



FROM THE ANNALS OF FASCINATION!



Volume 1:

"In Their Own Words"

Interviews & Chats





FROM THE ANNALS OF FASCINATION!



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"In Their Own Words"

INTRODUCTION

It's no secret that I became infatuated the moment I was introduced to Cirque du Soleil. No, I became obsessed. From the moment the lights dimmed at the Cirque du Soleil Theater at Downtown Disney West Side I was enchanted like I'd never been before. Before the experience I feared I would find the show tedious and tiresome (as I was not into theatrical arts like my friends were), but from that very first moment I sat there in rapt attention, spellbound by the artistry, the pageantry, and most of all, the acrobatic skill of La Nouba's performers. For it was truly once upon a time... a door opened; two worlds collided. Dreams clashed with reality. The mundane mixed with the marvelous. It was no longer possible for me to tell where one world began and the other ended. I had truly entered the dominion of Cirque du Soleil, glowing with spellbinding intensity... a vibrant kaleidoscope of artistry and daring... a splash of iridescent genius. I now knew the color of imagination, and I wanted more!

Those who know me have undoubtedly heard the story of how I was introduced to Cirque du Soleil many times. In fact, if you've read the introductions to the companion works to "From the Annals of Fascination!" you've no doubt seen the story there as well. Suffice it to say, my world was turned upside down the moment I was introduced to the Cirque, and it has informed my personal pursuits ever since. The *Fascination! Newsletter* is one of those pursuits.

Born out of a need and desire to continue servicing the online Cirque fandom (by sharing all that I had been learning about Cirque since my introduction), the *Fascination! Newsletter* came into being. Prior to its first issue, I was sharing what I'd learned through *Richasi's Le Grand Chapiteau* (an informational website launched on June 16, 1999 – Cirque's 15th Anniversary – to entertain and educate passers-by about all of the Cirque's endeavors, not just one show) and through *CirqueFAQ* (a text-based frequently asked questions document that debuted July 24, 2001, presenting information about the company, its shows and disciplines it employed, in a more concise manner. A little over a month later the *Fascination! Newsletter* followed.

As originally conceived, the newsletter was intended to be one component of a much larger fannish endeavor: a fan club for fans by fans. The hope was by forging together the many facets of the Cirque fandom already found online: the *Cirque du Soleil Discussion Group* (on Yahoo! Groups), *Le Grand Chapiteau*, the *Cirque Webring* (a network of like web-pages), and by providing our own club page and newsletter, the ultimate fan experience could be created.

The suggestion of a Cirque fan club was not an original idea. There was an official club of sorts at the time – “Dralion Internet Club”, which Cirque had formed when Dralion began touring in late 1999 – however, it was filled with information, music clips, and other items related to Dralion only, not for all of Cirque’s creations. That’s where this club – *Fascination!* – would come into play.

Fascination! was started by two self-described “super-fans” of Cirque du Soleil – myself and Yuki Nakano (she ran seisouso.net) – and as we discussed some Cirque-related topics through AOL’s Instant Messenger (AIM) one night, Yuki mentioned off-hand that it would be cool to have an online fan club dedicated to Cirque du Soleil. I quickly agreed, having harbored a similar desire myself. In the subsequent minutes we discussed some potentialities – Yuki would create and host the official fan club pages while I would go on to create and publish a newsletter – and we agreed to go forward. But creating such a fan club would require the backing of the entire Cirque fan community as well, and that’s where Jen Cassity (who owned and moderated the Yahoo Group) and Jon Lewis (owner / moderator of the Cirque Webring) came into view. They readily threw their support behind the project.

For my part I quickly dove into the crafting of the newsletter. I already had a number of ideas for its look and feel, what kind of content I wanted to provide, and even the overall theme of the issue (early on each issue focused on a particular show, reviewing it for the masses), but before long I knew I needed help. How could one person correlate all the news, monitor itinerary changes, look into facts and figures, and find the time to write about all the different facets of a particular show? One person couldn’t, so I turned to the Discussion Group to plumb Keith Johnson and Paul Roberts to assist me. Each had differing points of view – Keith more into the business side of the company, while Paul was more musically inclined – complimenting my desire to discover and flesh out each show’s thematical elements and history. Work began in earnest and the rest, as they say, is history...

In our first issue we introduced the idea of “Fascination!” to our readers as one that was not original, that several fans around the world probably had the same thoughts about creating a Cirque fan club or newsletter, but in our little corner of the Cirque fandom, there was nothing like this out there. On August 3, 2001 the newsletter was officially born, and like a baby, our first steps were rather small and rocky. But we’ve grown considerably since then, publishing thousands of pages on Cirque du Soleil, and expanding our knowledge exponentially. And we’re still going!


To celebrate Cirque du Soleil’s 30th Anniversary (and reaching Issue #125), we’ve put together a three-volume collection of “best of” materials. Since the inception of the *Fascination! Newsletter*, we’ve had the honor of meeting and speaking with many current and former Cirque du Soleil artists and tradesmen. In this volume – *From the Annals of Fascination! • Book 1: “In Their Own Words”* – highlights many of the questions we’ve posted to Cirque du Soleil performers, musicians, technicians and behind-the-scenes personnel... and their answers. May you find their words interesting, informative and inspirational!

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



« Table of Contents | Page 1 »





	<p>JOHN-PAUL GASPARELLI <i>Musical Director – «O»</i></p> <p>“New Musical Director for «O»!” Ricky Russo, 2001 09</p>
	<p>OLIVER “BJ” GENTEN <i>Percussionist – Quidam</i></p> <p>“An Evenings Chat with BJ” Ricky Russo, 2003 13</p>
	<p>OLIVER “BJ” GENTEN <i>Percussionist – Quidam</i></p> <p>“BJ, Live From Japan!” Ricky Russo, 2004 24</p>
	<p>RENÉ DUPÉRE <i>Composer – Alegría, Saltimbanco & KÀ</i></p> <p>“A Conversation with René Dupéré” Keith Johnson, 2006 31</p>

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



« Table of Contents | Page 2 »





	<p>JOHN-PAUL GASPARELLI <i>Musical Director – «O»</i></p> <p>"Catching Up with John-Paul" Keith Johnson, 2007 42</p>
	<p>STEBEN SISTERS <i>Trapeze Artists – Saltimbanco & «O»</i></p> <p>"A Perilous Leap: The Steben Sisters" Keith Johnson, 2007 56</p>
	<p>ALAIN VINET <i>Director of Cirque Musique</i></p> <p>"Directing Cirque's Musique" Keith Johnson, 2009 71</p>
	<p>VIOLAINE CORRADI <i>Composer – Dralion, Varekai & Zaia</i></p> <p>"Violaine Corradi: Working for Joy" Keith Johnson, 2009 81</p>

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



« Table of Contents | Page 3 »





	<p>FERGUSON & ALLAIRE <i>Album Producers – ZED</i></p> <p>“Making Unexpected Magic Timeless” Keith Johnson, 2009 92</p>
	<p>DANIEL LAMARRE <i>President & COO Cirque du Soleil</i></p> <p>“Joining the Circus” Keith Johnson, 2010 101</p>
	<p>JERRY NADAL <i>Senior VP, Resident Show Division</i></p> <p>“Keeping the Value” Keith Johnson, 2010 106</p>
	<p>BOB & BILL <i>Album Producers – Koozå & Totem</i></p> <p>“Believing & Dreaming” Keith Johnson, 2011 123</p>

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



« Table of Contents | Page 4 »





	<p>Erich Van Tourneau <i>Musical Director – Viva Elvis!</i></p> <p>“Taking Care of Business” Keith Johnson, 2011 129</p>
	<p>Benoit Jutras <i>Composer – Quidam, «O» & La Nouba</i></p> <p>“Making Time Stop” Keith Johnson, 2011 135</p>
	<p>Mark Ward <i>Dancer, Character (John) – Quidam</i></p> <p>“A Career Backwards” Keith Johnson, 2011 144</p>
	<p>Eric Chalifour & Mario Tomassini <i>Grand Chapiteau Site Analysts</i></p> <p>“Before the Circus Comes to Town” Keith Johnson, 2012 150</p>

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



« Table of Contents | Page 5 »

	<p>BILL ROSEMAN & MARIE-HELENE GAGNON <i>KÀ Comic Book Creator Artistic Director KÀ</i></p> <p><u>"KÀ-smic KÀ-mic KÀ-nversation"</u> Keith Johnson, 2012 163</p>
	<p>BOB & BILL <i>Album Producers – Amaluna</i></p> <p><u>"Third Time's a Charm"</u> Keith Johnson, 2013 170</p>
	<p>ALAIN VINET <i>Director of Cirque Musique</i></p> <p><u>"Facilitating the Journey"</u> Keith Johnson, 2013 174</p>
	<p>ANDREW LEVEY <i>Social Media Director</i></p> <p><u>"Getting Social"</u> Keith Johnson, 2013 183</p>

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



JOHN-PAUL GASPARELLI
Musical Director – «O»

« New Musical Director for "O" »

Ricky Russo, 2001

Just as we were putting our first issue "to bed" we were surprised by an "introductory" message from the newly-hired Musical Director/Conductor/Keyboardist for "O", John-Paul Gasparrelli, who also appeared on the Cirque Mailing List to say hello. Of course we couldn't let such an opportunity pass! Therefore, through the wonders of email, we're quite pleased to bring you our first interview – an introductory chat with John-Paul who will be starting his Cirque career in late October.

Q: "I see many performances before Las Vegas were in Los Angeles, is that where you are from originally?"

Yes, I was born in Los Angeles, grew up in the Bay Area of California and Sacramento, went to the Berklee College of Music in Boston (with others like pianists Diana Krall and Makoto Ozone - both were in school there when I was)...I then moved to Los Angeles after leaving Berklee, and started playing in various groups in the Southern California area... One thing led to another, and 15 years later, it seems as though I had racked-up a number of good credits, so I guess I was doing something right with regards to my playing and honing my craft...

Q: "What made you choose music as a career, instead of other professions?"

Well, at 10 years of age, I wanted to be a musical-theater performer, so my mother enrolled me in the San Jose Children's Musical Theater. We discovered within four shows there, that I had a natural singing ability. After awhile, I was starting to get calls from Broadway agents asking if I would go to New York to do Broadway productions, but my mother didn't want me to be a "child-star." Soon, my voice changed, and I lost the "show" quality of singing, but my focus then turned to the piano, which I was able to teach myself how to play. As I entered high-school, I was becoming stronger and stronger of a player. I guess to answer your question - I never had anything else in my heart that I wanted to pursue... I have always been passionate and totally consumed with being involved with performing music. It's something that, to this day, I think about non-stop - how to get better, how to keep growing as a musician. If I were to say what the "single thing" was that made me pursue a career in music, I'd have to say "passion of expression."

Q: “Your travels have taken you to the Fontana Bar inside the Bellagio Hotel where you have been performing since June 2001, what brought you to Las Vegas?”

Actually, in April 2000, (living in L.A.), I was hired to play keyboards with original Tower of Power guitarist Bruce Conte, at various casino lounges. While here with Bruce, I heard from a friend that Cirque du Soleil was advertising in the newspaper and various musician-referral services on the Internet for keyboardist openings in their various productions. So I sent them my promo package (my newly-released CD, resumé, and a photo). At the end of April, I got a call to come and audition for “Mystere”. They sent me a CD of some of the “Mystere” music, and two days later, I auditioned...I then moved to Vegas in May, as I was offered the gig with singer Dian Diaz (coincidentally - at the Bellagio), and was still hopeful of the CDS happening... It's pretty ironic that “O” and Dian Diaz are both at the same hotel... It made it that much easier, once I got the spot with “Denny Diaz”, to get to know the band members and staff of “O”... The whole thing couldn't have happened any better if it had been planned!!

Q: “How do you like it at the Bellagio/Las Vegas?”

Vegas is great, and I love the Bellagio. Working and spending so much time there really can spoil you when going to another casino. When I first started working there in June with Dian Diaz, it was so impressive to be in such a luxurious place on a daily basis... Now that I've been there so often, it's become “normal” to be in such an environment - but... it makes the other Vegas hotels and casinos look [“not as nice as others”]... Not to sound insulting to the others, but Bellagio, I have to say, is in a class by itself, and in my opinion, is the best place to work in Las Vegas...

Q: “What decision did you make to pursue Cirque du Soleil? Did they come to you or did you go to them?”

Not only was I impressed with the performance aspects of CDS, I was also impressed with how they demand the highest standards of excellence in *everything* they do. They just seem to do everything “right”... They always insist upon the best, regardless of the money costs, and it shows in everything they do. In wanting to work with Cirque, I've always been striving to surround myself with the best possible people, as I take great pride in my work and the quality of performance of which I put out. Cirque seems to have the same concept, and I felt as though I would be very happy in an environment of “like-thinking” people... Creatively, it seems as there is no limit on what is possible with Cirque, and throughout my career, I was constantly tiring of working with people that always thought “small”, and never wanted to go any higher than they were. So many people can “talk” about what they want to do, but very few ever really put it into action. It seems that CDS really does take action.

