





Athletes gather around the 'Raging Bull' during the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games at the Alexander Stadium in Birmingham on Thursday. AFP PIC

BIRMINGHAM

A COMMONWEALTH Games that once appeared doomed exploded into life with a dazzling opening ceremony on Thursday that put a modern spin on a sporting event often seen as a relic of the British Empire's colonial past.

Ten years after the 2012 London Olympics it was Birmingham's moment in the spotlight, although a smaller one, as Prince Charles, reading a message on behalf of The Queen contained in a Baton that had travelled through all 72 nations and regions of the Commonwealth, declared the Games open.

No one could deny Birmingham for giving itself a massive pat on the back for taking on the responsibility of staging the 2022 Games after Durban, South Africa was stripped of hosting duties for failing to deliver on promises made in its bid.

Instead of the usual six-seven years to prepare, Birmingham

MODERNISED GAMES

Birmingham opening ceremony breathes life into doomed sporting gala

had four and that challenge was multiplied by the arrival of Covid-19.

While the pandemic forced the delay of an Olympics and an Asian Games, Birmingham pushed ahead, delivering on its promise of an on time, on budget project.

"I'm a Brummy and this is a great city founded by people who just got on with," said Birmingham 2022 chair John Crabtree. "People just go on with it, that's why we're here frankly."

"Birmingham is a modest city that would like to have the spotlight on it for just a bit."

For one night at least, Birmingham got its due as 30,000

spectators packed into renovated Alexander Stadium to take in a slick show that would match up against any Olympic production, Organisers say it was watched by over a billion people.

The ceremony delivered all the classic staples of an opening night extravaganza from the parade of athletes to a shower of thundering fireworks.

But it was the high-tech story-telling of Stella and The Dreamers, a group of young athletes from around the Commonwealth who explore Birmingham's history representing a better, brighter future that provided the backbone of the two and a half hour show.

While evening celebrated Birmingham's cultural diversity and tolerance, Britain's Olympic diving champion Tom Daley, who came out as gay in 2013, used the moment to remind everyone that some Commonwealth nations still enforce homophobic colonial-era laws.

Homosexuality is a criminal offence in 35 of the 56 nations that make up the Commonwealth where punishments include whipping, life imprisonment and the death penalty.

Daley, who is not competing in Birmingham, ran the Queen's Baton into the darkened stadium as LGBTQ+ flags lined his path.

At the same time, the Birmingham Games will break new ground with more medals awarded to women (136) than men (134), a first for a multi-sport event.

Activist Malala Yousafzai, the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize laureate who was shot in the head by a Taliban gunman and spent part of her recovery in Birmingham's Queen Elizabeth Hospital, also had message.

"Every child deserves the chance to reach her full potential and pursue her wildest dreams," she told the audience.

The evening began with a fly-over by the Red Arrows and ended with West Midlands rock band Duran Duran revving up the crowd under a canopy of fireworks.

As always, however, the most anticipated moment of the night was the parade of nations as nearly 5,000 athletes from 72 countries and territories, who will compete for medals in 19 sports over 11 days, made their entrance.

Australia, widely expected to battle for top spot on the medal table as usual, were first into the stadium while their great rivals England were last and greeted with a huge roar. **Reuters**