

A funny thing  
happened on the  
way to a conference  
– and other stories

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# Opening ceremonies – a necessary evil?

BY VALERIE J LUND

**W**ell, you've finally made it. You can begin 'networking', sorting out your talks, getting orientated at yet another conference centre, hopefully not a million miles from your hotel. What happens next is open to chance, organisational efficiency and national foibles. Apart from David having a near-death experience when a large rococo mirror in the hotel fell off the wall, knocking him unconscious for a short while, one meeting in Italy many years ago was also notable for the small number of people in the audience at any of the scientific sessions, where they were often outnumbered by the half dozen speakers on any of the panels. However, at all of the social events, at least 6000 'participants' materialised and the town ground to a halt as fleets of buses conveyed the merry throng to one 'networking' event after another. A personal golden rule is never to go to a congress event without the means of independent escape. Otherwise, you may be there for many hours waiting for the next coach. Or if all else fails, always make sure you are on the first coach back.

It has been my observation in life that most things go on at least 20 minutes too long. This is often the case with opening ceremonies of medical meetings the world over, which frequently extend for an hour or more longer than necessary. During

my career, if I add together all this time, I conservatively estimate that I have sat for over 15 days as a captive audience at these well-meaning attempts to kick-start a conference. These involve the obligatory speeches from the vice provost of the university, the local mayor, all senior members of the organisation followed by a string quartet / children's choir / bell ringing and some obscure presentations by elderly luminaries of the profession, still just capable of independent movement to get them on stage. These memories have largely faded but one or two have been memorable in their testing of one's tolerance of the truly awful, hysterical or lunatic.

The decision to relocate the European Federation of Otorhinolaryngological Societies (EUFOS) meeting in Rhodes largely came about as the conference centre in Kos, the original venue choice, had not actually been built. It was perhaps a surprise, therefore, that the first 40 minutes of the opening ceremony was a tourist film about Kos which we would not be seeing, followed by a lengthy excerpt from a Greek tragedy, something jolly like *Medea* or *Oedipus Rex* with a high body count, which had been filmed in Kos' ancient theatre. Thus, one hour into the event, the crowd was anxious for the real action to commence and they were not

going to be disappointed. The highlight of the ceremony was for each representative of their respective European countries to come onto the stage to the strains of their national anthem. This proved difficult enough for some representatives, seemingly oblivious of their responsibility, who had to be nudged into action.

But worse was to follow when they got on the stage and had to stand in front of their own flag. This task led to quite a lot of confusion and shuffling about. Who knew there were so many European countries, each with a lengthy excerpt of their national anthem? When the group were assembled, they were joined by an electrically amplified balalaika orchestra and then a sizeable group of Greek folk dancers. At this point, Sir Thomas Beecham's quote that he would try anything once, except incest and folk dancing, should have been taken very seriously.

As the orchestra struck up, there was a sizeable explosion as the fuses blew and the entire auditorium and stage were plunged into total darkness, the concept of emergency lighting not having reached this conference centre. As the Stygian blackness continued, the audience became somewhat restive whilst those on stage were fixed to the spot, it being far too dangerous to move. As an old hand at

## VALERIE'S TRAVELS

these events, I had sat within spitting distance of an exit and managed to crawl out on my hands and knees to the bar where I was joined 40 minutes later by a truly enervated group of escapees who had eventually been led from the stage by a passer-by with a torch.

Following this experience, during the rest of the meeting most participants were to be found on the beach and even the speakers were largely missing so, courtesy of the laptop, one simply pitched up at one's session and asked the audience what they would like to hear about from one's repertoire of presentations.

Needless to say, EUFOS was disbanded shortly thereafter and replaced by the extremely successful Confederation of European ORL-HNS and its associated conferences, and the Eucomed code of conduct now rightly precludes commercial sponsorship of medical meetings taking place in seaside / recreational venues!

Fortunately, by the time of the closing ceremonies at most conferences, all those that can have skedaddled, leaving only a rag, tag and bobtail group of the organisers to hand over to their successors who, in turn, promise an even more glorious opening ceremony for the next occasion!

**“As an old hand at these events, I had sat within spitting distance of an exit and managed to crawl out on my hands and knees to the bar”**

This series of stories is dedicated to those of you with whom some of these moments were shared (or endured) and, above all, to my amazing and long-suffering husband, David Howard. Most of you know him as an exceptional head and neck surgeon but, since Covid, he has been involved in a large multi-speciality international charitable project reintroducing negative pressure non-invasive breathing support which could transform the management of respiratory disease all round the world. If you are interested, please visit [www.exovent.org](http://www.exovent.org) (or scan the QR code) for further information and, if you enjoy the stories, please consider donating to the charity through the Exovent website (Click DONATE on the home page drop down menu).



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