They're not just a bunch of “talkers”, which is so prevalent these days in this industry. When they do something, they really follow-through, and I really like that. A class organization, all the way around. Initially, when CDS advertised for keyboardists, I sent them my promo package in hopes of getting an audition.

Q: “What was the interview process for you like? Nerve wracking?”

Actually, the only thing you could consider “nerve-wracking”, was that I learned the audition material on *my* equipment, and then at the audition, had to instantly learn *their* equipment setup, and perform the material on a very different setup. As a keyboardist, you learn a particular way of accessing sounds, etc., and every player has a different way of thinking and doing it. So I think that it was a test to see how a person could perform “under pressure”. It made sense, but obviously wasn't the most “comfortable” initiation into the situation... But it worked out just fine, and the CDS staff auditioning me couldn't have been any nicer or more helpful. Also, they video-taped the audition, so that can add to the pressure... So - I received the audition material on a Thursday, spent the weekend learning the four pieces, and then had the audition on Monday morning. It seems to have gone just fine...

Q: “Had any other people applied for the position? And, if so, how did you hear the news that you were in?”

I never knew if and who the others were, that were also being considered. Actually, getting the “O” show and the conductor's spot, was a pretty big surprise. I thought that I was being considered for the keyboardist for the “Mystere” show, as that's what I had auditioned with... I didn't hear from CDS for about three months after my audition, and I figured that they had chosen someone else. Out of the blue, I get a call asking if I am available to work, and that I would be offered the MD / Conductor position for “O”. I was very pleasantly surprised, and of course, accepted the offer. Just goes to show you that you *never* know what life is going to give you, if you just “hang in there”, and keep following your dream!

Q: “Being the new Musical Director, the Conductor and the Principal Keyboardist of the show, “O”, how big a step is that up from previous engagements?”

Although I've played keyboards for some pretty big names and amazing musicians, and *have* been conductor / MD on a very big-scale production show in the past, I would have to say that this is indeed the “crown-jewel” of my musical credit list.

Q: “How excited are you to be joining Cirque du Soleil?”

I'm very excited and flattered, I just can't tell you. It feels like such a great match to me ; I've worked so long and hard on being the best musician and player I can possibly be, and it's such a treat to be given an opportunity like this to realize your potential. It's a big job, but I've done so many things and played for so long, that I am indeed ready for a challenge such as this. I feel like I have a lot to bring to the show, and to the company. And I know that they have a lot that I can learn from and grow even more as an artist. The educational aspect of this will be the true value of the opportunity. That is what I am most excited about - the learning experience of this amazing company. And the other exciting thing, is the chance to give to them, everything that I can, to make this the best show in the world...

Q: “How long do you expect to be with the show, “O”?”

Honestly, I can see myself being with CDS and the MD of “O” for as long as they'll have me. I never take *anything* for granted or as being “permanent “, and treat every situation as such. I'd like to do this as long as it's mutually beneficial for both of us, and if CDS is the company that I suspect that it is, I see myself being with them for many years to come...I would love to build a long-lasting relationship with them, as they seem to be really integrity-filled people...

Q: “Just to switch gears, you have a debut CD, entitled 'Moonlight', can you tell us a little about the album - the style of music?”

I'm very proud of my first solo CD effort; I learned so much from the experience, as aside from the guest performances, it something that I did completely alone, from start-to-finish... I think it sounds great, given the limited budget that I had, and seems to really capture my life-state of the time I recorded it. I'm influenced greatly by artists such as David Foster, David Benoit, Bruce Hornsby, Toto, Earth,Wind,and Fire, Chicago, Michael McDonald, and many jazz players as well... You definitely can hear these influences on my CD, and I've gotten many compliments from people on it... I hope your readers will want to get a copy and enjoy it themselves... That's what really makes it all worthwhile - if I can give something of value to someone, and learn the most I can in the process...

More information about John-Paul (including how to order his CD) can be found at his website, www.johnpaulmusic.com (you can also use www.gasparrelli.com).

Our special thanks to John-Paul for being so friendly and open!

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



OLIVER "BJ" GENTEN
Percussionist – Quidam

« An Evening's Chat with BJ »

Ricky Russo, 2003

It was a daunting challenge involving weeks of planning and several authorizations but we finally achieved our end result... a chat with a Cirque du Soleil musician! How would it be done? Which communication program would we use? How would I keep control over the chat? These and many more questions arose as those weeks began melting away. But, on August 17, 2003 at 8:00pm Eastern Daylight Time, the chat began and all the troubles of bringing it together were quickly forgotten. With a "Good Morning from Japan," our guest, BJ, a percussionist with the Quidam tour currently in Japan, joined us for about 2 and a half hours that Sunday night and spoke about who he is, what he's doing, and where he may be headed next, not to mention that he enjoys Sushi, Sake, Pocky and a good Irish Pub! At one point the chat was opened up to everyone in attendance to get a chance to speak directly to BJ - it proved not only successful, but a highly active time.

Now, I would like to share with you the log of our chat in a more easy to read Question and Answer format. So, take it away BJ:

BJ: With pleasure.

BJ: As you said, my name is BJ. I am 29 years old and currently with Quidam in Osaka, Japan. I am the drummer since December 2000 and therefore did parts of the European tour, the entire second North American tour, and now the Japanese tour. I was born in Germany; I am German, grew up in Spain for a couple of years and then moved back to Germany. I also have family in the Boston area. And my favourite colour is blue.

Richasi: In the Quidam Japan programme, your name is listed as simply "BJ". Does BJ stand for something? Is it your full name?

BJ: It does indeed stand for something: My middle initials.

Richasi: Fellow Fascination writer Keith Johnson wanted to know: What first attracted you to drums? Who gave you your first drum kit?

BJ: That is a complicated story. I started drumming when I was six. My mother is a music teacher and I had a lot of music around at home. At five she put me in some elementary music education course. After a couple of months the teacher told us that she was from a bigger music school and that we could all learn an instrument if we wanted. I instantly shouted “drums”, ran home and told my mom. She sighed and there we went. It is not clear what made me say that.

Richasi: Wow, so at a pretty early age then. Were drums the only instrument you wanted to play? Do you know how to play others?

BJ: I was never really interested in any other instrument until the age of maybe 15-16. Then I started to learn the guitar and a little later the piano.

Richasi: Multi-talented then. Do you just play drums with Quidam or do you double with another instrument?

BJ: I hope there's talent involved... I just play drums. In Quidam that is already a pretty busy job.

Richasi: No doubt. Sometimes twice a night, etc. Do you ever get tired of it? Do you ever tire of playing the same music all the time?

BJ: That is a deep question because when I feel tired it is hard for me to tell what I get tired of. I have spent quite a great deal of time thinking about that one. I still enjoy playing Quidam. Most mornings I wake up and get really excited to play on that day. When I get tired of it all it is mostly due to the circumstances. The travel, the pace of different cultures that I have to get used to, the unbalanced way of life.

Richasi: Do you enjoy the travel or is it something you'd rather not have to deal with?

BJ: The drumming part is a pleasure 99% of the time. The surrounding stress might be hard on us. I love traveling, seeing things, and exposing myself to different surroundings. But sometimes the culture in the country we go to is so different that the adjustment alone will eat a great deal of energy.

Richasi: When you feel the stress, and as you say you enjoy playing the show, is there a piece you enjoy more above others? One you look forward to playing each night? If so, what is that piece?

BJ: I used to see the show as a collection of numbers with individual pieces of music. But as I grew into it my perception changed. I see and feel Quidam more as two halves with waves of intensity and energetic levels. I really love German wheel for the way it gets me into it. If I get through German Wheel all right then I am pretty much set for the rest of the show. I love diablo, Tissue. Gee, just about everything.

Richasi: Most fans would say that as well. Do you find yourself being caught up in the emotion of the show?

BJ: On certain days I might enjoy Banquine less than Cloud wing. But generally I try to look at it from a larger perspective - as one thing. Various emotions. Every day is a new emotion. Mostly - due to my specific job - I try to feel intensity. It's not a specific emotion I try to have but I try to be as intense as possible in my performance. The drums are a very powerful component of Quidam. I better make it right. ;-))

Richasi: Is the emotion of the performance/music what drew you to Cirque and Quidam in particular or was it something else? What made you decide to join CDS?

BJ: I did a tour with a German circus in 1996 and there I met two artists from CdS. Before my experience with the German show I was not into circus at all. They introduced me to cirque. I then saw Alegría in Hamburg and soon after that I applied. Mainly because I liked the music. Then I did not hear from Cirque until late summer of 2000. I had almost forgotten about it.

Richasi: Did you audition for Alegría?

BJ: No, I received a specific call for Quidam. They were in need of a drummer for the rest of the European tour. I guess they liked my drumming.

Richasi: So, you auditioned for Cirque in general?

BJ: No, I auditioned in Frankfurt, Germany on stage with the Quidam band specifically for Quidam.

Richasi: Wow, and it must have gone great because you're on tour!

BJ: I guess I played a short piece of diabolo and then skipping. I jinxed them to hire me!

Richasi: Jen (JenJeninLA), who is not here tonight, wanted to know whether being in Cirque was what you thought it would be...the experience, the work, the training, the traveling, everything. Do you feel excited to be part of CDS?

BJ: I remember that I was very confused with the setup and with the way the music is conducted. I almost had to cheat my way through it but I eventually made it through. Very much so. It is a special work environment. I like touring, I like performing and I like the way most Cirque shows are put together. There's a bunch of very special people on tour with us. It's a lot of work. A lot!! But my reward is the fact that people leave the show with a big smile.

Richasi: I understand you've made some good friends, one of whom is leaving soon. Does that make you sad? Will you still hear from this person?

BJ: At present it is his plan to work on a solo project after he leaves and so far I'll be the drummer. Other than that we are already scheduled to meet in Ireland and have a pint of Guinness together. We are indeed great friends and I guess that will continue.

Richasi: Do you think Quidam will get back to Europe after Japan (and Canada)? (I know, a hard one to answer)

BJ: very hard to answer. Usually we are the last to know.

Richasi: And we, meaning fans, are usually the first to know - lol!

BJ: That seems to be very true. ;-)) It is not my main occupation to think about next year or the tour plans for the rest of the decade. I am very concerned with my everyday performance. I try to focus on what I do now.

Richasi: Must you renew a contract each year or is it two/three/four years? A particular tour?

BJ: We sign for specific tours, i.e. the European tour, the North American tour, the Japan tour. If a tour is longer than two years it will be divided into shorter contracts. I will negotiate my next year soon. And I know where we will be going.)

Richasi: So, if the tour were going to go to a few Canadian cities (which we understand is a possibility), this next contract would probably cover that?

BJ: I believe so. If it did indeed go to Canada. Maybe it does, maybe not)

Richasi: Albert (Treb, who is online here) wanted to know -- Exactly how much of the music is live? Is there any bit that is pre-recorded and played as a track every show? Or is every sound we hear live?

BJ: Most pieces are partially sequenced, i.e. a computer runs a couple of tracks. Mostly choir, percussion, strings, extra sound effects. The main structure of each number is played live. Skipping and some shorter pieces between acts are absolutely live. Diabolo is sequenced (percussion), hand to hand is sequenced (strings), so is the opening (choir).

Richasi: Albert also asked, does the music continue to evolve even after the show's been on for all these years? And do you find that you are allowed to make certain changes to fit your style?

BJ: As new artists join their acts and choreography changes we have to adjust the music. I actually have a great deal of freedom to play more "in my style". I need to make sure that I transcend the essence of Quidam. But individual grooves or fills are left to my taste and style. We constantly try to improve. The composer visits every once in a while and alters things.

Richasi: What happens if you are ill? Is there someone who can fill your place? Or, as I know they have for "O" and Mystère, do they have your performance recorded... do you just get replaced with a recorded you?

BJ: If I get ill the show is in serious trouble! We had to do one performance with just recorded music in Tokyo because I was so ill that I almost collapsed on stage and they literally pulled me off the stage. I wanted to go on but I guess the fever clouded my brain.

Richasi: Really? Wow! Did the audience know the difference?

BJ: Well the audience does not know how the show is supposed to sound. But the artists and technicians feel a great difference. The acts have to be perfect. A tape cannot react if something in the act goes wrong.

Richasi: If you don't mind me asking, what did the musicians do? Hang about? Appear to play but not?

BJ: That's what they did. Perfect playback and never stop smiling. It only happened once and I hope it will never again.

Richasi: Yeah, it's no fun hearing it taped.

BJ: I was lying backstage and the mere thought of hearing the show run and not being able to perform drove me crazy.

Richasi: We've had a couple of inquiries about... is anyone looking over your shoulder right now?

BJ: No. I am alone in my room. I guess everybody else is still sleeping. Craig (the singer) said he might pop in and check on me but that might not happen. I don't know when he got to bed.

Richasi: Do any of the other musicians/performers get online that you know of? Are they aware of fan groups and/or keep an ear to what is said on the official forum?

BJ: Not really. I believe that a few do but generally we are more concerned with life on tour. We email with friends and family, some might chat but as far as I know this is the first ever chat between a performer and fans.

