



Magic moments in the Main Arena

Wonderful, wild and sometimes weird, the evening entertainment in the Main Arena has always been a spectacle.

It's a curious thing about human beings – that in every age there are always a few who, for largely unfathomable reasons, are prepared to go to ridiculous and mostly uncomfortable lengths to entertain the rest of us.

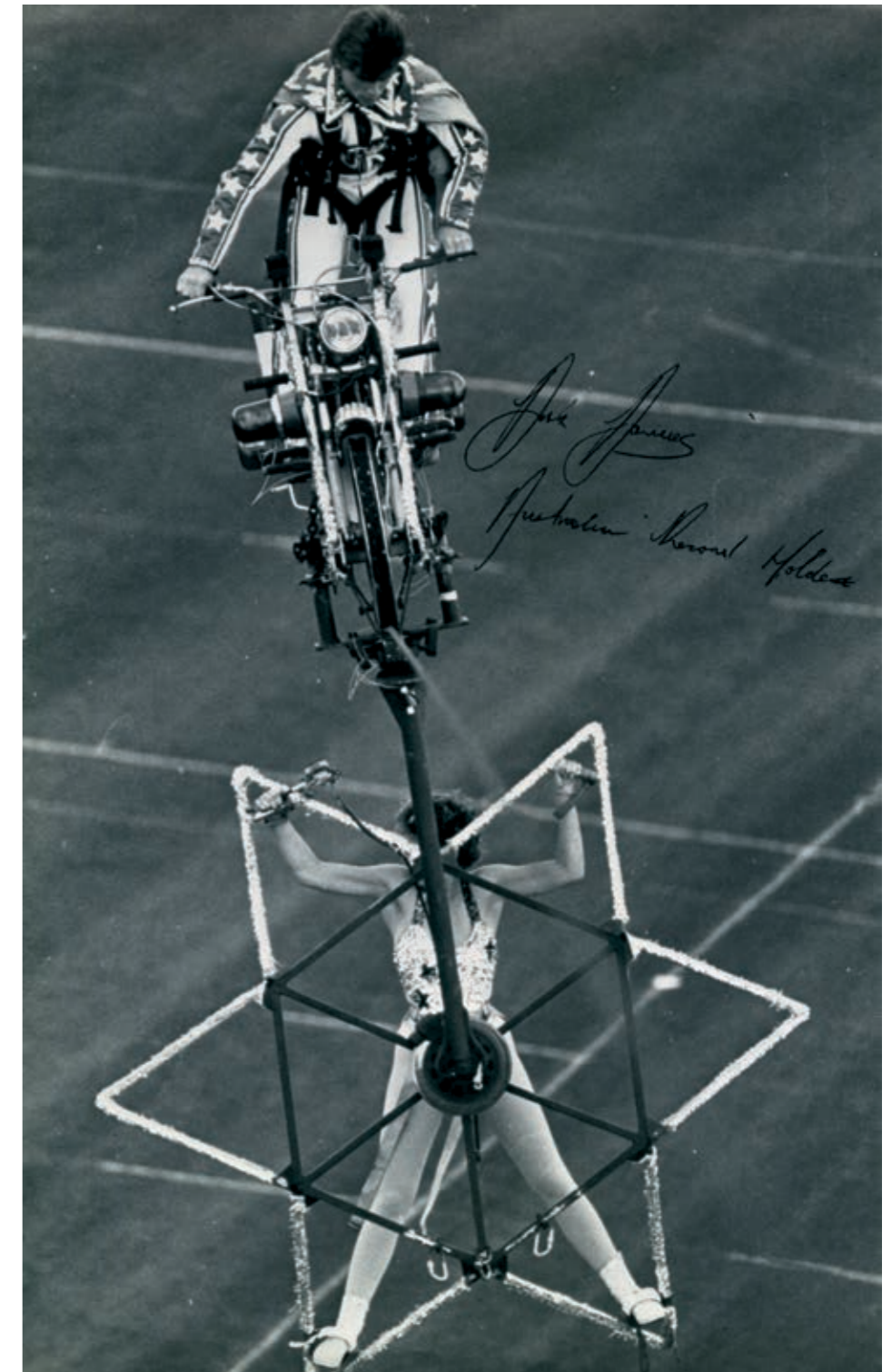
WORDS: VICKI HASTRICH

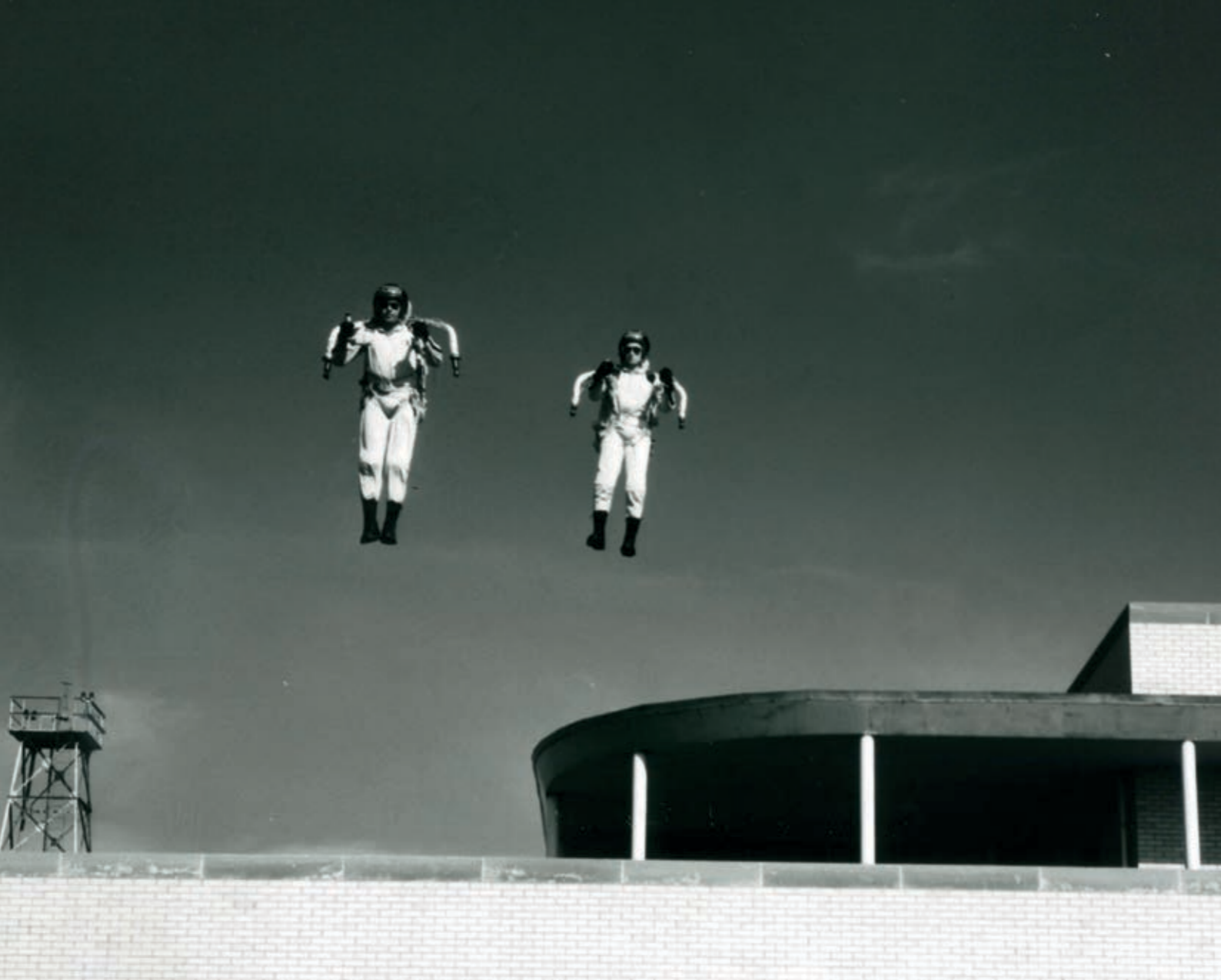
They've marched, they've dangled, they've blown themselves up, they've shot at each other, they've dived, they've flown and burst into flames, they've faked innumerable almost-crashes. The biggest was Robosaurus and one of the best by popular decree was 'The Man from Snowy River Spectacular'. The most bizarre was the human cannonball, which over the years has had many incarnations, and the most outrageous, well that was without a doubt, the Big Pretzel. And the first? That was in 1917. It had a bushranging theme which the crowd adored and so began a long tradition of dramatising Aussie skills and stories in the Main Arena. It's a tradition which proudly continues with this year's production, 'Australia In All Its Glory', an extravagant celebration of the national character.

