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Thousands gather at the Oprah House as 'love festival for Australia' reaches its climax

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FINALLY, after three months of build-up, Australia's big moment with Oprah had finally arrived.

"Who is feeling the love right now?" one of her producers asked from the stage just minutes before the Big O was meant to arrive in the heat and humidity of a typical Sydney summer morning. "Do you feel sexy, Australia?"

Judging by the cheer, that was a yes.

Six thousand of Oprah's "ultimate" fans were in the forecourt of the Sydney Opera House — renamed the Oprah House for the occasion — for the morning show; another 6000 would file in for the evening show.

The shows were star-studded affairs — Russell Crowe, Bindi Irwin, Jay-Z and Jon Bon Jovi in the morning, Bono, Nicole Kidman, Keith Urban, Hugh Jackman and Olivia Newton-John in the evening — but people had snapped up the tickets long before the line-ups were announced. It didn't really matter who else was on the bill, they were all here to see Oprah.

Certainly, she knows how to make a person — no, an entire country — feel good about themselves. "Now I know why you call this place Oz, because you are truly at the end of the yellow brick road," she said when she finally arrived just after 10am, resplendent in Uluru orange and having just led the audience in a chant of "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, oi oi oi".

"After a week in this country, I love Australia. I love Australia. I LOVE AUSTRALIA!" she said, in her favoured oratory style.

"Wherever you are in the world, you *have* to come here," she said.

Ka-ching. That line alone had to be worth the \$4 million the state and federal tourism bodies had paid to get her here.

The four shows on Australia that she will screen in January — the Opera House shows are numbers three and four — are, she said, "a love festival for Australia".

"As I said to your Tourism Minister this morning, 'Aren't you glad I liked it?'"

As video clips rolled after each ad break showing the natural wonders of Australia, they indeed made the country look like a pretty good place to visit.

Her first guest was Crowe, with whom she chatted amiably and fairly superficially, asking him why Australians don't much like it when people get too big for their boots. Perhaps sensing this was somehow about him — isn't everything? — Rusty tried not to be drawn on that one.

Bindi Irwin and her brother Robert — a dead ringer for his dead dad — and their mother Terri were up next, and just as Rusty had a movie to plug so Bindi had a book and the whole family had a Las Vegas outpost of Australia Zoo to spruik.

On it went, with good-humoured chat interspersed with travelogue videos and, for a little emotional heft, a couple of hard-luck stories with happy (-ish) endings.

First, an underprivileged school in the western suburbs of Sydney received a visit from Jay-Z followed by a gift of laptops

from IBM for every student and a wired library (and a copy of Jay-Z's book), which Oprah claimed was worth \$1 million.

Next, a young man with cancer, a wife and two kids. Their church has helped out by paying the bills; Oprah went one better, handing over a \$250,000 cheque, telling him to "take a year off and get well".

Bon Jovi played. Jay-Z chatted. Everyone got a pearl necklace.

The evening show offered more of the same. A surprise visit from Bono, then a spectacular entrance from Jackman that almost turned to tragedy.

He slid along a flying fox strung 80 metres or so between the top of the Opera House and the rigging above the stage. He waved happily to the crowd as he hurtled towards the stage, then came to a brutal and thudding halt.

Medical staff treated the actor when he was finally lowered, and a few minutes later he returned with a plaster to the side of a very red eye.

Nonetheless, by the end of the show he had recovered well enough to sing — along with Kidman, Urban, Newton-John, Crowe and the Qantas choir — *I Still Call Australia Home*. And then it was over.

The evening audience missed out on the pearl necklace. They got a diamond pendant in the shape of an O instead.



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GO ONLINE

See highlights of the taping of Oprah's first Australian show.



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