Richasi: Speaking of the tour, what do you think of the new Fuji big top? Is it better than the regular touring chapiteau?

BJ: It blows my mind. It is huge (2,900 seats) and has no masts. That means it has no restricted view seats and looks even bigger. I love it. It's quite a deal to tour it because it actually is a semi-permanent structure that is set up on a concrete foundation. There will be photos of it on www.bjpercussion.de soon.

Richasi: I also assume Fuji placed you in a great housing facility?

BJ: They take good care of us. We live in the middle of the city. In the heart of a network of shopping streets.

Richasi: I know you've said you've enjoyed touring... is there a specific tour/city you've enjoyed above others?

BJ: London, Copenhagen, Boston, Pittsburgh, Nagoya. Most cities have something interesting. Tokyo was hard because of the culture shock. At the end of this year back again in Tokyo that will be different.

Richasi: AmberrGrey (Carrie) had a quick question: What helps make a good show so memorable for the artists and musicians?

BJ: Could you rephrase that question a little. I am not sure what she means.

Richasi: I believe she's asking is there a particular aspect of a show/performance/city that makes it memorable to you as an artist? Say, makes you think of that particular city as the tour goes on?

BJ: That usually is linked to the private life on tour. I like simple things. I like to be in a city with spirit - a heart. And preferably an Irish Pub. A good hotel also makes things easier.

Richasi: Other than sitting at an Irish Pub during your off hours... do you have any other hobbies you indulge in?

BJ: I like to spend my time with friends on tour discovering the city. I read a lot. I also like to write little stories about tour life and other things. But I don't know if that collection will ever be published. At present I am reading a lot of books that are related to Japan. "Memoirs of a Geisha" for example. I also read Nabokov, or Douglas Adams.

Richasi: Have you, by chance, taken in any Taiko drumming while in Japan?

BJ: I will soon. A couple of people wanted to do it and we finally found a possibility to do it. I am really excited about that.

Richasi: I hope you get to see Kodo. They're just wonderful. I highly recommend them!

BJ: I did see them but I haven't had a chance to try it myself yet. Other than that: I am currently very busy working on a couple of projects. Craig Jennings album requires a lot of attention recently. I have just recorded some overdub drums in Nagoya. After Osaka Craig will fly to the US and start mixing the beast. I also work with a couple of people in New York or L.A. Technology is fascinating.

Richasi: Any specific technology you find fascinating that you work with on tour?

BJ: I can record drums in Osaka and send them to NY through the Internet. I don't know how specific I can get with you guys. You're not all crazy musicians, are you?

Richasi: Some of us might be, and those who aren't here, may be interested in the details...

BJ: I like a hard disk recording device called Pro Tools. We have used it for Craig's things. I also like my new mixers that I have just installed at the beginning of the Japan tour.

Richasi: Kaliwolf wanted to know what kind of music does Craig do?

BJ: That's hard to describe. It is both very electronic and very acoustic. Every track is different. A great challenge and a wide range of styles.

Richasi: Any particular type of music you like? Have you listened to other soundtracks from other CDS shows?

BJ: I know most soundtracks. I recently spent a couple of shows in the drum booth with La Nouba's drummer Joe. I really love that music. I also love Saltimbanco's soundtrack. But mostly I listen to "non-cirque" music. Peter Gabriel, Toto, Miles Davis, Keith Jarrett, Gino Vanelli, Beethoven, Zeppelin, and Green Day - whatever comes my way and touches me. It keeps me alert and helps me tolerate different styles and play them.

Richasi: Changing gears a bit -- do you find that the Quidam crew is tightly knit?

BJ: Extremely! Through thick and thin. We do a lot together. Mostly smaller groups but if we have a reason to get together and have a festivity - we sure show up. We stand together. In some situations the life of someone depends on the reliability of a fellow artist or technician. You need a great amount of trust to deal with that.

Richasi: Would you give up your drumming role with Quidam to be with another Cirque production?

BJ: I will always welcome new challenges in my life. The band just did a gig together in Nagoya. Only the music we liked. A lot of rehearsing but a great gig. I guess the photos are on psioui.com. So we do actually spend a lot of time on extra stuff. Some artists have just started to rehearse for a cabaret that we will stage at the end of the Japan tour. Only for ourselves. Just for the sheer fun and excitement.

Richasi: If given the opportunity, would you want to change to another Cirque show?

BJ: That very much depends on the show. I like some more than others.

Richasi: Other than Quidam, do you have a particular favorite?

BJ: La Nouba. And Alegría. I have not had the chance to see any of the Vegas shows but I hear that they are really good. Being on tour does not really allow me to see the rest of our shows.

Richasi: What about La Nouba do you like? And Alegría?

BJ: I like the poetry of Alegría. It is a joyous and beautiful show. And I love the soundtrack. In La Nouba I love the power. It reminds me of Quidam. It is a bright and fast version of Quidam. The creative team behind it was the same so you recognize the trademark.

Richasi: Speaking of other shows, have you heard any buzz on Zumanity? Interesting concept I must say... Have any thoughts on it?

BJ: None whatsoever. I know almost nothing about it. We discussed it in the kitchen yesterday. We are trying to get more information but Japan is far from Vegas. Of course I hope that they are doing fine.

Richasi: All of the people (fans) I've spoken with thus far about the show have glowing reviews of it. Looks as if Cirque has another hit on their hands.

BJ: We did send them our best wishes for their premiere. But that happens between most shows for every premiere in every city.

Richasi: Random question: Do you get any time off on tour?

BJ: Between cities I usually have 8-12 days off. Depending on the tour. The Japanese Big Top takes longer to tear down and set up. I think we tour with 60+ trucks. They need six big auto-cranes to set it up. It's the biggest structure Cirque has ever toured with.

Richasi: Fans were able to see the big top being constructed in Tokyo over a webcam. It fascinated me. Hopefully I'll get to see it someday. I hear they'll use it for all Japanese Cirque tours.

BJ: I love it (but I said that already). Yes. They will use it for all further Japanese Cirque tours. Have you seen photos of the outside?

Richasi: I have, I think on your website if I'm not mistaken (but I might be). Might be Pascal's as well (psioui.com). I'm sure he has some. It's a great looking big-top. I bet it has a state-of-the-art sound system in there, right?

BJ: The sound system is basically the same we used in the States and in Europe. But we had to alter it slightly and add some speakers and amps. The Dome is bigger than the Big Tops in the US or Europe so we need more power.

Richasi: Nadia (Morpheus, who is with us) asked: Is there a marked difference in the Japanese audience with relation to other cultures that's he's perform to, i.e., the reaction to certain acts or clowns that is quite different than what they had anticipated?

BJ: The Japanese have a totally different way of reacting. They are very quiet and polite. They find parts of the show exciting that are considered “normal” or “unspectacular” in other countries. Applause is generally much quieter. But that is not related to the excitement they feel.

Richasi: Do you find that changes your perspective of the performance? As in, I know some performers become unsettled if an audience doesn't react to what they do.

BJ: We have a greater amount of people crying out of emotion here than anywhere else. I certainly appreciate it if an audience reacts. It gives me energy. In our case I had to learn to take the Japanese way of admiring and reacting. Some people have more problems with that than others. Our clowns can suffer sometimes. They need participation.

Richasi: I remember hearing a remark that they didn't like coming to the US because of that fact. And yet, audiences in the US seem to react to just about everything (not always, though). Japanese are reserved.

BJ: Japanese like to watch and silently take it in. US audiences are very loud but I sometimes ask myself what that indicates. It is not the volume of the applause that reflects the appreciation. It is unusual for Japanese audiences to get on their feet at the end of the show.

Richasi: And for the last moderated question, what type of equipment do you use in the show?

BJ: I use Sonor drums, Sabian cymbals, Pro-mark sticks and Remo heads. Micophones are mostly Shures with a couple of AKGs. I mix on two digital Yamaha desks. For the electronic stuff I use mostly Roland gear and samplers.

(At this point, the chat was opened up.)

KaliWolf: I was wondering, what was the composer's idea behind the music? What was the core sound he was trying to convey?

BJ: The main idea behind the music of Quidam is eastern. Ukrainian, Baltic music.

Treb: Do you know for sure if Richard will be compiling his independent work any time in the near future? If so, will you have any involvement in the project?

BJ: I will probably drum a few tracks on the album. But I cannot say when that will be. He will leave soon and then take his time to approach it.

Richasi: Katie (who isn't here I don't think) wanted to know about your schooling background. As in a particular college/field of study?

BJ: Well I studied philosophy and German literature. For the drumming part of my life: I was in music school for 9 years when I was 8-17. The rest is pretty random and always slightly chaotic.

Pedro: What happens in the process of a new "Zoe" joining the show?

BJ: New Zoe's will do training in Montreal for several months after they have been cast and join us about three weeks before they start performing in the show. They then start to perform the show with an "old" Zoe standing backstage singing and always ready to jump in. So they lipsync. The next step would be to do one half and then the entire show.

Treb: What happens when singers themselves become sick?

BJ: On the Japanese tour we have both Craig and Richard with us and both sing in every show. Some shows Richard will sing most, the next day they switch. That helps them save their vocal chords. If one is out the other takes over but we've never had that so far.

Treb: Is there a particular piece that you LEAST like to play?

BJ: The exit of the clowns right before cloud swing is not always my favourite part But it's only 20 secs so I guess it's not so bad. The precision of the music with the acts comes from a rather complicated system of cues behind the music.

Ambergrey: For instance, what kind of cues? From watching the artists?

BJ: Our bandleader wears a head microphone and counts in individual parts of the music when he sees that the artists are ready to move on to the next segment of their act. We can cut, extend or repeat individual parts of every piece.

Treb: Do you find yourself struggling to communicate on your off hours sometimes? Like, finding the right bus, etc

BJ: Communication here is really not easy. Especially because they also have a different way of body language. And my accent is probably terrible.

Pedro: Has anyone ever offered money to get a Cirque band to play for them privately, maybe at a party?

BJ: I have never heard of such an offer. But I guess that would be really expensive.

Treb: You have mentioned that some parts of the music are pre-recorded. If you have to repeat a segment of the music due to a mistake in the act, how do those pre-recorded segments "work" out for the whole music?

BJ: We work with a system called RPS. Realtime Programmed Sequence.

Treb: Can you explain how that works? Maybe elaborate a bit?

BJ: Each number is cut into 5-20 pieces that are assigned to individual keys on the keyboards. The keyboard player can - at anytime - name the cue that comes up and “punch” it in with the groove. It is my job to make it sound rhythmical and logical. Most cues have a fixed order so he does not have to announce them. He just counts them in. Banquine is quite a bit of talking behind the music.

Ambergrey: Wow- how long did it take you to get used to that?

BJ: It took me nine days to learn it but I stopped having heart attacks after two months.

KaliWolf: This may have been asked, I'm not sure. Do you have a favorite act or segment of the show (not a favorite song)?

BJ: I do not see the show as individual numbers put together. For me it is more like a wave.

Treb: Do the acts ever become “boring”? Does it get to the point where any of the acts just become, “Eh, okay, I've done this a million times -- this is just work now.” Does it get to a point where it just seems routine, or do you feel the magic every day?

BJ: Some get tired but we always find ways to motivate ourselves and our colleagues. Most people get really excited when it is time for them to perform.

A few moments later we ended the chat on a high note. I wish to extend my thanks once again to BJ and his associates for making this chat happen and to BJ himself for taking the time out of his busy schedule (not to mention getting up early in the morning) to speak with us. On October 3, 2003, BJ will celebrate his 1000th performance with Quidam and in his words... “It's getting better and better.”

BJ: Mesdames et Messieurs: Bonsoir!

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



OLIVER "BJ" GENTEN
Percussionist – Quidam

« BJ, Live From Japan! »

Ricky Russo, 2004

On a wonderful Sunday evening in March 2004, BJ, the drummer on tour with Quidam, once again took a few moments out of his busy schedule to chat with Cirque du Soleil fans via the Internet. Like last time, BJ joined about 10 Cirque fans from across the globe on the IRC (Internet Relay Chat) network. He spoke with us about Japan, his current feelings about the tour, projects he's working on and various opinions about where he is in life. The chat was not without its hiccups, however, as the broadband provider compromised Internet service two or three times. Regardless of the intermittent problems with the network, the chat was a success and I hope everyone who attended had a great time! For those who could not make the online chat, don't fear, as before we've taken minutes to present for your enjoyment.

Thus, once again, take it away BJ!

BJ: Ohio gozaimasu!

Richasi: Ohayo Gozaimasu! (Good Morning) How is the morning?

BJ: The morning is cold and slightly cloudy. Yet also extremely hung over from last night's sumo party. We had our final Goodbye-Japan-Party yesterday night. It involved a lot of Sake and a (fake but entertaining) sumo fight.

Richasi: So when do you leave Japan?

BJ: We leave in exactly two weeks. I fly out on April, 5th in the morning. Not even 12 after tearing down.

Richasi: How has your week been, to start out?

