

Chelsea Wrap Up

A brief impression of 'The Chelsea Experience' by designer Mark Browning

June 8, 2007

For more information:

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Nearly a year down the track from the beginning of the Chelsea journey, we flew out of Melbourne on May 4, I felt ready for it: the plans were finished, our three containers were waiting for us in London, and our team oozed commitment and competence.

In full construction uniform the majority of the team arrived in London 26 hours later. It was my third trip in the past 8 months and I was still finding myself in disbelief that I was there, living out a dream that few have lived. I could only imagine the excitement the younger guys from Kiama Landscapes were feeling. It was about to happen, and with the exception of Scott Wynd, none of us had a clue about the next three weeks in London.

In hindsight the sixteen days of construction were a bit of a time warp. Describing working from 7.00am through to 9.00pm in mud and rain and single digit temperatures doesn't conjure up much excitement, however I can honestly say at no time did I wish to be anywhere else. I think the boys from Kiama, the faithful Wes, Jack and Leanne from Fleming's, Chris and Timo from Lump Sculpture and Blair of Gardens at Night felt it too. It was not only the direct crew affected by this challenge to build the best garden possible, Anthony van Schaik from Bio Gro and Steve Potts from the NGIV were in it too. Building contacts of mine, David Pontifex and Dean Atkinson had also jumped on for the ride and brought with them skills that rest of us could but only sit back and admire.

Not only were we a team on site, but also in public. To begin with, the purple boots and pink uniforms were a little embarrassing, but within a week of the build up the whole team wore their gear with pride. Even in a city the size of London we were starting to become known as those wacky landscapers from Australia, national pride was upon us and it felt great.

The build up period washed over me like a tsunami, and as the imminent arrival of the show and masses bore down upon me I felt robbed of time; I had not wanted the fun and team spirit of building the garden to end. But time waits for no man, and before I knew it the judges had arrived and were about to assess our garden. On one hand I felt naked and cold and on show for all the world to scoff at, on the other I sat very comfortably in the garden I had designed for Chelsea, and especially proud of the

quality and workmanship now on display. I felt confident we were up for a prize, if for no other reason that each and every member of the team deserved one for their commitment to the project.

Media day came and went and I remember watching each and every crew member enjoying their obvious satisfaction with their respective roles in the garden we had all built. To me that was more important than meeting royalty or rubbing shoulders with celebrities. I reflected upon the past three weeks and realized how privileged I was; not only to be the designer of the Fleming's and Trailfinders Australian Garden, but also to have spent the past three weeks with a stunning bunch of people.

On Tuesday morning, May 22, our entire team assembled inside the London Gate entrance to the show. We had made a decision not to proceed onto our site until we knew if there was a medal awaiting us, but once the word was out that the medal was up we proceeded to our garden: Silver Gilt, the second top prize. What a huge relief and rush of pride I felt. Our garden was bold, unique and distinctly Australian, yet challenged traditional Chelsea values, having been described by the Daily Telegraph as '... over architectural on plan but could garner gold (or better) for fearless use of trees and shrubs over flowers'. Water Gardener magazine summed up the garden: 'Dramatic features seem challenging at first, but like rock music that grabs you by the ears, this grabs the eyeballs'.

I still feel incredibly honoured (and somewhat humbled) that a team of more than 20 highly skilled tradesmen and technicians worked like slaves on my dream. I could go on for hours outlining my appreciation to and each and every member of the team, rather than that I will conclude by saying that the past twelve months culminating with the past month has been the most satisfying year of my life and has reinforced the goodness of people in my mind. I hope everyone involved in the process looks back on it with as much honour as I do. For me, the Chelsea Flower Show is not so much about horticulture and landscaping, it is a journey into personal growth and team philosophy and I will always cherish the memory of Chelsea and the faith placed in me by Wes Fleming.

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