

WATCHING THE WORLD WATCH THE CLOCK

By Debra Merinchuk

Watching the television coverage of the New Year coming in around the world was as frustrating as it was intriguing and even moving.

Having recently left the television business after years working behind the scenes on just such extravaganzas, I found myself looking forward to being the viewer for a change.

It was December 31, 1999, and I was working at my new job, on my computer, comfortably at home. My deadline wasn't until after the New Year's break, so I felt I could afford to work more slowly and keep my eye on the television coverage, hyped to be over 24 hours long as it followed the midnight hour travelling across the world's time zones. Ever eager to hear unfamiliar languages and see unfamiliar peoples, I was looking forward to a multicultural feast. By the time I joined in, the New Year had already passed the easternmost part of the world and I was seeing daylight celebrations from Sydney. A lone saxophonist with very long hair (I couldn't tell if it was a man or woman and yes, I was curious) stood on one of the peaks of the Sydney Opera House, playing a mournful sound. Long, slow camera

pans allowed me time to enjoy the music, and consider the vistas. I didn't recognize the location right away, and what I was seeing reminded me very strongly of a music festival in St. John's Harbour in Newfoundland, where musicians had tried all kinds of interesting ways of creating harmonies using features of the natural landscape.

As I watched, a children's choir added their voices to the music and I became aware of a low-pitched drone. The camera then showed me, on another peak, a musician blowing a long type of aboriginal horn. I loved the sounds they were making but I wondered what the people actually present were hearing. On television, there was a pleasing and perfectly appropriate mix of the different instruments and voices, but I imagined that if I were standing in front of the Sydney Opera House watching, I would perhaps hear a faint saxophone, I might not hear the long horn at all, and the children's voices, if I were standing right in front of them, I would probably hear the loudest. Or maybe all I would hear is wind and waves with a far-off buzz, like being on a bus and hearing someone else's too-loud Walkman. I wondered if the composer had been happy, writing his or her piece specifically for broadcast or if they meant for this piece to be performed in some other way and it was the television people who required the dramatic positioning of the musicians on the peaks of the opera house for the best pictures. I wondered how the conductor, the choir, the saxophonist and the horn player communicated with each other, for surely they couldn't hear each other. How did they know when to start and stop and whether they were in time together? And when I saw the saxophonist's fingers not moving in time with the sax notes I could hear, I began wondering about pre-

recorded tapes and who was actually playing and whether, if this whole thing was staged just for television, it mattered. Was it what the composer really wanted to say?

Announcers came on to tell me what was happening and I realized I was watching the French language Radio-Canada so I switched over to the English CBC. Instead of the haunting sounds and magnificent vistas, I found a bright, blonde reporter bundled up in her woollies out in the snow, merrily explaining some quaint custom of a northern people. “Miss Fliptop”, as a producer I worked with used to call these young, pretty and possibly talented reporter/journalists of whom there seems to be an endless supply, was earnestly warning me to stay tuned for more important revelations but disgusted, I flipped back to the French station. I had been promised I would “Be There!” in all the celebrations in all the different countries at the crucial hour. The various promos and advertisements lured me into watching with promises of exotic locales and native celebrations and that’s what I wanted to see. I did not wish to be educated or enlightened by a team of researchers, camerapeople and producers who had done their travelling in the past month, gathered scenic shots and location interviews and then returned to pre-package these insights with Miss Fliptop, ready for digesting on the big day. I wanted to experience the magic of instant telecommunications. I wanted to see for myself what it was like around the world, *right now*. I didn’t want it explained, mediated, translated, packaged or highlighted. I wanted to see. So back to Radio-Canada.