BJ: Well, our week - my week - has been extremely busy. I have played ten shows, done a lot of final shopping for the folks at home and also worked on Craigs album for the last time before it goes into the mixing stage.

Richasi: Have you figured out the art of Japanese gift giving?

BJ: Well, have the Japanese even figured that out? It's complicated. But I guess that I have learned a little.

Richasi: And, a Q from the stage (from Quidamgrl): When will you update your site?

BJ: Uhh, my site. I know. I feel extremely bad about that. I am working so much and the guys in Germany who deal with the design and the actual updates are constantly bothering me. I guess soon is the time to update it. In fact, there are massive updates on the way.

Richasi: Cool! So we can expect some goodies from your site soon, ne?

BJ: Yes, in fact you can expect quite some goodies.

Richasi: Q from Treb -- How are you and Craig coordinating the project now that he's over at Varekai?

BJ: There will be more music, some videos and some conversations with fellow artists and other musicians - not only from Quidam. The coordination of this project is not very easy. I work on a Pro Tools system that I tour. Craig has a Logic Audio system on his side and our producer, i.e. Michael Picton who was our keyboardist in Europe, also works with Logic. We send tracks back and forth on burned DVDs and try to have everything as seamless as possible.

Richasi: As a review for those who weren't here last time, can you explain the project?

BJ: The project is simple. Craig has written an album. The idea and the musical style are a cross mix of rock, pop and trance, with very deep lyrics and the whole thing is sort of a concept album.

Richasi: Q from Treb & Quidamgrl: When do we get it in our hot little hands? :)

BJ: Almost two years ago we started recording it in Ohio but because of the "other" job that we have, it takes a long time to finish it. But we're close. The final mixing will start in April. I personally hope to have a result in the late summer. Maybe August. So far it sounds pretty cool.

Richasi: Will the album be commercially available via Amazon or other online retailer or direct from the source?

BJ: As of now Craig does not have a record label for it but we are working on options. One of them is Cirques new music division, another is to create our own label but the easiest way would be to just sell it to a big label. I hope that works. The album really grew on me. I love the music and I feel incredibly blessed that I was allowed to play such a big part in it. So far we have a lot of bits and pieces and I think that I am safe when I tell you that it's quite good.

Richasi: You said in one of your communications that you were exhausted... circusboy wants to know what your average day is like now?

BJ: My average day is busy. I get up in the morning (depending on what time the first show is), shower and fight my way through one million Japanese to work. Then I will have a meal, a sound check and two shows. After that I might return straight to the hotel or stay to make some alterations or discuss some ideas with other artists or technicians. The evenings vary from going to a sushi bar to going straight to bed.

Richasi: Rod_digga wants to know if you're enjoying Japan and whether or not you're ready to leave?

BJ: That's a difficult question. I am very ready to leave. In fact, I want to leave as soon as possible. But that has nothing to do with Japan. I love Japan and most every thing I have seen here. But with our relentless schedule I have almost no time to see Japan and explore it. So I am not tired of Japan. I guess I am just tired of our schedule and of the fact that it is extremely difficult to communicate here and that many things within the Japanese culture will always remain a riddle for which I never had the time.

Richasi: Have you found the Japanese people to be patient with you? Have you attempted communicating with any Japanese?

BJ: Japan is beautiful. Above all I love Kyoto but also Nara, Hakone or Nikko. Everybody should go there and learn that there is a different world on this planet. I have communicated with many Japanese and just because I am an entertainer their patience is almost unlimited. But it is unthinkable not to be patient in Japan. You cannot push anybody! Patience is politeness and that means a lot here.

Richasi: Q from Quidamgrl: Have you learned to read/speak much Japanese?

BJ: Unfortunately I have not had the time to learn much Japanese. I guess I have picked up some words and phrases but I have to admit that my Japanese has remained poor. I think that we all are excited to go back to a territory where we can understand and comprehend and where our schedule is less demanding.

{Editor's Note: The rest of the chat time from here on out was open forum, which meant any of the fans could ask their question directly to BJ. This section has been edited to remove comments and/or questions not for BJ.}

Q: Is Richard Price performing with the show in Vancouver?

BJ: No, he will leave us in two weeks. He just came back to help Andree, the new singer. But trust me: Andree is quite up to the job. You will be pleased. The show sounds excellent at the moment. We have a new sound guy since Fukuoka and he really knows his job. We have also started to do multi-track recordings of every single show.

There might be a Quidam live album ahead. I am serious. There might be a live album. THERE MIGHT!!! Don't quote me on that one.

Richasi: BJ, what did you get to see out in Kyoto, Hakone?

BJ: I saw the Gion quarter in Kyoto and I actually saw a Geisha. Other than that I saw many shrines and temples and other sites in Kyoto. I went there several times. It's just beautiful. My favorite place in Japan so far.

Richasi: Did you happen to see the movie "Lost in Translation" and if so, can you relate to it?

BJ: I have not seen it. It's banned in Japan for its racist content. Some of my colleagues saw it and they did not actually appreciate it for its unbalanced view. The Japanese are strict with that stuff.

Richasi: Reading any manga or watching any anime while there?

BJ: Well, there are no translated mangas and I can't really read Japanese. But most everybody here reads them.

Q: Did ya make it up Fuji-san?

BJ: Fuji was on the agenda a couple of weeks ago. Went there with Laetitia, our young singer.

Q: BJ, are you going home or on vacation after Japan or are you going straight to Vancouver?

BJ: Home! There is no food like moms food. I will have about three weeks with friends and family and no drums. Home for me is a small city by the name of Aachen about one hour west of Cologne. But I will not spend my entire time in Germany. Just after flying into Germany I will pack a small bag again and fly to London and do a short bike tour with Richard Price. Just for fun among really good friends.

Q: Does Andre sound completely different than Craig/Richard?

BJ: Yes, he does. But he has his own beauty. I am quite happy about the fresh air he brought to Quidam. And trust me. Quidam is nothing like the DVD anymore.

Q: Do you think it'll be weird adjusting to a smaller big top after getting out of Japan?

BJ: Quidam has changed and evolved. It might be weird for a short while but I know that old big top so well. It will probably feel like coming home. Just bare with me. I don't play like Raynald who is on the DVD. I sound quite different.

Q: BJ, any new equipment upgrades since our last chat?

BJ: New overhead microphones, new mixing desk for me, new room microphones different snare drum and new socks for my costume.

Q: Are the crowds picking back up for the show? I know you mentioned somewhere along the line they were thinning out.

BJ: At the moment we are sold out straight. The Japanese take the end of a run very seriously. I hear that there are tickets for the very last show in the black market for over \$1000.

Q: How would you compare Marina Trouchina's handbalancing to Olga's?

BJ: Marina is more straightforward with her act. She does a couple of things that Olga would never have been able to do but she is a craftswoman. Olga was more poetic. Both have their beauty. I can't decide whom I prefer. But the music for the act is stronger than ever.

Q: Same music I assume, that Elena Lev performed to when she was contracted?

BJ: Elena was great to work with. What a nice girl. I think she preferred Alegría as a show because she could smile more but she loved Quidam for the friends backstage. Over all I think she misses Quidam a little more. At least, that's what she told me.

Q: Has the music for the Aerial Hops changed any?

BJ: Aerial Hoops sounds the same. The funny thing is that you will hear Craig Jennings on that. Richard always used to play didgeridoo on that and Craig did an impression of a monk voice. Andree had trouble with that so we sampled Craig's voice and in the very beginning and end you will hear Craig's voice for some seconds.

Q: What's the name to the Handbalancing song again? (Quidam)

BJ: I have no idea what the name of the handbalancing song is. We don't use the commercial names of the record. We just call the tunes by the names of the act.

Q: BJ, you ever work with Jutras on Quidam's music?

BJ: Of course I worked with Benoit.

[. . .]

BJ: Peter Jackson just came to see us the other week. Really nice guy.

Q: How is he to work with?

BJ: He is very specific with certain things. But I guess that after 3 and a half years and after being the longest serving drummer on Quidam we know each other well enough. He trusts me quite a bit and I have a lot of leeway. If he feels that you give your best he is very easy to work with. He sat with me in the drum booth and I had no comments from him other than that he loved to be there. After that we got pretty drunk with Irish beer. So what can I say?

Q: Does Benoit visit the show regularly to see how things are kept up?

BJ: Benoit is currently busy with MGM so he does not have a lot of time. But he likes to check on things every once in a while. The band at the moment is pretty good. So Benoit feels safe not to show up.

Q: Any clue what Audrey's doing now?

BJ: I have no idea what Audrey is doing. Unfortunately! But I'll let you know as soon as I know.

Q: What other show would like to play in?

BJ: I could see myself playing Alegría and La Nouba.

Q: How are Daniel and Asa doing with the show?

BJ: Daniel and Asa are doing really well.

Q: We heard Roman got injured. Is he doing ok?

BJ: Roman's right foot is broken so he is out of the show until late in Vancouver. Dima fell on it when the big tower in Banquine collapsed. Very unfortunate incident.

Q: How is everyone taking the fact that Guy is now on the list of billionaires? Does anyone care?

BJ: As long as Guy drinks Guinness with me, I'm fine. I think that most people are happy about it. In the end it indicates how successful we are. I personally don't care about how much someone earns. But he is a nice guy and still knows his vision. That's worth much more.

Q: What genre/style will Richard Price's solo project be?

BJ: Do you know Steely Dan? That would be the style of music for Richard. Just VERY intelligent Pop with lots of influences from Jazz, Rock and various other styles.

Moments after the chat came to a close. He did have 4 suitcases to pack he said, and to call his mother. And, even though we were sad to see him go we understood. Before he left, however, we advised him how much we looked forward to hearing him play on our pending CirqueCon 2004 trip to Vancouver. To that he replied, "I will be there, on stage, dressed in blue, drumming like never before."

BJ: Mesdames et Messieurs: Bonsior!

Hai, arigato gozaimasu, BJ!

Thank You!

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



RENÉ DUPÉRÉ

Composer – Alegría, Saltimbanco & KÀ

« A Conversation with René Dupéré »

Keith Johnson, 2006

One of my favorites, this was my first time re-arranging the bits and pieces of a live interview to make a more coherent article. It's also the first time we talked to a composer about the importance of creation musicians appearance on a shows soundtrack CD, which seems to be a litmus test with many fans. The interview was set up through the Cirque Montreal PR offices, though in the end it meant calling Mr. Dupéré's hotel directly. Amazingly that meant Cirque PR would not be listening in (which is much more common). Mr. Dupéré was wonderful and it was a fantastic hour, which got me accustomed to hour-long time slots, which are really more the exception. At the time we weren't aware that Mr. Dupéré was called in to work on KÀ at the last minute, after the music supplied by Benoit Jutras didn't work out – it's why he refers to the time as being high-pressure. Wish I'd known that then, I would have asked more about it. Mr. Dupéré has withdrawn from the web from what we can tell, the creationsnetza.com site mentioned below is now consumed with business partners Allaire and Ferguson's forthcoming musical "N-The Queen of Paris." His wife Elise Velle now has a new album out (perhaps that is what he discusses below), see www.elisevelle.com.



Before Cirque du Soleil, the world of circus music was populated by brass bands and marshal music arrangements. Certainly there were occasional forays into the unusual, but it was Cirque that pioneered the concept of bringing more modern, more "world-music" sounds into a circus context. Winning accolades and influencing countless others, it is the music of Cirque du Soleil that, through the ears, prepares the mind for the wonders about to unfold before the eyes. This is a tribute not only to René Dupéré, Benoit Jutras, Violaine Corradi, and other Cirque composers, but also to Cirque's ability to mesh all the elements of circus and stagecraft into a magical whole. Continuing on that tradition, and featuring a 40-member choir and 57-piece symphonic orchestra, the soundtrack CD for KÀ, the latest "resident" show at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, has been proclaimed by Cirque du Soleil as their "most ambitious musical project to date." It also marks the triumphant return to the fold of its first composer, René Dupéré (Ren-ay Du-pair-ay).

Every Cirque fan with more than a few soundtrack CDs in their collection knows Dupéré's name and have appreciated his music. His sound, with its lyrical nature and ethnic music influences, set the standard for Cirque shows to follow and gave the new circus its distinctive flavor. He has also had quite a successful career outside of the circus, with collaborations with his wife Élise Velle as well as other work.

Recently he very graciously took the time to speak with us from a secluded resort in Québec, where he and Élise were working on material for a new project for Élise. In Part One of our two-part exclusive interview, we talk about the new KÀ soundtrack CD, due to be released in the US on October 18 and currently available in the Cirque du Soleil Boutique (item #506615, \$19.50 USD).

Mr. Dupéré started by explaining how he came to the KÀ project. “My first career was as a teacher, the first job in my second career as composer was for Cirque du Soleil. I worked ten years with Guy Laliberté and the circus and left [after Alegria] in 1994. I wanted to do something other than circus music. But I told [Cirque] that if they had a special project, that wasn't under the big top and wouldn't really include that kind of music that I [would be interested].”