Night time entertainment at the Show has excited and impressed successive generations of showgoers but none of it would be possible without a big supply of one very important element – electricity.

When the Council of the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS) first said "Let there be light" the effect was not, as on that other famous occasion, instantaneous. Work to electrify the Showground to improve lighting and allow for the first night sessions at the Show was delayed due to wartime constraints. When the switch was finally thrown at the Moore Park substation, the stage was lit for a smorgasbord of evening outdoor entertainment on a scale never before seen in Australia. Drenching the Main Arena were 70,000 units of candlepower. Newspaper reports reluctantly admitted this was not really enough for the horse jumping events in the middle, going so far as to use the word 'dangerous', a term that by today's safety standards, might be more accurately interpreted as 'completely and utterly terrifying for competitors, with a high probability of loss of life'. There was, however, plenty of light on the trotting track where the special entertainment mostly took place: chariot races, which were to become a favourite often seen over the years, and the big finale – a bushranger show called 'Wild Australia'.

Below: Stunt motorcycle rider Dar Davies in action at the 1989 Show
Opposite: A promotional Show poster of the Bell Rocketmen in 1965





During the show a homestead was attacked and a stage coach held up; apparently the looting of the luggage particularly pleased the huge crowd. The ensuing round-up of the gang by mounted police was punctuated with sensationally arranged falls from horses at full gallop.

Wild Australia it truly was. In one performance a horse bolted at the sound of pistol shots and cleared the fence in front of the Eastern Pavilion, jumping into the crowd on the lawn. People scattered in all directions and it seemed certain that someone would be killed, but quite miraculously there were no injuries. Though the horse had proved itself uncontrollable, the rider remounted, intending to rejoin the fray, until cries of protest from the crowd forced officials to instruct him to leave the ground.

Overall the entertainment was described as 'most realistic', and it needed to be considering that many in the audience may feasibly have witnessed the real thing; Ned Kelly had been hanged less than 40 years before and many older people had stories to tell of personal encounters with bushrangers. Especially in rural

communities, these experiences were still vivid in present memory.

At that first, illuminated night show, lessons were learnt which were to hold true for all time: it took many bodies, lots of colour and plenty of movement to fill that vast open space. For this reason military bands and other massed displays became popular, but it was the promise of tension that really appealed to audiences. This was best produced by tight competition, daredevil acts and a strong storyline – or better still, a combination of all three. Organisers soon learnt that certain acts, if updated, would work again and again.

Prior to World War II, trick riding in all its forms dominated arena shows and the importation of American Wild West performers proved immensely popular. Australia, like other parts of the world, had begun to go crazy for the USA and all things Hollywood.