As the day went on, I did get a lovely sense of the movement of the sun. As

midnight passed through China, Egypt, Austria, the day was dawning in Tonga and Hawaii. And instead of the remarkably similar big nighttime shows with lasers, projection screens, smoke and loud, pulsing music, here there were long shots of a rosy sun over the sea, sandy beaches, or barren, wind-swept mountains. The morning celebrations seemed heavy with meaning. A Japanese couple made their wedding vows in an ancient, traditional ceremony, a longhaired ascete in flowing robes played his stringed instrument on a mountaintop. Here, I began to think, here is something important for me to understand, although I wasn't sure what, but intrigued, I kept watching. I enjoyed one troupe of strikingly painted performers on a sandy beach, portraying all kinds of animals awakening to the new day. I gasped in astonishment when an unpainted performer, Man, stood up, stretched and then pulled Woman to her feet. They hugged, the camera pulled back to reveal the joyous dancing of the animals with the human couple hugging in the middle. I gasped because the couple was in absolutely perfect alignment, directly in front of the rising sun. The picture seemed so full of implications, and so amazingly fluidly achieved, that of course I wanted to absorb it and wonder. But to my utter shock the camera cut away almost before the instant of the alignment. I gasped again, but this time in anger at being robbed of the pleasure of that moment. I am sure that a producer, cameraman, choreographer and maybe a few others got up in the middle of the night and went down to that cold beach before dawn so they could plan exactly how to position their people and equipment to get that perfect alignment with the sun. They probably did that a few times. I couldn't begin to imagine how the choreographer and floor director would put marks in the sand so the dancers knew

where to be. And how the script assistant, director and camerapeople timed the movement of the camera, the cuts by the switcher and the positions of the dancers to end up with that glorious moment of fulfillment. And to have seen it work for a fraction of a second before my eyes were hit by a bunch of other shots, before my brain had digested what had happened... I was furious! Which television director, drunk on the adrenaline of being on air, shouted "Take 3" to the switcher, snapping his or her fingers to an inner rhythm, oblivious of the impact of the images? Which co-ordinating producer had yelled to which director "Okay, okay, we've seen that. What's next?" Which sponsor had warned which marketing executive "Cut the boring stuff and make sure there's lots of time for my big box office stars."?

Between my eyes and the reality I knew was at the other end of a camera lens there seemed to be a whole bunch of powerful people getting in the way.

I was angry enough to turn off the TV. I tried instead firing up my Internet connection. Maybe I could get what I was searching for from some of those live web cams, tiny cameras permanently transmitting images to the Internet from all kinds of places around the world. But that didn't work. I spent most of the time searching for a likely link and then waiting for these complex web pages to load. By the time an image finally appeared, I was looking at particularly empty parts of a city, or scenes from 5 hours earlier. So back to the television.

I became accustomed to the pacing and grew to anticipate when the location would change. A few minutes observing the crowds in Moscow's Red Square before the fairy tale-like image of St. Basil's Cathedral and I was ready to

switch to Tallinn to see long lines of hooded people carrying tall crosses, snaking up a snowy hillside. After puzzling over the intense feelings of medieval sombreness and present day cold temperatures (you could see foggy breaths of those silently marching past) I was ready to be transported to Vienna, as costumed musicians and dancers celebrated the waltz. Even with the constant cutting of image to image, the flash of fire exploding across an animated globe with wordless choir voices signalling a location change, I felt an immense and inevitable motion. Seeing the midnight celebrations in the cold blackness of one country and then seeing a majestic dawn appearing in another, I became aware of the motion of the earth in the heavens, the phenomenon of light following dark, which has nothing to do with the scurrying busy-ness of human beings. And seeing it happen over and over, as the earth rotated through the time zones, ah, that was worth the frustrations of the short bursts of images interrupted, inevitably, by commercials.

I grew used to jumping between daylight celebrations and nighttime shows, happy with the feeling of travel and hoping to see something truly different. And yet, when I did I wasn't prepared. Suddenly looking at the backs of a number of suited gentlemen and a few women greeting each other, I thought I'd stumbled onto a news report and I checked to see if I'd accidentally switched channels. But as I recognized Nelson Mandela, and I became aware of jail bars in the background, I was rivetted. Was he really doing what it looked like, visiting the scene of his 25-year incarceration? Surely not. In disbelief, I watched as a line of male dancers, led by one particularly cheerful fellow, began performing in a hallway lined with jail cells,

rhythmically hitting floors and bars with sticks. The confusion of the smiling, reuniting people had sorted itself into a solemn line that followed the dancers down the hallway. It was true, I thought to myself, horrified. Nelson Mandela and his cellmates were revisiting not only the prison, but the actual cells of their internment. A woman sailed majestically past the camera as Mandela turned into a cell. Tears formed in my eyes as I raged inwardly. How could they? How could they ask him to do this? How dare they turn his captivity into some kind of performance? I searched Mandela's face for a clue as to what he was feeling but he retained that same gentle expression he seems always to wear. He did what I assumed he was asked. He walked into his cell, lit a thick, white candle and then took it away with him as he walked out. I thought about South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and how I believed it to be an extremely difficult but good way of dealing with things. And yet watching Mandela in this prison, I could not believe, had I been in his shoes, that I would be capable of this gesture. I felt torn, ashamed of my feelings of anger and yet still angry.