“So I worked in different fields of music including movies, television series, advertising, all that stuff. Around the end of March, 2004, Guy Laliberté called and said they were looking for a composer for the KÀ show in Las Vegas. When I asked him what kind of show it was he invited me to a run-through the day after, just before the cast left for Vegas. So I went to the studio in Montréal and watched the run-through and realized that it was a huge show, a live movie on the stage. The idea I had for the music was of a movie soundtrack, a mix between Lord of the Rings and Matrix. I called Guy back and told him my idea was to have the music treated as a soundtrack, and the references to the Lord of the Rings and Matrix seemed to appeal to him, so we agreed on that and I started working.”

“I started the next morning, with the idea of a movie soundtrack. For two months I stayed at home alone with my computers, composing. Nobody heard a single note, not even [partner] Martin Lord Ferguson or [show director] Robert Lepage. I wanted to propose at least half to two-thirds of the show in terms of demos and sounds that they would like to hear. I started writing very fast, because I came into the process very late. Normally [the composer is hired] one year before opening night; when I joined the show [in March, 2004] the opening night was supposed to be the end of July. But it was later postponed to November, and we were happy about that (laughs).”

Fast forward to May of 2004. “After two months, I had almost two-thirds of the show written in terms of the themes that were used. Then I sent the demos to Robert, and I had Guy and Martin listen as well. The only thing Guy told me was to be careful not to be too dramatic, because the show itself was dramatic. That was good advice, but he had heard only the dramatic music, not the music for the clowns. And there is some comic relief and poetic release in the show. [In the end] it went quite well, and the show is quite balanced in terms of emotion, [with] comic stuff and dramatic music, too.”

“Then I moved to Vegas, and Robert and I would talk almost every day. I'd adjust things, compose other things and cut things that I had already composed [due to changes in the show]. Just working and readjusting the music for the scenes with direction from the director. And since Martin and I work very fast, we could propose something [new in one or two days]. Then it was just a matter of putting it into the machine and putting the music in the theater. We realized that in two to six weeks we would be able to do any big change. Small changes could be done with the musicians on the spot.”

Many Cirque fans have been interested in what happens in that maelstrom of activity, the creation process, especially with a show whose scope and ambitions are so large. Dupéré explains, “It's always a work in progress. The difficulty [comes in] making things happen with the technology, because things are so big, you can't make changes [quickly]. For example, if you want to change the lighting for one scene and you have 2000 lights it's quite a chore, you can't do that in two hours. For some people it was a little difficult to work in that kind of “work in process.” I had no problem.”

And working with show director, Robert Lepage? “I've known Robert for 20 years. I saw his first show (“Circulations”) in Québec City 25 years ago. I really had fun working with him because I like people who are able to explain their demands. If they want something, and they can give you the right explanation, they give you a direction, like a movie director. And working that way with Robert was really interesting.”

Critical to the endeavor is Mr. Dupéré's partner, Martin Lord Ferguson. “He's my co-arranger and mixer. He's a fantastic mixer; he's been working with Pro Tools since he was a kid. I'm the composer and arranger, and he co-arranges with me and makes the sound bigger than I would have been able to. He's a very important person for me because when you do this kind of show - even if the music is really good - if it doesn't sound good, it shows.”

In prior interviews, Dupéré has commented that Cirque du Soleil is made up of 10% gamblers. We asked what gambles have been taken with this show. “The gamble of putting on a \$200 million USD show (the theater and the show) and hoping that it will work is a big gamble. On my side the gamble was to include pre-recorded music in a live show. I wanted to include a choir and symphonic orchestra, with live musicians playing along with those tracks. We have 32 tracks of audio on a hard disk running with the show, and nine musicians playing live. [The tracks are loaded in] a machine that allows you to move from one part of a song to another [seamlessly]. That was the biggest challenge, because you don't want the machine to crash in the middle of a show. It was really a technical feat to accomplish, and it works very well.”

To accomplish that feat, they first had to record the samples. “We recorded the orchestra and chorus in two steps. The biggest part of the music was done in Montréal in August, 2004. Then I realized I could put more choir in the Forest and Cliff scenes. So I came back to Montréal after the previews started (on November 26), and in December we recorded more choir music which we put [into the show] in January, just before opening night.”

How are the 32 tracks of pre-recorded audio prepared for playing in sync with a band in an unpredictable, live show atmosphere? Mr. Dupéré explained the process. “We first recorded the symphonic orchestra and choir on 32 tracks. Then we’d cut the songs into chunks of music. We’d cut a chunk from Bar 1 to Bar 8, and from Bar 8 to Bar 10, and another from Bar 10 to Bar 27. If you have a melody that lasts eight bars, you know you can’t cut the melody in two. But you can repeat the last two bars of the bridge after that section two, three, four times depending on what’s happening on the stage. So, if at Bar 10 we have a problem, and we want to repeat Bars 8 to 10 [the conductor pushes a button] and it goes back to Bar 8. Otherwise it would continue non-stop.”

“The hope is to not have to repeat any sequence because everything will go fine. But if you want to improvise on a sequence you just repeat that one chunk and when you’re finished you just let the music go. The beauty is that you can cross fade from one section to another, from one bar to another, from one song to another, as long as you have previewed it. We desperately needed that kind of [technology] because we wanted to use those 32 pre-recorded tracks in the show.”

“The machine we use is called a Symphonia. It’s already widely used in musicals in New York.” And it’s versatile. “For instance, if the oboe player is sick you can just replace him with a sampler. The machine follows the music, it can slow down and speed up, and you can switch from one section to another. In *KÀ*, we have a sampled symphonic orchestra and a sampled choir. And we have a lot of percussion played live by the band. And [we can be] flexible throughout the show.”

But when it came time to record the soundtrack CD, they didn’t just go back to those original 32 tracks of orchestra and choir. They recorded entirely new tracks with a new orchestra and chorus, to be mixed in with the already recorded samples. “The CD soundtrack was recorded at Paramount [about mid-July to early-August, 2005]. We can put these recordings into the show if needed, but the show sounds very good with the very special samplings that I used. And we did a lot of mixing between our samples and the [newly recorded] real orchestra so [the CD] sounds bigger. We took the best of both worlds.”

They did not use the show’s live musicians or singers, however. “We didn’t have time to go to Vegas and add [them] to the CD. The opening night was February 3rd, 2005, and we started working on the CD the week after. With rehearsing in the afternoon and performing two shows a night, five nights a week, they are exhausted. It would have been a chore for them to do the CD.”

“We wanted to do something else with the singers as well. The CD is telling the story a certain way and the show is telling it another way [with the added visual element]. We didn’t really want the same singers because we treated some songs quite differently; we even transposed a couple of things.”

Some fans have wondered, if a recording doesn't include the musicians involved in the creation process, can it truly be representative of the show? Dupéré notes that, "We didn't want to [replicate] the show on the CD. Because the format is different we added things that were intended more for the CD than the show, and the editing of the songs is different. But the color is the same. So you have orchestra, choir and percussion, and we added little spices on top of that."

Mr. Dupéré has said that soundtrack CD's should be "inspired by" the shows yet be able to stand on their own. Fans have suggested that the last couple of CDS releases, *Varekai* and *Zumanity*, have seemed to be on the outer edge of that in terms of taking the original source material and going in a somewhat different direction. Mr. Dupéré agrees, noting, "We were aware of that, we knew that *Zumanity* and *Varekai* were, I wouldn't say bizarre mixes, but were [different in] the conception of the CD itself. I think it's even more obvious with *Zumanity*, because "inspired by" is written on the CD cover. We didn't want that to be written on the *KÀ* [CD cover]."

"Although there are 16 pieces of music [on the CD], there are 10 to 12 that are really in the color of the show. You can recognize not only the color of the show but the moment where that music is used. And I thought that was obviously the way to do it. This is a show soundtrack, not a [pop soundtrack] with songs, a lot of airplay, techno stuff. Maybe we could [alter the songs] for radio airplay, but that wasn't our purpose. Not that we didn't want airplay. But basically the format is a soundtrack so it has to reflect the color of the show. Since the features of the music are the symphonic orchestra and choir we couldn't avoid them (laughs). It was the only way to treat the music."

There are also three "conventional" songs at the end of the CD. The first one, "If I Could Reach Your Heart" is sung by wife Élise Velle, and there are two additional "bonus" tracks, "We've Been Waiting So Long", and "Reach for Me Now." "We realized there wouldn't be any songs that would be [suitable] for airplay. So we tried to include some songs without interfering with the concept we had for the soundtrack. It was important for us that the CD goes from track 1 to 14, and the last song, sung in English and an invented language by Élise, is the end of the CD, and it's sort of a turning point to go somewhere else. Then [there are] seven seconds of silence and this leads to the other two bonus songs that are in English. We really wanted to treat those last two songs like bonus tracks, because that's what they are."

"They don't reflect the show because their purpose is to [carry on] themes that are in the show, but give another color. So the music has another color and the singer is different. "We've Been Waiting So Long" is based on the melody from "Shadowplay", and "Reach for Me Now" is based on the melody of "Deep." When played with a piano, sort of a Vangelis type of sound, it's the same song in a different musical world." In fact, it's wife Élise that brings the CD full circle by singing "If I Could Reach Your Heart," which is based on the melody of the first track she also sings, "O Makunde." "It "loops" the CD. And after that there are two songs that are something quite different."

Is there any music missing from the CD that he wanted to include? “There were a couple of things I would have liked to include. At the very beginning of the show there's a sort of “once upon a time” music. But we didn't know where to put it, because we really wanted the CD to start with Élise singing “O Makunde”, and ending with the English version of that and the two bonus tracks. So I didn't really know where to put this ‘once upon a time’ song.” While that didn't fit the concept of the CD as it was envisioned, they might still see the light of the laser. “We might do something for the first anniversary of KÀ next February. We might do a sort of an anniversary album and include two or three extra things, we haven't decided yet. I would include that “once upon a time” music and maybe a medley of different songs that are not used in the CD but are used in the show.”

What does Dupéré believe are the roots of KÀ's music? “I think this is more of a soundtrack than anything else. The roots would be my classical training and studies, and ethnic music. I've always been crazy about ethnic music. And some modern influences like techno and hip-hop, though they aren't really present, are in the show and are on the CD as well.”

And how would René Dupéré define his own music, what's his signature? “Modernity and lyricism, I think. I've often said it's a mix of Pink Floyd and Brahms. I also tell people that I'm sort of a romantic 19th century musician with 20th century technology.”

“And I must say that world culture is a part of my music, because I'm really aware of cultures, music from around the world. [Beginning when] I was seven my parents taught me about music. We had opera, and we had Cuban music from the fifties; Perez Prado, Xavier Cugat, that kind of mambo music. I remember being exposed to all kinds of music. And when I went to college there were priests that were really aware of different kinds of music, from Japan to Yugoslavia to Bulgaria, and they had us listen to [it all]. So I've been in contact with a lot of different musical cultures from early on and I think it shows in my music. With classical structure, that's really important to me.”

* * *

In the first half of our interview with Cirque du Soleil composer René Dupéré we focused on the music and soundtrack CD of KÀ. Here the 60 year-old Mr. Dupéré (who just celebrated a birthday) speaks about other projects and interesting bits of Cirque musical history.

The first recorded piece of Cirque musical output was a 45 by Cirque house band La Fanfaonie, with “Le Cirque du Soleil” and “Le Funambule.” After expressing astonishment we knew of it, Mr. Dupéré discussed its origins. “We were not with the circus at that time. We were meeting every year, in Baie-Saint-Paul where Cirque was founded, a big gathering of street performers and musicians. I believe it was in 1984, and with Guy Laliberté we chose those two songs, both of which I wrote. There also was one called “Percuefonie” but it wasn't on the 45. There was another 45 we did too, just for Fanfaonie. We just went into a studio and did it, in one night with a friend mixing. And that was it. I think about 1000 copies were made, I don't know how many we sold (laughs).”

Less rare is the first version of the “Cirque du Soleil” LP (Naga 1187). Most of the selections were re-recorded three years later to become the “second version” of the album that appeared in the US on RCA (RCA 62523). “Between 1987 and 1990 a lot of acts changed. By 1990 the CD was no longer reflecting the music of the show. So we had to change a couple of things. I wasn't there at that time, the other composer, Benoit Jutras (Ben-wah Joot-rah) did. He also arranged the first piece of the [Naga] '87 CD (“Ouverture”), an overture that was inspired by Mozart's “Magic Flute.” It was a nice thing he did, quite neat.”

Saltimbanco also enjoyed a re-recording, but for different reasons, and again at Cirque's urging. “They approached me. And the changes we brought to the CD we also brought into the show, new loops and string samples.”

“[The original recording of Saltimbanco] had the flavor of the 90's. There were a couple of things that I didn't really like, such as the harsh guitar sounds with the big fuzz of the 90's. [And] the percussion and ethnic flute samples were passé as a sound. I wanted to keep the essence of the music, not to change the music in itself, but to change a bit of the orchestrations and soften it a little bit. There was a lot of compression that we put on the voices [originally], so we loosened the voices. And we redid the ethnic flutes and percussion, keeping the ones that were really interesting and adding a little more percussion. And redoing all the synthesized string samples with real string samples. It was a matter of refreshing the whole thing and bringing it into the 2000's without changing the meaning of the music.”

