

LIGHTS MUSIC TATTOO

15 200 850 100

The 15 who make the show flow seamlessly include musical directors, assistant directors, arena masters, curtain pullers and stage crew.

The \$2 million worth of lighting equipment includes 200 computer-controlled light fixtures that move and change colors.

The 850 performers make up the 21 groups representing six nations and all branches of the U.S. military.

It all adds up to a hundred-minute show with no intermission.

SCOPE IS DARK. Military music begins to blare. Nine huge video screens - 15 by 20 feet - light up around the Norfolk arena. "That's my cue. I'll be on the radio saying, 'Send them. Send them,'" says Scott Jackson, producer/director of the Virginia International Tattoo. It's time to get the drummers, color guards, rifle team and flags out onto the floor. All 325 of them.

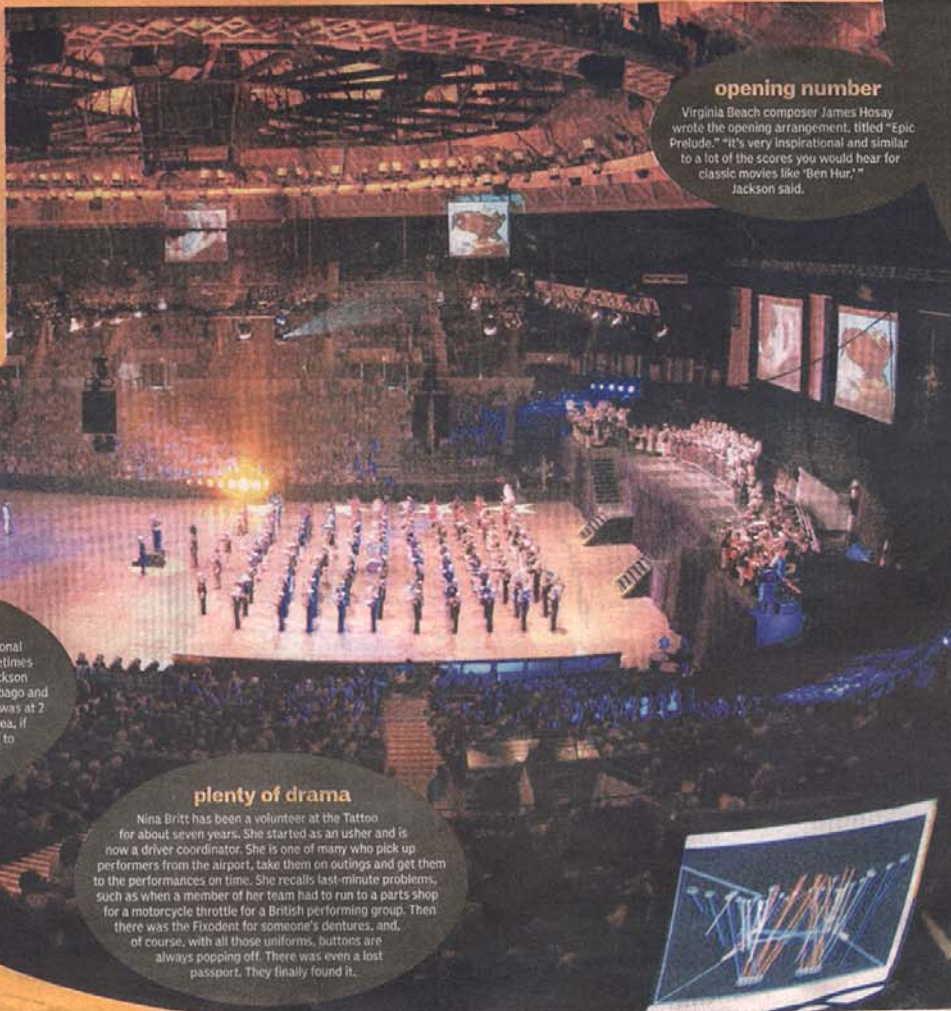
Jackson is perched high in the press box with his lighting crew and an announcer. His radio headset is his link with his team - arena masters, assistant directors and others - scattered around the coliseum.