As Mandela rejoined the head party, he gave his candle to a leader who, in turn, presented it to a child standing nearby. Aghast, I wondered, do they really mean to symbolize that someday this child too, will be imprisoned for his beliefs and he mustn't be afraid of his destiny? I hoped, rather, they meant the future is built on the past but is not compelled to repeat it. But no amount of calm, explanatory voice-over from the remote announcers could rob this disturbing scene of its complexity. With new humility I realized that for all my good intentions, there are still things in this

global village that I cannot comprehend.

On the other hand, I enjoyed recognizing similarities. I saw my own fascination with fire mirrored in how each country marked this grand occasion. Displays of fireworks graced each locale, often along with torches and candles. And while there were differences, certainly, Bethlehem's releasing of doves and Mexico's parading of skeletons and ghoulish representations of ancestors for example, it was startling to see how many countries loved the typical big stage show, with top singers, lasers and huge projection screens (ensuring that those actually present wouldn't miss the sense of watching television!). From Finland's gaudy stage show recapping top pop songs throughout the century, to Jean-Michel Jarre's sound and light show in front of Egypt's pyramids, from London's big name concerts both outside and inside an extravagant, newly-built millenium hall to Japan's singing stars, the world seemed to agree, no matter what the culture, on what it takes to put on a lavish spectacle.

And yet, what moved me the most were the glimpses of real people, caught haphazardly by the constantly moving cameras and seemingly ignored by those in control of the various processes. **Midnight in Moscow, Red Square.** A trio of hatted and mittened older people, oblivious to the crush around them, produce glasses like magic and successfully force frozen fingers to open the bottle of champagne they'd kept intact. **London, England.** The Queen, her eyes unusually bright and intense, keeps reaching for the burning torch she is to use to set on fire a huge flame out in the middle of the Thames. She drops her hand as the facilitator continues

explaining and talking. She nods, reaching eagerly again and again but is forced to wait, as a child is made to listen to adult lectures about gratitude and politeness when a new toy is just out of reach. When finally, she is allowed to grasp the torch and light the remote control, the facilitator will not let her have total control, but keeps a guiding hand moving the torch in the right direction. Gradually, I am filled with a sense of panic. Whatever is supposed to happen isn't. The Queen herself finally breaks her mesmerizing focus on the flame to make a low-voiced comment and after a few more nervous moments, the facilitator's other hand reaches discreetly around the box to press the backup button which does the job the torch failed to do.

Cairo, Egypt. The drummer, who has been happily hitting a variety of electronic and real drums in a remarkably tight enclosure for what seems like hours, holds up a tiny cup and nods to someone offstage in gratitude for the drink while the lights, smoke and sounds of the performance continue to swirl around him.

Each time a countdown to midnight happened, in English or German or Danish or Chinese, each time the crowds shouted their joy at the long anticipated moment having arrived, I found myself near tears, choked by the unbearable sense of universal human longing for something special, some bit of magic to make all these elaborate preparations meaningful, some hope that life would be different afterwards. And each time the moment passed, as all moments pass, and the realization hits that for me, sitting in my living room in a country cottage, nothing has changed from a minute ago to now. And for all those millions of people involved in all those intricate events and complex rituals, nothing has changed for them either

as the clock shows 12:01, 12:02, 12:03...

For those of us watching television, however, that uncomfortable truth is covered over as the cameras chase the clock to the next time zone. There's always another party just over the horizon. But I'm becoming aware, as I wait for midnight to cross the Atlantic Ocean and arrive in my country, that people over on the other continent must be growing uncomfortable. They must be becoming aware they've been standing around in the cold for an awfully long time. Maybe they have to go to the bathroom. Maybe they have to fight the crowds they're a part of to find their cars and begin the long drive home. **The Bolshoi Theatre banquet, Moscow.** People are standing around a little aimlessly now, lots of empty tables littered with dirty plates, lipstick-smearred cups. I watch a number of women in white blouses, black A-line skirts and sensible shoes still moving purposely through the hall carrying water pitchers and coffee carafes and I think of my Ukrainian grandmother who wore exactly the same things 50 years ago when she, too, waited tables. A father, or perhaps grandfather, noticing the camera looking for a subject, halfheartedly pulls the little girl he is escorting back to the table into a little dance but she is tired, and more interested in something happening off camera. He, too, seems to be thinking about getting her home before she gets cranky.