Long-time readers will remember we broke news of the “first” Canadian reissue of the Alegria soundtrack (BMG 73442, 2002) being channel-reversed. (That is, what was originally in the left channel is now in the right channel and vice-versa.) It's a correction, or mistake, that has continued to today. Though Mr. Dupéré wasn't aware of the change, he isn't bothered. “You should try to experience it with somebody who's never heard the music. It's not like a symphony orchestra, where I have a big problem if I hear the strings on the right and the double bass on the left. But I didn't listen to the new version, so I'm really surprised.”

If given the opportunity to re-imagine the Alegria soundtrack, he wouldn't be as radical as with Saltimbanco. “Actually, if I had the opportunity, I would keep most of the music that has been recorded and remix it. I wouldn't change a lot in terms of the music because it's really up to date. I would change the bonus tracks, because they were recorded under the big top. That was one of the reasons I said yes to re-doing the Saltimbanco soundtrack, because I wanted to entirely re-do the bonus tracks which for me sounded awful. And it's the same with the Alegria bonus tracks, they don't sound the same when compared to the rest of [the music].”

“I would retouch the mixing and mastering and change a few small things. But in terms of the music I'm really quite satisfied. It's different, it has a more European flavor than Saltimbanco, which has a jazz fusion and rock sound. It has passed the test of time without being [out of date]. It's timeless.”

Though there are several pieces of music in Alegria that have never been officially released, he doubts he would include them if given the opportunity. That would include “Sisyphe,” the music for the swing hand-balancing act, though he doesn't recognize it by that name. “I can't relate to the title. Besides the music that's in the show, I composed three or four more pieces while it was on tour. One for a solo trapeze, one for a hand-balancing act, and one for a diablo.”

The opportunity to write new music as new acts are brought into a show isn't common, however. “It happened three times on Alegria, I think it happened once or twice on Saltimbanco (for solo trapeze and a balancing act). They try to keep the same acts even if the people change. That wasn't the case with Cirque Réinventé or Nouvelle Expérience. But since Saltimbanco they've kept the same music in the show, there's not a lot of new music that's needed.”

The music of the shows is very important to Cirque, and there are strict guidelines to preserve its integrity. “When there is any change they want to make they have to have my approbation. All the changes that were made to Saltimbanco, using the new loops and new instruments, I received a DVD [to approve]. Besides that, I go to each tour two times a year. It's almost one week every time I go, so I can listen to the show five, six, seven times and rehearse with the musicians. There is a lot of care about how the music is treated.”

Music written for Cirque shows has also taken on a life outside the traveling tent and permanent theater. Josh Groban made a hit out of Quidam's “Let Me Fall.” The company experimented with remixing for the two-CD set “Solarium/Delirium” (CDS Musique 10021). There is a whole new Cirque show, “Delirium,” using music as the basis for the visuals (as opposed to the other way around). And before that, “Soleil de Minuit (Midnight Sun),” a collaboration between Cirque and the Montréal Jazz Festival (www.montrealjazzfest.com), rocked the streets of Montréal. “The Jazz Festival brings hundreds of thousands of people to the streets,” Mr. Dupéré notes, “and cops are happy because nothing happens. People are quiet, there are no problems whatsoever.”

But we were surprised to hear that that street celebration of Cirque music wasn't the first; another one-time-only performance occurred ten years prior! “Alegria [had been] a big hit in Québec, in Canada they sold 200,000 units, which is double platinum for us. There were lots of articles in newspapers and so on. In 1995, the year after Alegria was released, people were really crazy about the music and about [Cirque]. So the Jazz Festival asked Cirque to work with them to put together a show that would feature circus acts, lighting, effects, and my music. There were 200,000 people in the streets. It was a blast! People were listening to the music as if they were in church, nobody was talking.”

“I started off the concert by playing tuba. Somebody read a letter from my mother on stage saying how proud she was. It lasted more than two hours. We had a 55-piece orchestra. Our singers were Élise Velle from Mystère, Francesca Gagnon from Alegria, and Francine Poitras from Saltimbanco. And in the end all 200,000 people in the streets were singing “Alegria” - what a choir! It was an incredible night.”

“Midnight Sun was different interpretations of the music, changing the orchestration and arrangement. The orchestrations were made by two guys from Montréal, they did a good job. But I wasn't actually involved with the show. It was more modern, more actual, more visual than 10 years ago. But I think '95 was more intense and moving in that the music was more like it was on the CD's. Sometimes when you listen to the same thing you like it played differently, but sometimes you like to hear the real thing. In the streets in 1995 we were closer to the content of the CD's. I wouldn't say it was the only reason people were moved, but I think it helped.”

In addition to several albums with his companion of 14 years and wife for three, Élise Velle, and his other projects (some of which are noted on their newly designed website, www.creationsnetza.com) Mr. Dupéré also composed the soundtrack to the Canadian television series, “L'ombre de L'épervier” (Analekta 8812). “In English it means, “The Shadow of the Hawk.” There's a saying where I come from that when you see the shadow of the hawk on the ground, and you look up and you don't see the hawk, something bad will happen soon.”

“It's about fishermen in the 20's who lived close to my home town. They were treated almost like slaves by a big company. The company “owned” the village and paid the fishermen with coupons that allowed them to buy things but only in company-owned stores, they couldn't go anywhere else. And the man and woman in the show decide that [they've had enough], and rebel against the company. We did 23 hours of the series, 13 hours the first year and 10 the second.”

We noted there were some pretty musical ideas expressed on the CD which we wished had been developed into a longer form. “I wish I had the time to do that, [but] because it's TV, they didn't have any budget. We didn't have the means to record with real instruments, so I did it on my own [with] synthesizers. It was fun, really fun.”

Musical ideas of the present are in the forefront for him now. “Actually, today we're working with Élise on a new CD for her. We're looking for sort of a “Buddah Bar” sound. We're foreseeing [releasing it] either next Spring or Fall, it'll depend on all the things we're working on. We're thinking of probably using a couple of songs from “Voyage”, [which] was released in Québec only. It'll have a little bit of French, a little bit of Spanish, but will mostly be in invented languages because that's one of our trademarks.”

Speaking of musical interpretations, how does he feel about “Solarium/Delirium?” “I was really pleased with what they did with “Delirium”. I wasn't crazy about “Solarium,” it could have been a lot more creative than it was. It's a matter of interpretation though; somebody else could have different feelings and I don't mind. I was pleased with “Delirium” because it has what I think is good about Cirque du Soleil, imagination and audacity. Especially with “Kumbalawé”, that way of putting things almost out of pitch, major/minor, was just great.”

Cirque has recently released the “Le Best of” Collection (CDS Musique 20022). He's well represented with five tracks, including “Égypte” from the no longer available studio version of *Mystère*. How would he populate a René Dupéré “Best Of”? “Everything I pick [would be] mostly ethnic stuff.”

- From the first “Cirque du Soleil” CD: “Trapeze” “Limp Bizkit [sampled that track], their song was called “Get Ya Groove On” (from “Electric Starfish and the Hot Dog Flavored Water,” Interscope 490759, 2000). They used 16 bars of music and put a rap on top. It was fun to hear that.”
- From *Nouvelle Expérience*: “Éclipse” “Because of that beat, like Dave Brubeck's “Blue Rondo À la Turk”.
- From *Saltimbanco*: “Kumbalawé,” “Horéré Ukundé” and “Il Sogno di Volare”.
- From *Alegria*: “Alegria,” “Querer,” and “Nocturne”.
- From *Mystère*: “Égypte” and “Caravena” (available only on the studio version).
- From “Voyage” (Netza 1440, 1995): “Ismya Vova,” “Mayalah,” “Naked Trees,” and “Argentina en la piel”. “I listened to [“Argentina”] the other day with Élise because we're thinking of doing a couple of things in Spanish.”
- From “Xotika” (Netza 1751, 1998): “Windspirits,” “Passione,” “Moon,” and “Earth,” “with the tiger roaring. And all the classic, sort of Brahms stuff.”
- From “Le Belle est Dans Ton Camp” (Netza 1441, 2001)” “Passage du Hasard,” “Lits de Papier,” and “À Tous Ceux-€”.

“The songs that I like most among all I have composed are “Argentina en la piel” (from “Voyage”), “Alegria,” and “Funambule” (from the *Fanfaronie* 45). [“Funambule” is] one of my favorite melodies. I wouldn't say it's the best one, but it's one of my favorites because it reminds me of souvenirs and remembrances and nice things that happened [in the early days].”

One of the nice things was an early friendship with Cirque CEO Guy Laliberté. We asked Mr. Dupéré, who is 15 years Laliberté's elder, for his impressions. “[He's like] a hawk or an eagle, up in the air and seeing everything.”

“It's really special here in Canada. I grew up in a different time in the history of Québec. I spent a long period of my life, including when I was a teenager and when I was an adult teaching kids, trying to [convey] what we were like as Québécois. That kind of separatist movement that we were part of. When I was younger we were trying to establish something here in Québec, because there was resentment against English people, for political, social, financial reasons. And that resentment could have been right or wrong, expressed or not expressed.”

“I don't think Guy felt that because he was from another generation where people were sure about their own identity, [they don't] have to show that [they] are Québécois. He knows that he is and that the planet is open to him. And it was. And it led to a kind of world vision. Watching him I realized that the planet was open to me also. And he's great at both finance and art. He can go from one to the other with equal strength in both fields. It's a crossover between two different worlds that's quite rare. And he's a very faithful man, faithful to his friends.”

How far ahead is Mr. Dupéré's life planned job-wise? “It's not, it's never been. I don't know what “career” means. I have to say “no” more often than “yes.” Though I must say I'm not a workaholic. I can work very hard for long periods, but when I stop, I stop. For example, we're in a suite here (in Québec), overlooking the lake, and I have all my synthesizers on the table, but I still feel like I'm on vacation. Because I can tame them, I'm the boss. (laughs) And usually I never work past five or six o'clock at night. At five I can just close up shop and have dinner with my wife, enjoy the evening. But I can get started at five in the morning.”

Having achieved many things in life, one has eluded him - playing cello! “But there's so much [else] to do. When I was 40 I wanted to learn something new, something I'd never done. I [had a choice] between learning Japanese and playing cello, and I decided to learn Japanese. I've since forgotten everything because I didn't get much of a chance to practice. But I can order sushi in a sushi bar with a lot of gestures and some monosyllables.” (laughs)

Drawing the interview to a close, we asked what words of wisdom he might have for young artists. “The act of creating,” he responded, “doesn't have to hurt, it can be fun. For me it's always been fun. If it's not fun there's a problem. Last June I received a PHD in Music (an honoris causa doctorate) from my alma mater (Laval University) in Québec City. And they asked me to talk. I spoke about five words that I felt were critical to success in life: Passion, Craft, Courage, Chance, and Talent.”

Speaking about two of those words, he elaborated, “There was courage because it took courage to do what we did with Cirque du Soleil. I left a job as a teacher, making good money in 1981 to become a composer - it took courage to do that, too. And chance, because if Cirque du Soleil had not been in Los Angeles in 1987 maybe we would not be talking today.”

Finally, we had to ask a person who has brought so much joy to the ears and hearts of so many people, what brought him joy? “Love. Family. Food. Wine. Nature. Silence. Friendship. I'm not sure about the order though.”

My sincere thanks go to: Mr. René Dupéré, for so graciously spending time with us, Denis Barnabé, Sales and Marketing Manager (for the initial contact), and Micheline Nalette, Media and Communications Coordinator (for arranging the details), both from Cirque du Soleil Musique, And my wife LouAnna for putting up with my sometimes obsessive hobby.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



JOHN-PAUL GASPARELLI

Musical Director – «O»

« Catching Up With John-Paul »

Keith Johnson, 2007

Oh, John-Paul, where did ye go?

To query the Internet now, you'd think John-Paul Gasparrelli is a famous drag strip racer. But long ago, there was an experienced and friendly keyboard player by the same name. We'd done a short email Q&A with him some months prior, but we wanted to do something more in-depth. He seemed willing, so off we went. Over a long period of time (that's just how it was in those early days) we corresponded via email in several back-and-forths. He took great care to be complete in his answers; even though it reads drier than some he has lots of interesting insight about learning to play and how to be successful as an artist. Aspiring musicians take note!

This interview led to one of my first Cirque "lifetime" moments. The interview had nearly reached the stage where it was ready for publication. He had wanted to make some small changes that I had questions about. At the time my wife and I were planning a trip to Las Vegas, so John-Paul suggested we work on it in his "office" at the end of his night. So we waited until the end of the late show and met up with him. I vividly remember sitting in the left musicians pod inside the "O" Theater, at the keyboard where John-Paul played and conducted every show, working on his edits. The warmth of the studio, the quiet, the low hum, the serenity of the stage/pool down beyond the glass front wall. It was a fantastic moment.