Waiting in the wings are the 120 performers making up the massed pipes and drums. "We try very hard to make it absolutely seamless," Jackson says. It's a military-themed event that must be pulled off with military precision.

After a week of intense rehearsals, Jackson says, "By the time we are to opening night, really my job is just to get it started, and it should run itself."

The Virginia Arts Festival's signature event kicks off Friday, featuring 850 performers in military bands, precision drill teams, color guards, gymnastic routines and Highland dancers.

By ROY A. BAHLIS | *The Virginian-Pilot*



opening number

Virginia Beach composer James Hosay wrote the opening arrangement, titled "Epic Prelude." "It's very inspirational and similar to a lot of the scores you would hear for classic movies like 'Ben Hur,'" Jackson said.

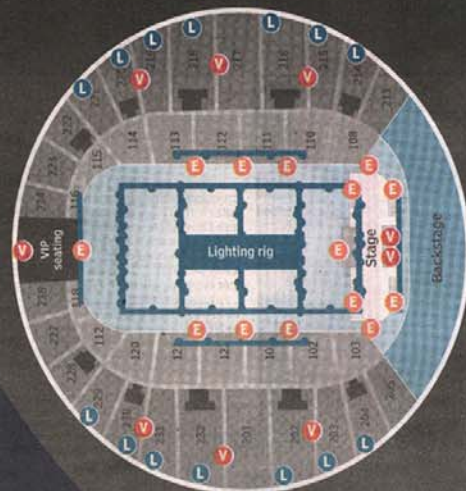
see you then?

The language barrier among the international performers is not really a problem, but sometimes the cultural differences can get in the way, Jackson says. "In 2007 we had a group from Trinidad Tobago and also Korea. With Trinidad Tobago, if rehearsal was at 2 they came at 3. And with the group from Korea, if rehearsal was 2, then at 2:01 they wanted to know why we were a minute late."

plenty of drama

Nina Britt has been a volunteer at the Tattoo for about seven years. She started as an usher and is now a driver coordinator. She is one of many who pick up performers from the airport, take them on outings and get them to the performances on time. She recalls last-minute problems, such as when a member of her team had to run to a parts shop for a motorcycle throttle for a British performing group. Then there was the Fixodent for someone's dentures, and, of course, with all those uniforms, buttons are always popping off. There was even a lost passport. They finally found it.

WIN TICKETS! Pulse and the Virginia Arts Festival are giving away a family four-pack of tickets to the Virginia International Tattoo at 2:30 p.m. Sunday at Norfolk's Scope. For a chance to win, call (757) 446-2506 or e-mail daily.break@pilotonline.com by noon Friday. Tell us what "tattoo" means regarding this event, and leave a name and daytime phone number. We'll pick a winner at random from those who give the correct answer.



the scope arena layout

- V 15-by-20-foot video screen
- E Stage entrance/exit
- L Spotlight

what's going on backstage?

Volunteer Nina Britt said the hundreds of performers waiting backstage sometimes joke with each other and interact, and they also practice their routines and music, play cards, read books or even do homework. "One moment it's like craziness, because everyone is doing their own thing. Dancers may be practicing, motorcycles may be revving up to go out there, but as soon as they hear that opening music, it just gets quiet."

the view from the director's seat

Scott Jackson and his crew use baseball bats to keep the Tattoo a constant flow of performers. When a band or group is performing on the floor, they refer to the next group as being on deck and the group after it as being in the hole.

Virginia Arts Festival

What Virginia International Tattoo

When 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2:30 p.m. Sunday

Where Scope, 201 E. Brambleton Ave., Norfolk

Tickets \$20-\$100, (800) 982-2787, www.vafest.org

What does this have to do with my "I ♥ mom" tattoo?

Um, nothing. The term "tattoo" in this case dates to 17th century Europe and the Dutch phrase "Doe den tap toe!" or "Turn off the taps!" Officers shouted this into lino to signal soldiers to return to barracks. "Tap toe" sounded like "tattoo," and that call to arms evolved to refer to a ceremonial performance of patriotic military music, massed bands and civilian entertainment.



GRAPHIC: KEVIN MULLIGAN | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT. PHOTO: COURTESY OF VIRGINIA ARTS FESTIVAL