition has left indelible images that remain crystallized in our collective memory.

The level of spectacle remains unparalleled with innovation driving both the reconstruction and deconstruction of cultural identity attached to the host country. My engagement as a distant TV viewer of Paris 2024 was on a different level. On this occasion I felt that I was not just a passive viewer of a spectacle in a distant stadium I never visited but was part of a broader narrative on a river and streets that resonated with my own.

Paris, a city with a deep cultural history and a platform for diverse and contrasting

contemporary expression, offered the perfect stage for an unprecedented artistic spectacle. The streets I walked a few months earlier and the historical sites I visited over the years became the stage that went beyond sheer entertainment. Of course, I was amused by the beheaded Marie-Antoinette accompanied by a heavy metal band and my romantic side sunk as tears rolled with the sight and sound of Celine Dione in the rain on the Tour Eiffel. Yet, this ceremony meant more to me. The artistic director's brief was on point – take the ceremony out of its traditional home and into spaces where emotional connections can be made through an Olympic creative journey along the Seine.

The playfulness, humour and irreverence inspired by the diversity of French culture, epitomised the same principles, which to my non-French perspective, embodied everything that is quintessentially French and was reflective of the values of the Republic. As each scene unfolded along the Seine, I felt that this ceremony was also mine – not as a Maltese or European citizen and surely not as an Olympic athlete – but as a curious human being connected with a global community. I connected with Thomas Jolly's artistic choices through their bold theatricality but above all, the invitation to see myself in a space I thought was exclusively reserved for nationhood, elite art, and sportsmanship.

I felt represented across the Seine through the freedom, diversity and inclusivity layered with verve, panache and brilliance. As the establishing shot of the long Bacchic table, headed by a DJ accompanied by drag queens hit my screen, I was elated. The scene – brimming with joy, freedom, and boldness – was a celebration of diversity and self-expression. Since the artistic choices did not sit comfortably with everyone, I could anticipate the backlash from conservative factions that would inevitably follow. And sure enough, within hours, the ceremony was denounced by religious figures and public figures like Donald Trump, who expressed their outrage at what they perceived as an insult or mockery.

In retrospect, the misinterpretation of in-your-face imagery of Bacchanalia was less of a naïve misinterpretation and more of an obsessive, self-centred reading of a conservative community that is aggressively triggered by the acknowledgement, visibility and celebration of minorities, especially queer culture. It reflected a deeper discomfort with artistic events that attempt to present new or different narratives, especially on this global scale. Rising conservative factions often react strongly to events that present a more progressive or diverse view of society, especially when those events challenge heteronormative or traditional ideals. The Paris opening ceremony did just that – it openly and unapologetically celebrated diversity, subverted stereotypes, and welcomed minority cultures into the Olympic spotlight.

US presidential candidate Donald Trump's called the scene a disgrace and asserted that should he be elected, then Los Angeles 2028, "won't be having a Last Supper". His

comments reflected a familiar pattern – conservatives reacting with hostility to what they saw as an affront to tradition and cultural values. The imagery of Bacchanalia, rather than being viewed as a joyful, inclusive expression of freedom, was framed by some as morally inappropriate. But the true issue went beyond the imagery itself. What was really being challenged was a conservative worldview that struggles to accept artistic representations of diversity and inclusivity.

While Trump's remarks were hardly surprising, they served as a stark reminder that some politicians see themselves as moral arbiters, believing they have the authority to shape society's values by interfering in artistic expression. While the backlash from conservative figures was loud, it was countered by the support from President Macron. Macron's defence of the artistic director in the wake of online harassment demonstrated the crucial role of political action and commitment in protecting and guaranteeing artistic freedom.

Paris 2024 redefined my perception of an Olympic ceremony. It was a daring, expansive celebration of art and culture that broke free from the confines of the stadium. The ceremony invited me and the rest of the world to see ourselves – whether through the playfulness of French history, the boldness of queer representation, or the universal themes of freedom and inclusivity. Its provocations were also a space for conversation on contentious cultural specificities.

This artistic triumph went beyond celebrating sports; it was a creative seismic shift expressed through a distinctly French lens. It transformed the centre of Paris into an open-air stage, blending the historical with the

contemporary. It challenged identity and historicity, it took incredible risk and pushed boundaries as a legacy for those who value diversity and inclusivity in global events.

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Let's not mistake at the fact that Macron is a firm defender of artistic freedom. Macron use the Olympics to smooth his image at international level, but the situation of culture and the arts in France isn't in a good state. What this ceremony showed is what France could look like, and could be (this beautiful place of freedom of expression and existence), but it is not the case today, particularly under Macron's presidency