Helsinki, Finland. Midnight has come and gone, and the big stage show continues, more music, more lights, more of everything. But now there is a sense of the crowd splitting. Some people seem to be looking for each other, sending signals about finding coats and purses, boots and keys and getting ready to go,

while others seem to be focussed on keeping partying no matter what, defying the coming of the day.

Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. A bass player, standing off in the wings but still visible to the crowds, is patiently waiting, looking down at his toes, while a solo guitarist is entertaining. I imagine him worrying about his bills, working out whether, with the overtime he's making tonight, he can afford the unscheduled car repair he's been forced to look after.

I begin thinking about all these camera crews and I remember the weariness that hits, after the production has ended, the lights are turned off and you're looking at the mountain of gear it takes to put on a show. The miles and miles of cable that have to be coiled away, the lights that have to be dismantled, the sets struck, the paperwork that has to be completed before anyone can think of joining their own friends and families to toast the New Year.

But before I can become totally overwhelmed, it's midnight on the Canadian East Coast. Somehow, I find myself attracted to the smaller and more personal. I feel a certain mild anticipation as midnight approaches me, in my own time zone. I go about unplugging my computers and various electronics, just in case some kind of Y2K power surge hits here out in the country, although all around the world things have gone off without a hitch. I keep one television plugged in however, and find myself astonished at the number of older faces I see standing patiently outside in those frigid temperatures. Underneath the hats and behind the spectacles, I watch bewildered faces, gamely putting up with the jostling, but intent on looking for

something, something that can happen only by being there, by being part of that crowd at that particular moment.

And after yet another burst of fireworks, I finally turn from the international coverage to a local television station. I find I want to know what's happening right around me. I watch the coverage from Barrie and I am forcibly brought home. No more the glitz and glamour of huge stage shows. Now, I'm watching breathlessly amateur interviews with musicians who are playing small, crowded, local pubs and are, is it possible? a little tipsy? There's a whole celebration organized for 10 o'clock just for kids, so they can have the grown-up satisfaction of counting down to the top of the hour and shrieking their delight before being bundled off home for a reasonable bedtime and so that their parents can get back for the real midnight. Toqued and ski-jacketed people are winding through a maze built of snow while the local mayor thanks local businesses for their support in creating this event. Outdoor lights flood a skating rink, toboggans go by and people mingle, holding steaming cups of cocoa. And as midnight approaches, with local celebrities encouraging everyone to come out to see the fireworks, I finally turn the television off.

The lights on the Christmas tree give the room a subdued glow. The furnace rumbles on. The cats, curled up together on the couch, open their eyes at the sudden quiet but quickly go back to sleep. I go stand outside and smell the brisk, clean air.

Here in the country, miles north of Toronto, it's startlingly quiet, after being tuned in to all the noisy celebrations of cities around the world. There's snow on the

ground but the quiet isn't that kind of muffledness you get with a big snowfall. It's the complex quiet of some animals resting while some stalk, of far-away water being heard effortlessly, of the wind promising change.

Midnight passes. There's not even a flicker in the Christmas lights. Far off, I can hear faint booms of fireworks. But basically, the quiet goes on. Nature continues its own mysterious cycles with a benign acceptance of whatever frantic *folies* humankind chooses to mark the passing of another night, another day. Remembering the pictures of dawn approaching inexorably after midnight in Far Eastern countries, I return inside and think about the coming morning.

Tantalizingly, I feel there was something important that I didn't quite understand in the day's events, something about human beings being the same and yet different, about time, about magic. And now that midnight has passed me and is on its way to Manitoba, I've lost interest. Matter of factly, I begin my usual pre-bedtime routines of closing lights, turning down the furnace, brushing my teeth. And I'm vaguely disappointed. Somehow, I didn't get it. Somehow, there was a unique opportunity for understanding something and I missed it. And now, five minutes past midnight, whatever it was doesn't even seem important any longer. Whatever that something was, it was linked in some very basic way with the actual moments of counting to 12, in sync with my neighbours, here and around the world. And despite the most intense efforts of trying to understand, the magic of it eludes me still.

Maybe next year.