Sadly, John-Paul did not last long as Musical Director for "O", as he was removed from the position just a few months later. (Somehow that seems to happen a lot to Cirque musicians we interview – are we a curse? Or maybe their publicity department doesn't like it when artists conduct interviews without their knowledge.) He later scrubbed the internet of his presence and hasn't been heard from since. The Gasparrelli.com website is now dead.



We first met Mr. Gasparrelli with a short interview in our very first issue. At the time (September, 2001) he had just become the Musical Director/Keyboardist for “O” in Las Vegas. Though only Musical Director until Spring 2003, his story of how he became a musician, his climb up the ladder, and his thoughts on music are inspiring. John-Paul comes with an extensive resume. Primarily self-taught, he first came to LA in 1985, playing in many different groups and situations. From '94-'96 he was the Musical Director/keyboardist for “The Carolina Opry,” a musical variety show in Myrtle Beach, SC. He then returned to LA until mid-2001, when he ventured to Vegas and became keyboardist for Bellagio Casino/Hotel act Dian Diaz. Soon after Cirque came calling.

Q. What first attracted you to the piano?

Well, from the age of 10 to 14 I was an accomplished singer and actor in musical theater in San Jose and Sacramento community and summer-stock theater, which is where I started as a performer. After appearing in productions like “West Side Story”, “Damn Yankees”, “Tom Sawyer”, “The King and I”, etc., I discovered that I had a naturally good singing voice, so much so that I was being scouted as a child performer for Broadway shows. But my mother wouldn't let me fall into the “child star” thing, as too many of those end up not having a career as an adult. So, I was this child singer/actor in Sacramento, performing in productions with people like Molly Ringwald, who later went on to be a big star.

Q. You were being scouted by Broadway. Did *you* want to do that at the time?

Boy, and how! I had caught “the fever” as they say, and because it was so much fun and it was something that I could do successfully I was really into it. But my Mom and Dad, being the wise people they were and are, put “the brakes” on that situation. At the time I was unhappy about not having my parents be the “stage mother and father” that so many of my peers had pushing them. In retrospect, I am so thankful that I didn't end up a Hollywood casualty child-star. Practically all of the child performers that “make it” have *no* career after they are children. And my parents didn't want that for me, as much as they knew that I wanted it as a child. I'm very blessed to have such wise and caring parents. I probably wouldn't be where I am today if I had gone the “child-star” route.

Q. Many musicians it seems initially turn to music as an escape. Trying to get away from something uncomfortable, be it a hard home life, or school, or whatever. Would you say that was true for you?

Well, without going into too much detail, if you knew my early childhood you would know that from the time I was 6 to 10 years old, I had a very bad time. From ten years old and up, it became a very good time. I started performing when I reached my 10th year, and I think it was both a celebration of my “exodus” to a new life and probably also an escape from my previously horrible years. So I would say it was both an escape *and* a chance to find a way of expressing myself for the future.

Q. How did the piano come into the picture?

As I was being hired to sing at various events I had to frequently hire a pianist to play for me. So, after a friend's mother who played at her church showed me a couple of chords on the piano, I started figuring out, by ear, how to play music from people like Billy Joel, Barry Manilow, etc. Also, as I had played clarinet from the 2nd to 10th grades, I knew how to read music and I transferred this knowledge to the piano. So I had the ear thing going, as well as music training from the clarinet. As I got older, I started teaching myself jazz, R&B, pop and anything else I wanted to learn. I always had a good ear for copying things so most things I was studying came fairly easy. As I went into junior high and high school I became more and more interested in learning jazz and the singing thing, while still a strong focus, took a back seat to the piano, which had taken over my primary efforts. In high school I became the "school pianist" playing for anyone and everyone that needed a pianist, from the school choirs to the jazz band. You name it - I was there, and hungry to get as good as I could in all styles. From there I applied and was accepted to the Berklee College of Music in Boston. My high school jazz band teacher was an alumnus so he recommended that I go there. I went very briefly and returned to Sacramento shortly after to begin playing in dance bands.

Q. Who gave you your first keyboard?

My first keyboard was a small upright acoustic piano which my mother and father gave to me. I was about 12 when they bought it (the first of three acoustic pianos), and they also bought my first electric keyboard setup, which consisted of a Rhodes Stage 73 electric piano and a Korg Poly 61 synthesizer. I was so excited to get these keyboards - this was very big stuff for a blossoming keyboardist just starting to gig in 1983. My how times and technology have changed!

Q. What was your first paying musician job?

In 1980, when a drummer friend and myself (playing keyboards) were hired for a dinner party. Talk about a small repertoire - I think we knew about 12 songs then, and for four hours of music there were lots of repeats! As for my first paying gig as a performer, period, I was hired at the age of 12 to sing at a function in Sacramento. That was one of the ones when I had to hire a pianist (before I knew how to play!). This gig made me think that I should teach myself the piano and avoid the outlay of money. Ah yes - greed is indeed the mother of invention!

Q. What attracted you to making music your career?

Well, as a child, I always admired kids on T.V. that were performing, and wondered if I could do the same. I think the fact that singing and playing music has always come very naturally to me, without a lot of stress and difficulty, and the fact that (hopefully) what I play/sing sounds halfway decent, encouraged me to make it my career. (Not to say that it's been an easy road, because it most certainly has not been!)

Q. How did you first become involved playing keyboards in LA bands?

After returning from Berklee in Boston I was anxious to start playing “for real” and not just studying it in a classroom somewhere. I joined a local band in Sacramento, “cutting my teeth” with this and a couple of other local groups. After a few years I started looking to L.A. as somewhere I could play with great musicians *and* find more opportunities than Sacramento could offer. So one day I packed up everything, moved to L.A. and started “making the rounds.” It was a long process (as any effective networking process can be), but after a few years of playing with as many people as I could I started being able to make a decent living just doing music.

Around 1987 I moved to Long Beach after getting married, and met a singer named Derek Bordeaux. Derek had just started his own group at the time and he heard me playing with an excellent band in Newport Beach. He called me for a gig one day and things just snowballed from there. He ended up having the top R&B group in Orange County at that time (Derek and the Diamonds), they ended up being the “All-Star” R&B/Jazz cover-group of the time, attracting all the great players in that area.

This is the kind of thing that happened throughout my time in Southern California; you start getting a reputation (good or bad) as you play more and more in the area, and you start becoming a part of the network. By this process, I really got the opportunity to hone my playing and musicianship with some of the best players in the world...

Q. What lead you to start playing keyboards as backup for touring acts such as Expose and Debarge?

Again, by exposing (no pun intended) myself to as many opportunities as possible, by being “hungry” to get “good,” and playing for sometimes very little money gave me a decent reputation in the area. This led to lots of “word-of-mouth” situations, where out of the blue I would get calls from groups like DeBarge and Exposé to work with them. It really was a “climbing up the ladder” sort of thing; one thing always seemed to lead to another. Sometimes better, sometimes worse, but my playing skills and business sense always grew from whatever I was involved with at the time.

Q. Your involvement in the Carolina Opry is an interesting note on your resume. How did this opportunity come about? What did you take away from the experience?

Actually, during the country music boom of the early 90's, a guy I had become friends with in the 80's, and had stayed in touch with over the years, ended up moving to Nashville and becoming the musical director and keyboardist for superstar Garth Brooks. He and I had been friends before his big break, and when I found out he had started working with Garth I contacted him in Nashville to congratulate him. I had been working with, ironically, vocalist Johnny Lee (“Lookin' For Love In All The Wrong Places”) at the same time, so we had something in common.

When we finally got back in touch, he told me that I should consider moving to Nashville, as the “country craze” was hot at the time and there were many opportunities to work in this arena. So I took a chance and made the move to Nashville. (This was also because he had set me up for an audition with Wynonna Judd, which I flew out to and did great on, but didn't get the job because I was “from L.A.”) So, hopeful to get into this market, I once again packed up the truck and moved to Nashville.

When I got there, my friend set me up with lots and lots of auditions with many of the country stars of the day. But nothing really materialized with them, although I could play the material effectively. About the time I was considering giving up on Nashville, I got a call from the producer/director of The Carolina Opry in Myrtle Beach, SC. He had gotten my resume from a mutual friend, and was looking for someone with my background to add to his show. He flew me out to Myrtle Beach, and I was impressed with what I found. I was offered the job, and not having anything to hold me in Nashville I moved to Myrtle Beach and joined The Opry. A high-budget show and slick production, it was a great experience and gave me lots of valuable insight on how to be an effective musical director. It wasn't the level of show that Cirque du Soleil is, but it was very effective training and experience. And of course, living at a beachfront condo was great, too!

Q. After working in Los Angeles for many years, you moved to Las Vegas to play keyboards for Bellagio Bar act Dian Diaz. How did this opportunity come up, and why did you decide to make the move away from Los Angeles?

After I stopped working with Steve Oliver, Jeff Kashiwa and The Art Of Sax in L.A., I took a hiatus from playing music at all. I was increasingly becoming jaded with respect to the over-inflated politics, false promises, and the “much ado about nothing”-ness of the smooth-jazz world. You wouldn't believe all the nonsense that goes on in “elevator-music”-land, but it does and did, and I finally had had enough of all the phonies and such. So I took six months off to think about which direction I wanted to go in, as the smooth-jazz thing, IMO, had become a dead-end market.

One day I got a call from old friend Bruce Conte (the founding guitarist of Tower of Power) to play with his band on their regular “run to Vegas.” Bruce had been in and out of The Art of Sax over the years and we had become good friends.

So off to Vegas I headed! Once there I ran into another former band-mate that had moved there, and he told me that Cirque du Soleil was looking for a keyboardist for the “Mystere” show. He got the contact info for me, and I immediately became interested in the organization. I sent them my newly-released CD and promo kit, and hoped for the best.

A day before the end of my run with Bruce in Vegas I received a call from Cirque, inviting me to audition. I accepted and they Fed-Ex'd me the material. Two days later I went to audition and did well. I went back to L.A. hoping to hear from them, but never did. So I decided to take a chance and move to Vegas and hope for the best.

Once in Vegas I started looking for work. Within a couple of weeks I heard that vocalist Dian Diaz was looking to replace her keyboardist in her house band at the Bellagio. Wanting to work I made arrangements to audition, and was offered the job. It turned out to be a great experience and gave me the opportunity to work with many of the current great Vegas players, including Dian, herself a wonderful vocalist.

Then, three months after my audition with Cirque, I got a phone call from Montreal asking if I would be interested in becoming the musical director of "O". Of course I said "Yes!", and a week later they offered me the position.

It's amazing what happens when you just "throw yourself out there," and do your best. I'm very grateful for all the great things and great people I have been involved with. A wonderful career, to be sure.

Q. You produced your own CD, "Moonlight." Why did you decide to produce an album?

For the longest time I felt the need to officially realize my musical ideas and abilities into a tangible medium. Just to have my playing ability and ideas just "floating around out there" is not a good idea if you're serious about making the most of your career. So I decided to make the commitment to do a CD *for real*, and not to compromise on any part of it, putting as much into it as my resources and ability at the time would allow. I knew many people that I was playing with that had taken halfway "stabs" at making their own CD and they always seemed very "homemade" to me. This was something that I wanted to avoid as I really feel, when you make your own CD, that it is truly your "calling card" and that people get the gist of who and what you really are with regards to your talent, your attention to detail, and your self-image. There is a saying - "You only get one chance to make a first impression". I think, especially when producing your debut CD, that this is a true statement.

Also, when you want people in the industry to take you seriously as a viable candidate for whatever they may be needing someone for, having a well-done CD is vital. It really is your "calling card", and that's why I spent so much pain-staking effort in making it the best I knew how at the time.

Q. How long did the album take to put together as a project?

From start to finish the CD took about a year and a half. The good thing was that I was able to figure out on my own how to do everything to produce it. I literally did everything from the recording, composing, arranging, playing, singing, producing, engineering, mixing, etc. The things that I did not do were the saxophones, some of the vocals and guitars, and some of the drum fills. The photography was from an ace guy in L.A., and the design work was done in partnership with a graphics guy in L.A. as well. It's amazing what can be done with enough time, energy, some great keyboards, a good mic and a Macintosh G4 computer!! It really is limitless if you invest the time into it. I think all in all it was a very good first effort.

Q. I agree with you, the CD is a very good “calling card.” How much did the album cost you to produce? How many copies did you have made?

The album cost about \$3000 in actual money spent. That obviously wouldn't be taking *my* time into account as there were hundreds of man-hours involved on my part. The fact that I was able to do most everything myself with the Macintosh computer really made a huge difference. I had about 1200 copies made. To be honest, I never had any illusions about “making it big” with this CD - it really was intended to be a good “calling card” to show my abilities as a player, writer and producer. And I think it succeeded in this context.

Q. When did you start recording, and were you also working during that time?

I started at the beginning of 1999. The actual recording of the parts went pretty fast once the arrangements and parts were there. That was the part that took the longest. Creating arrangements and parts that worked correctly were the toughest thing to make happen. It really takes a period of time to “age” parts and arrangements that you come up with. What may sound correct and exciting one day may (and often did!) sound dumb the next. So being patient and letting time pass really makes the difference. If I can listen to something over and over again over a long period of time then it works. But if I listen to something over the same period of time and it starts bugging me, or I get bored, then it's time to change it. Obviously you can't wait forever, but I think you start realizing when something is right and when it's not.

