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Creating an Anglo-Moroccan Garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2015

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When I visited the Chelsea Flower Show for the first time last year I never dreamed that I would find myself standing at the entrance decked out in 'high-vis' and 'steelies' as part of one of the Build-Up teams. The next few days were an incredible, eye-opening experience consisting of fourteen-hour days filled end to end with preparing, arranging and planting our Anglo-Moroccan plant pallet in and out of panics about the rest of the stand, and endless weaving in and out of vehicles carrying everything from tiny alpines to elephant-sized rocks. I saw jumbles of plants turning into stunning gardens and incredible and floral displays appear, literally, overnight.

The atmosphere was one of high intensity but also of camaraderie and, most strikingly of all, one in which everyone became equal. In this strange world, populated by human highlighter pens, the likes of Chris Beardshaw and Dan Pearson became just two more frantic participants racing to get their work done on time. It made for a rather surreal experience as one constantly saw faces from the TV walking past and you had to take great care to work out why someone seemed familiar in order to avoid acute embarrassment on both sides. My personal highlight was seeing Jim Carter (who will forever be Carson from Downton Abbey) and Imelda Staunton being interviewed in one of the gardens. I had to double-check to make sure I'd seen who I thought I had.

On the final night of the Build-Up I finally left the site at about half-past-ten, having stayed late with Christopher, our designer, to pack everything into our 'cupboard of death', so named because our things had to be balanced above a drop into a puddle and because it could only be accessed by wriggling past a door that had an alarming habit of falling over onto unsuspecting passers-by (I nearly took out a security guard at one point during the show: disaster was only averted by his quick reaction and the fact that he found it funny). We dropped in on our Westminster base on the way home to collect various bits and pieces and found

ourselves greeted with a drink and a piece of cake which were, by that time, more than welcome! We were too muddy to go inside the flat so ended up eating our cake out on the landing by candlelight, perched on a bench with our host, Richard, seated in stately splendour in an old wheelchair. It was one of life's more wonderfully bizarre moments.

The show seemed almost tame after the Build-Up except that the crowds somehow managed to be harder to move through than the delivery vehicles. The atmosphere had changed completely with the days of merry muck and mayhem being replaced with glamour and festivity. I came for my first day on the stand to find a Bronze Medal perched on our fountain as a source of pride for all the team and, rather wonderfully, as a source of indignation on our behalf from members of the public, one of whom drew a silver medal in our visitor's book. The garden also went down well with our Moroccan team members and contacts including the president of the Moroccan British Society Princess Lalla Joumala, which was something of a relief.

I had expected to be nervous but I found that the interaction was a lot of fun and that, as often as not, I was getting as much out of it as I hope that I was able to give. The showground had a very different buzz about it and there was something magical about looking at all the finished gardens and stands, having seen them being built. I felt hugely privileged to have been able to see the process as well as final product and to have several days to explore rather than the mad rush of my one visit last year in which I had to try and see everything in a matter of hours.

It was surreal just how quickly it all came down. First came the sell-off of plants, in which we had to scramble in and out of the beds grubbing up armfuls of plants and bundling them into bags. Then came the contractors brandishing their weapons of destruction. Soon our garden was nothing but a pile of rubble. I think we were all in shock. Certainly we all stood looking at the rubble for some time before we galvanised ourselves into action again. The whole thing had been a tremendous bonding experience and there was a certain wistfulness about the goodbyes. Would we do it again? I don't know. Would we miss it? I think, in our own ways, we all thought we would. The pressure had been great but the rewards had been greater still.

