



Sydney: An Unexpected Journey

By Dr Oh Jen Jen

My trip to this lovely city in April earlier this year was unlike my previous two visits. Having already checked off the sightseeing highlights, and with no well-timed conference to attend, this sojourn was arranged for only one reason: to catch Josh Groban in concert at the Sydney Opera House during his international tour.

The Australian autumn season felt like spring, with fine sunny weather hovering in the low 20s during the day, dipping to around 15 degrees Celsius at night. My hotel at Circular Quay offered easy access to Sydney Harbour and George Street – bustling areas swarming with locals and tourists alike.

Aside from the show and a bit of shopping, I had no formal itinerary. After a late Tuesday morning arrival, I took a leisurely post-lunch stroll to the Opera House to collect my tickets, and prepared for a quiet evening of rest.

Here was where social media – ie, Facebook – came in useful. An old friend based in Sydney alerted me about the world premiere of *Star Trek Into Darkness*, which was due to take place that very night at the George Street Event Cinema! Director J J Abrams and stars Chris Pine, Zachary Quinto and Karl Urban would walk the red carpet from 6 pm onwards.

I looked at my watch – it was 5 pm. After a hurried shower and quick stop at the concierge desk for directions, I practically sprinted to the venue, only to be told the

entrance was blocked off as all the available spots had been taken. Security helpfully directed us across the road, which afforded decent views.

Abrams was first to arrive, followed by Urban, Pine and Quinto. I found it interesting that they all came in separate cars, but it definitely added to the suspense and excitement! By the time the two leads, Pine and Quinto, emerged, the crowd was ecstatic and greeted them with loud screams, audible even from where I was standing. And this being my first brush with a Hollywood film premiere, it was a very memorable experience!

Abrams is tiny compared to the cast, and extremely personable. Happy to let the actors shine as reporters grabbed them for interviews, he made his rounds among the fans, chatting, signing autographs and posing for photos for an hour. I've been a huge fan of his since the beginning of his career (TV drama series *Felicity* and *Alias*), so seeing him in person was awesome! Urban (whose movie work in *Dredd* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy I love immensely) brought his family along, and towered over everybody. Pine was the most gregarious of the lot, beaming widely and hugging anyone who asked. Quinto, on the other hand, was obliging but remained slightly reserved.

The morning of Day 2 was spent shopping at George Street. On the way back to the hotel, we heard music drifting over from Martin Place, and chanced upon an Australian naval band practising for the Anzac Day celebration. We

Photos: Dr Oh Jen Jen and iStockphoto



were fortunate to arrive at the start of their set list, and were treated to 30 minutes of rousing military marches, mixed with swing classics and a moving rendition of *Waltzing Matilda*. The crowd was quiet and respectful, but also generous with their applause and cheers after each piece. A wonderful interlude indeed!

Josh Groban is the most punctual musician I have ever encountered. His show was scheduled to begin at 8 pm, but he appeared on stage two minutes early. On tour to promote his latest album, *All That Echoes*, his repertoire comprised mostly songs from this release, and he sang them flawlessly. I've

seen a few of his recent performances which had pitch issues on YouTube, but that night, his vocals were perfect – no easy feat considering the technical difficulty involved.

He also entertained us with lots of witty banter – Josh's self-deprecating brand of humour is legendary! At one point, he invited an audience member on stage to

sing *The Prayer* with him (she did an amazing job!), then ran up the aisle to the back of the concert hall to hand his drumstick to an ecstatic young lady. Unlike most major concert venues in Singapore, the Opera House did not enforce any restriction on cameras, so everyone snapped away for two hours, and there were quite a few people recording video clips as well.

I've been an ardent fan since Josh first guest-starred on *Ally McBeal* in 2001, and own all his albums and concert DVDs. After waiting 12 long years for him to come to Singapore, I finally decided to go to him instead, and have no regrets doing so. In addition to pieces from *All That Echoes*, Josh surprised us with four beautiful songs from his debut release, namely *Vincent (Starry, Starry Night)*, *Alla Luce del Sole*, *Alejate*, and *To Where You Are*. These songs also happen to be my personal favourites, and because I never expected to hear them in a live setting, I suddenly found myself overwhelmed with emotion.