After the war, technological advances made a whole new range of acts possible. In 1964 the space age hit town, embodied in the Bell Rocketmen who flew across the stadium with

jetpacks strapped to their backs. Later that decade the Flying Cosmonauts arrived. They were an American high-wire motorcycle act. Then came the home-grown stunt drivers like Lloyd Robertson whose precision car-driving teams performed for many decades under different sponsors.

One of many notable motorbike stuntmen was Dale Buggins. He was only 15 when he made his first appearance in 1977 jumping lines of cars Evil Knievel-style. Though he broke his arm on his first outing he continued to perform with it in plaster.

Local aerialists Dar Davies and the Flying Lotahs have been regulars, stunning audiences with their incredible high-wire, trapeze, sway pole and high-dive acts.

Making a publicity splash and getting the turnstiles clicking is the job of the feature attraction and every now and then that takes something really big and really new. Enter Robosaurus. Of course, along with the really big and really new comes major planning and logistical challenges.

Di Henry, the creative director behind this

year's Main Arena show, headed the 1994 team which brought Robosaurus out from the US for its debut. 'I am in dire straits!' she wrote to one of her contacts as she desperately cast around to supply its unusual demands. 'The Robosaurus monster needs to eat five cars a day x 12 days = 60 cars... Also I need a few extra for rehearsals just prior to the Show. Please help me Chris, you are my last chance!'

In every way the twelve metre tall robot was a big investment, so anything that could be begged or borrowed from sponsors was a godsend. The cars, which would be gripped in the creature's claw, then nibbled and tossed aside from a great height, had to be meticulously stripped of all glass, loose parts and fluids (petrol, transmission oil). Any broken glass left on the Arena would be hazardous for animals using it later.

But Di's troubles didn't end there. Where would she find a free supply of the 800 litres of propane gas needed to create the great tongues of flames which burst out of Robo's metal maw? On top of that, engineers had to test the track to make sure it could take the colossal weight of the contraption. Yes, was the verdict, but what would happen if it rained? It would – and famously did – get bogged.

Robosaurus caused headaches for everyone, including its driver who, harnessed into a control area inside the head, hung almost upside down whenever the creature tipped back its head to howl. Whatever hair-tearing it caused, Robo was worth it. It was so gigantic and so dramatic that families came in droves, earning its makers repeat invitations to the Show.

Robo proved the point that size does matter, however size was only part of the equation in one of the most infamous stories in Main Arena history. Occurring at the 1966 Show, the incident involved the Big Pretzel. The Big Pretzel was not, as one might think, an oversized, animated beer snack. It was the stage name of the then 19-year-old Sydney go-go dancer, Patricia Wordsworth.

Performing on a replica of a Mississippi showboat was a jazz band which needed a bit of pepping up; more visual impact. So the Big Pretzel and three other bikini-clad girls were engaged to climb aboard the showboat when it stopped in front of the grandstand and do their gyrating best. One evening as the blonde, beehived and beautifully curvaceous Big Pretzel mounted the ladder her brassiere popped off. Whether this garment glitch was entirely accidental is not known but the cheers of appreciation from the crowd were long and loud. By contrast, some of the folks in the Council Stand were mortified.

Later that year the Big Pretzel went to Vietnam

to entertain the troops and as recently as 2006 she appeared with Little Patty and others at a concert to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Long Tan.

Horse-centred acts and those with Australian themes have never gone away but as the 20th century closed there was a resurgence of nationalistic pride with Sydney hosting the Olympics and the country celebrating its centenary of federation. Our own stories and skills deserved to take centre stage and nowhere were they better showcased from a bush point of view than in 'The Man from Snowy River Spectacular' in the year 2000. Stories with dramatic lighting, music and hell-for-leather riding have continued to please recent crowds – just as they did nearly a century ago with that first harum-scarum stagecoach raid.

Stand and deliver. It's what entertainment in the Main Arena has always done. Switch on the lights and the people will come. ■

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Opposite: The Bell Rocketmen perform a promotional stunt in 1973
Below: Robosaurus at the 2010 Show

