

**INSIDE VIEW:**

# A Conversation with Entertainment Director Paul O'Loughlin of Queen Mary 2

by

**Richard H. Wagner**

**P**aul O'Loughlin, Entertainment Director on Queen Mary 2, carries substantial credentials. In 1981, before he had turned 20 years old, he was an entertainment officer on P&O's legendary Canberra. Five years later, he was promoted to cruise director with Princess Cruises, which at that time was a subsidiary of P&O. Since then, he has hosted many thousands of guests, worked with a bevy of big-name star entertainers, and been presented to royalty. Along the way, he even acted in an episode of the American television show "Loveboat - The Next Wave."

"It has taken me 30 years and 27 ships to get here in my career. I think [Queen Mary 2] is the most unique and special ship that I have ever sailed on. She is flagship to Cunard Line but as I always say, she is flagship to the world. She has a magic all her own - - her design, her timeless elegance - - everything that the name Queen Mary 2 conjures up is very special."

The entertainment director on QM2 is responsible not just for the entertainment per se but also for the ship's enrichment program, activities such as trivia contests and bridge lessons as

well as for hosting receptions and events in which the passengers participate. Overall, this is referred to as the "programming" for the ship.

As well as being a premium grade ship in her own right, Queen Mary 2 is the beneficiary of a long heritage built by some of the greatest ocean liners of the past and that creates an image in the mind of the traveling public of sophistication and elegance. The programming onboard is designed to fit with this reputation.

"The first word is 'quality' and that is what our guests expect when they walk up the gangway of this great ship. Everyone needs to be top quality from our wonderful show casts to the individual artists who come to us from Broadway and the West End to our vast array of musicians who are all at the top of their tree to our relationship with the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. I think guests on Cunard are very discerning. They choose Cunard Line for its style, its grace and [the] programming. We like to present exactly what they expect."

QM2 was built to do transatlantic crossings and such voyages remain both her specialty and

mainstay. On such voyages, there are no port days. Thus, unlike a cruise, the sea days are not mere adjuncts to the primary focus of the vacation experience. "On cruise ships on a seven-day Caribbean voyage, there is a different focus. We have to give our guests every moment a great choice in activities, lectures and entertainment. It is much more quality-based, less revenue-orientated. On Cunard, again, it is quality."

"Our Cunard enrichment program is the best enrichment program at sea. It encompasses: [acting classes, performances and poetry readings by] the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts; the computer learning in our Connections Centre; and the diverse [lecture] topics that we like to present especially on transatlantic crossings with all the sea days. On this voyage we have astronomers and John Maxtone-Graham, a celebrated maritime historian. Last voyage we had a forensic scientist, [author Margaret Atwood] and Julien's Auction House auctioning off the Barbara Streisand collection for the Barbara Streisand Foundation. So, we have a very diverse program with which we try to enrich our guests' experience here on QM2."

QM2 attracts a diverse group of passengers including large numbers of British, American and German guests as well as significant numbers of guests from around the world. This international clientele also must be considered in designing the ship's programming. "We have to offer variety to all our guests onboard regardless of where they come from."

"The one thing that is tricky if we have a split half and half [of British and American guests] is comedy. Comedy [in these two English-speaking countries] is very different. The British comedy is a little drier. But we try and find comedians who work either side of the pond in theaters or on television shows."

Because programming for the ship is so important, Cunard has teams shoreside dedicated to finding appropriate entertainers and lecturers for QM2 and fleetmate Queen Victoria. The entertainment directors onboard the ships make suggestions and have input into decisions about who will be coming onboard and how they will be presented. "At the end of the day, it is the guests that we think about through all of this - - will they like the entertainment? How can we get the guests involved in the entertainment? Instead of just watching and enjoying, a lot of guests want to be more interactive. [This is shown by the fact that during this voyage] we had 150 guests in two choirs who have been rehearsing hard and will be



*Entertainment Director Paul O'Loughlin introducing the Royal Cunard Singers and Dancers.*

appearing on stage with Anthony Inglis and the National Symphony Orchestra in four performances."

Once the entertainers and lecturers are selected, the Entertainment Director develops the schedule for the programming. For most voyages, this begins a month or more in advance by creating an "entertainment planner" for that voyage, which sets forth the "main events: cocktail parties; afternoon concerts; main show entertainment in the Royal Court Theatre; the Planetarium; the movies; the balls; and other events."

The daily program for a given day is put together two or three days in advance. "We finalize it the morning before and then print it the day before to go to the staterooms and suites [when the stewards prepare the room for bed] the night before."

In developing the schedule, the Entertainment Director has to determine where as well as when an event will be. "Whenever you come up with an activity, you think what is the best



*O'Loughlin in an earlier life as Cruise Director on Emerald Princess.*

venue for that activity?" Thus, for example, the atmosphere of the Golden Lion Pub lends itself to trivia contests while the acoustics of the Grand Lobby enhance the sound of the noontime guest sing-a-longs.

Another consideration is passenger flow around the ship. "With two and a half thousand guests, I can't have all the guests arriving in the same place at the same time." Therefore, O'Loughlin schedules a variety of activities at a given time to attract the passengers to different parts of the ship.

The Entertainment Director's responsibilities touch upon "everything that a guest comes into contact with." For example, the evening entertainment has to be coordinated with the ship's dining operation so that guests do not arrive late for dinner or shows begin before guests have had time to finish their dinners. Similarly, the beverage service in the bars and lounges is affected by the musicians and other entertainment scheduled for those venues.

Since entertainment is part of the ship's hotel operation, the Entertainment Director reports to the ship's Hotel Manager. "The Hotel Manager and I meet every morning, every lunch time and every evening regarding the happenings of the day."

The Entertainment Director also sits on the ship's Executive Committee, which includes the Commodore and his direct reports - - the Hotel

Manager, the Chief Engineer and the Staff Captain. This again is a function of the ubiquitous nature of the Entertainment Director's responsibilities.

To assist him, the Entertainment Director has approximately 130 people in his department, "which shows that Cunard is very dedicated to putting on quality entertainment." These people include hostesses and activities personnel, the ship's production cast, musicians, theater managers and others.

"Typically, I work 12, up to 14 hours a day." A typical day includes: recording a television show for broadcast throughout the ship; meeting with the Hotel Manager and the Executive Committee; contact with the home office in Southampton, England; meeting with his own managers and staff; checking the production show rehearsals; introducing lecturers; working on future programming; and acting as host at receptions, shows and other evening events. "That is the fun part - - actually getting out there and meeting the guests."

Still, a typical day is not routine. "Just take today. I am interviewing Baz Luhrmann, director of Moulin Rouge, Australia, Romeo and Juliet plus many others. Lord Wedgewood, celebrating 250 years of the Wedgewood company was on my 'Good Morning' show this morning. Tonight, I introduce Anthony Inglis and the members of the National Symphony Orchestra on the Royal Court stage for the Last Night of the Cunard Proms. And that amazingly is just an average day aboard this magnificent ship."