To Where You Are is especially significant. As we recently marked the tenth anniversary of the SARS epidemic, I was reminded of the fiancée of a young doctor who passed away during the outbreak. She had shared with me how this song had brought her great comfort and helped her cope with the loss of someone she loved so dearly. Since then, I too have lost friends and relatives, but as the poignant lyrics remind us: "A breath away's not far/To where you are".

I made a beeline for the stage door after the show, but at least 200 fans were already there when I arrived. Josh alighted from his car to sign autographs for those nearest to him, but had to leave after ten minutes. Sadly, I didn't get a chance to meet him, but I hope an opportunity will present itself in the not-too-distant future!

Day 3 – 25 April – marked Anzac Day, which commemorates all Australians and New Zealanders who served and died in all wars, conflicts, and peacekeeping operations, and the contribution and suffering of all those who have served, although this day was originally named in honour of members of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) who fought at Gallipoli in the Ottoman Empire during WWI.

The highlight events in Sydney consisted of solemn



dawn services at 4.30 am, followed by marches by veterans from past wars, as well as current serving members of various military and uniformed service groups. George Street and adjacent major roads were barricaded for the marches, as massive crowds gathered for the grand parade.

Security forces were on high alert that morning, perhaps because of anxiety in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombings. But once the bands marched out and the music began, the mood visibly lightened. Once again, spectators demonstrated deep respect and appreciation, waving handheld flags and applauding whenever a new group passed by. I was especially impressed with the children, who remained silent and attentive beside their parents. I was also extremely moved by the older veterans, some of whom were in their 80s and 90s. They had probably served in WWII, which was equally devastating.

What I loved most, however, were the bagpipes. Appearing periodically in large groups, they added flair to the ceremonial proceedings, and elicited cheers when they launched into *Waltzing Matilda*. The other bands performed popular favourites, ranging from *Loch Lomond* to Johann Strauss' *Radetzky March*. I had a lot of fun playing Name That Tune!

Last on the itinerary was a trip to Manly. Just a 30-minute ferry ride from Sydney Harbour, the picturesque seaside town was crammed with people out enjoying the public holiday. I took a short walk from the ferry terminal to Manly Beach and passed countless shops and eateries, as well as Hotel Steyne's restaurant and bar, which was filled to capacity as locals watched rugby matches on large TV screens.

More revellers lounged along the coastline, sunbathing, having lunch and surfing. The weather was fabulous and the atmosphere peaceful despite the crowd. It was an idyllic scene which I found most difficult to leave behind!

After three short and exciting days, it was time to return home. Aside from the unusual events I was lucky enough to experience, I would like to thank the many Australians who made my stay such a happy one. Strangers offered directions just because they spotted me frowning at a map; drivers stopped to let me cross the street even

though it was their right of way; people always apologised if they accidentally bumped into others; men routinely opened doors for women; and even the ladies in the Opera House restrooms smiled and pointed out empty cubicles to those who were unaware. I think Singaporeans have much room for improvement in terms of graciousness!

I bade a reluctant farewell to Sydney, but will be sure to return soon. If you're interested in attending a show at the Opera House, you can check the event listing on their website <http://www.sydneyoperahouse.com> (buying tickets online is incredibly easy). They're staging *South Pacific* starting from September, so keep that in mind! **SMA**



Dr Oh Jen Jen is a consultant at the Department of Emergency Medicine, Singapore General Hospital. When not battling endless patient queues at the hospital, she spends way too much time in front of the TV. An avid blogger since 2002, she also hopes to write a screenplay or novel someday – if she manages to survive her three-monthly episodes of job burnout.

Photos

1. The iconic Sydney Opera House
2. The world premiere of *Star Trek Into Darkness*
3. Josh Groban was amazing on the piano
4. Josh's backup band
5. Skyline of Sydney at sunset
6. The grand Anzac Day parade
7. The Royal Australian Navy rehearsing for Anzac Day
8. Sun, sea and surf at Manly Beach