I was indeed gigging and working in L.A. during the time I was producing my CD. I was living in Pasadena and was playing with some great jazz players, which really fueled my input into the album and sharpened my “chops” for when it was time for me to play on it as well.

Q. How long did the actual recording and mixing take?

The recording took about four month's total, but the mixing is where the work really is! I spent SO much time mixing, remixing, listening in cars, people's homes, other people's sound systems, etc. to be able to make sure that the arrangements and mixing would translate correctly in as many environments as possible.

What sounds good or powerful in one environment may sound lame and weak in another. My mixing concept is one thing that will change on the next CD. I think that my CD would have been even better if I had mixed it in a pro commercial studio instead of my various apartments at the time. And having a “real” engineer, which I would never consider myself as, is a must. There are so many tricks and things that a real recording engineer can do that I, being a musician primarily, will never know. What I did have when mixing were my ears. As they are pretty good, and I have a strong idea of arrangement, this is what saved my CD from my ignorance of “real” engineering.

Q. Which aspect gave you the most pleasure?

Writing and playing the piano stuff. Being a piano player first and foremost I'm fairly proud of the piano playing on the CD. Not the best in the world to be sure, but I still think it's pretty good. Also I had fun, and am proud of, the synth bass parts. Playing bass in a song correctly is one of the hardest things to do, and coming up with the right part is tough. You have to have the right sound and be strong, but not *so* strong as to be noticed. If you notice the bass over the song then it's too much. But if you notice how much the bass *isn't* noticeable, but is subliminally carrying the song and grooving, then you're doing it right. I think the bass stuff is really good on this CD.

Q. Do horn arrangements come easily for you?

Actually, I love making horn section stuff with keyboards. I am very much influenced by groups like Chicago, Earth Wind and Fire and the big bands, and am an avid admirer of genius horn arranger Jerry Hey. I have studied their horn arrangements for years and really have made an effort to discover what makes them work and how to create them. One of the things I was hired a lot for in L.A. was my ability to simulate a live horn section with keyboards. I have one of the best horn section sounds in my keyboard rig that you'll hear. Playing with all the jazz and R&B groups that I did in L.A., you start figuring out how to make keyboards sound like a real horn section.

Q. What do you think makes your keyboard horn sound so good, and how have you modified it to make it so? In other words, what makes a good horn patch sound? Is it more the sound, or the way it's played?

It really is a combination of things, but I think it comes down to how you phrase what you play. The basic sound is very important, but once you have a good sound, if you don't understand how real horn sections phrase things and what they *wouldn't* play, then you get into trouble. Understanding the limitations of ensembles and implementing that when you are simulating them is really the key. Having all the technique in the world doesn't make any difference as a keyboardist if you don't first understand what these ensembles play and what they don't. Dynamics, harmonic content, voicing patterns and articulations are all so vital when trying to create a believable horn section (or string section, for that matter). I often hear players trying to play horn stuff on keyboards that is just plain embarrassing, because they just haven't taken the time to really study what's going on.

/// THE MUSIC BUSINESS

Q. Being a professional musician can tend to be a very mobile career, meaning you move where the work is, more often than other professions might. Has that been true for you?

Yes I have had a very mobile life due to the ever-changing nature of the business. But I don't think that being mobile is an exclusive trait to the music business. I am starting to discover that to be truly successful in *any* business or career, you have to be willing to be "liquid" and not get too comfortable in any one place forever. The people that I have seen *not* do this have stagnated or missed opportunities that would never come again. The fact that I have been open to change, and being "uncomfortable", has led me to this place in my life. I look back on the toughest, most uncomfortable times in life and they were when I was "on the move". But they were also the times when I was playing at my peak and composing my best stuff. So it's a trade-off. But being "willingly mobile" is a vital factor for *anyone*, not just musicians, to be truly successful and long-lasting.

Q. Can you be steady location-wise? Can you settle in Las Vegas and expect to play for 20-25 years?

I've met people here that have been playing Vegas since the early 60's (with Elvis no less!) and are still going strong. Vegas, for all of its craziness, is a great place to be a musician. There is so much entertainment here and it's only getting bigger.

Q. What changes have you seen in the musical performance business since you started?

When I started playing in L.A. nightclubs in the early 80's it was a booming time and very popular. Jazz, R&B, Funk and Pop were very viable things in that town and you could make a decent living playing that stuff. Today I know so many musicians that have had to quit music because that whole scene in L.A. is now gone. Times and music do change and it certainly has in L.A. It's like the jazz scene in NYC in the 30's and 40's - by the 50's that scene with Bird and Gillespie was over and Rock had replaced it.

Q. What is the scene in L.A. like now?

As far as I hear from my friends that are there it's a tough scene. I mean, who wants to hear a third-rate version of "Brick House" or "Mustang Sally" yet again for the millionth time? Most people do not. And club-owners are not attracting paying customers with that at their clubs. To these people that are there for their art, I take my hat off to them. But to me life should be a balance, not an extreme of any direction. I think that you can be great at something in your life without it having to be at the expense of having a prosperous and somewhat "normal" thriving existence. So many people I know think that to be good and "real" they have to lead a forever struggling way of life. If you have integrity and are true to what's honest and real then things will come your way eventually.

Q. Which gets more jobs in your opinion - niceness, attitude (or self-confidence, some might call is arrogance), or talent? I know they may all factor in to some degree, but which is primary?

In my opinion, to be really successful you have to have the total package. If you're a nice person but have no real talent or skills, you can only go so far. People hire people that can deliver "the goods" more or less. Likewise, if you're amazingly great at what you do but have lousy people skills, are dishonest, mean, or are bad in handling business, then as great as you may be talent-wise you will only go so far as well. I think you can be confident and very able without being a jerk or dysfunctional. But unfortunately I've found that most of the bad rap that musicians get is well-deserved. A lot of musicians are one way or the other - either amazingly talented but impossible to count on and/or work with, or are really easy to work with but cannot do the job correctly and have very little talent. Then you have the nightmare person - the person who is a jerk, is mean and/or dishonest, and also cannot play or perform. And amazingly enough these people are working a lot. It's a strange brew. Personally I have learned from many over the years how *not* to be or act. I'm not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but my goal has been and is to be the best person I can be, deliver the best possible product, and help as many as possible *whenever* possible. I think with this combination and philosophy success will follow *you*!

Q. Have your job experiences changed your outlook on music, how it is used, or how you may use music in the future? If so, how?

It's funny - when you get "outside your box", and go out into the world *without* a safety net you start realizing just how many amazing opportunities there really are out there but had been invisible until you made the choice to see and investigate new ideas and ways of thinking.

Q. Which has more "staying power" in the industry, singers or musical instrument players?

It really depends upon how resilient your body and mind are. Some singers can sing great for their whole lives and some burn-out in 2-3 years. Some instrumentalists play through their 80's and 90's, and then there are those who get carpal-tunnel syndrome or some other malady that stops their craft. It really depends upon how you treat your body and mind and how careful you are in life.

Q. Do you ever get Carpal Tunnel symptoms (I've always wondered how working musicians care for their hands)?

Yes, I have it and it is irritating sometimes. But working out every other day in the gym makes it less noticeable. It really doesn't affect me or my playing, knock on wood!

Q. Another musician-health question: Do you have tinnitus (ringing in the ears, often caused by repeated exposure to loud noises)?

I have been fortunate to not have developed it, although why I haven't is a good question. For years I stood next to a very loud saxophonist (who shall remain nameless), and the volume really took its toll on my ears.

Thankfully my ears have stood up against that punishment from years past. I don't think I will ever (knock on wood) have to worry about playing music at such loud levels again.

/// MUSICAL PHILOSOPHY

Q. How would you characterize your music? What would you call it?

I think that forcing your music into one or another category can border on taking yourself too seriously from the consumer's point of view. Sure, you have to have an identity of what and who you are, but I think that if you just go with the initial idea of your sound it will find its way by itself, without you having to force it down anyone's throat. I think music can be seen in many stylistic ways, and why limit yourself? I think it's funny and self-indulgent for jazz musicians to try and reclassify themselves as "rock" for legitimacy's sake. It's like those guys in wedding or lounge bands that are balding but have ponytails, and are still "rocking out" on guitar or whatever - the image that *they* have of themselves and what others see are totally different. Same thing with music; you really have to have the honesty and the *courage* to see yourself as realistically as possible.

But I think it is good driving-around-in-your-car music. It's kind of the "smooth-jazz" thing, for better or for worse!

Q. "Smooth Jazz" - That's exactly what I thought when I first heard the "Moonlight" CD. How do you feel about that characterization is it bothersome?

Well at one time, like anything else, it was a compliment to be considered "smooth-jazz". Now I believe it is definitely not. Just like when country music was hot with Garth Brooks, now it isn't anymore. You can't get stuck in one style, you have to move and grow. I know so many people that refuse to change with life. They stick with one thing that is comfortable and then rationalize their determination to be stagnant and lazy. I have to admit that it's an easy thing to get stuck in if you aren't careful. But it's dangerous, and the times when I have had the most success are the times I tried to re-invent myself and what I wanted to do. For example, I'm not a big Madonna fan, but I admire the fact that she's always looking to improve and refine what she is doing. She didn't get stuck in one thing and then tried to live on that forever. I couldn't tell you the last hit she had or sing the melody of her last single, but as a performer and artist I commend her on not getting complacent. She is a great example of what someone can do if they try to think "outside the box".

Some people I know try to formulate their musical output and I think that's ridiculous, like producing musical "fast-food". The "smooth-jazz" market and artists that I know are just making glorified "elevator music" in my opinion. I know that will put some people off by me saying that, but the truth is the truth.

For my next CD I will be very conscious of not being “smooth-jazz” as I think it's an easy thing as a musician to sell-out and default stylistically. Especially if you've ever had the delusion of grandeur of being the next Kenny G, David Benoit, or Boney James. It's time for all the smooth-jazz drones to find something else to do and quick!

/// THE CIRQUE GIG

Q. Have your job experiences changed your outlook on music, how it is used, or how you may use music in the future? If so, how?

I think my entrance into Cirque made me realize that there are so many other possibilities in music than I ever realized. It's funny - when you get “outside your box”, and go out into the world *without* a safety net you start realizing just how many amazing opportunities there really are out there but had been invisible until you made the choice to see and investigate new ideas and ways of thinking. The music of Benoit Jutras in “O” really struck me as an amazing example of how combinations of instruments previously thought of as “un-combinable” have been combined to create an amazing tapestry of sound and emotion. Benoit is a modern-day genius. What he has done with the art of composition is really something, and has opened my eyes a little more to the amazing possibilities of composition and arranging.

What I think I will get from Cirque on a musical level is a deeper insight as to how to discover my talents on writing for film and theater, which is something I have been considering trying my hand at. It won't be in any way as strong a focus as my work with “O” and won't be for some time to come. I don't think at this point I could ever seriously consider a paying career in that but you never know what the future may hold. In any case, my exposure to the music in Cirque, and the longer I am around it, will give me more and more education and initiation into the complex world of film and theater scoring, the next frontier for me, personally...

Q. What is the most challenging thing (about being a musician)?

Lately it's been to keep the “O” band in tip-top shape with regards to making sure that things always stay on the top level quality and consistency-wise. It's a tough show to play 10 times a week, and making each one sound as precise and fresh as the very first - it's harder than you would think. But it's a great challenge and one that I really enjoy and feel I am successful with.

Q. You say you've taken much time getting the “O” show together. What were the difficulties you had to overcome regarding your Musical Director's job at “O”, other than learning how to work the keyboard setup?

The show was indeed together quite properly. As with the addition of any new band member, or myself, there was the initial “fitting-in” to the situation, and that does indeed take some time to settle.

I took quite a bit of time, and still do, to make sure that I continually study the various acts on stage so that I can more effectively call the musical sections to them. The better you study the many variations of what can happen with the acts during a show the better prepared you are when strange and inevitable things occur (which they sometimes do!) I don't think you can 100% anticipate what each and every situation will be like during a show so you constantly try and learn as much as you can, so that you aren't caught too off-guard when something out of the ordinary happens.

When I first began the show the whole concept of “calling” sections of the music verbally to the band as the action occurs was quite new to me, and completely different from anything I had ever done. Although I learned the show in about 4-6 weeks time, and was conducting it alone after 8 weeks, it was quite a challenge to take on the responsibility. Gaining the confidence of knowing that you can handle with calmness and control _any_ situation that may arise is the biggest challenge. Also, getting the rest of the band to trust and have confidence in my decision-making was something that was very important to establish from the very start, and I am happy that we all have a very good and mutually supportive relationship. The band is made up of very wonderful people. Each member really brings something special and different to the show and it's the chemistry of the band that really makes the music work as smoothly as it does. I am very privileged to be working with such gifted and wonderful people.

Q. How do you keep the O band in “tip-top shape”?

Even the L.A. Lakers need constant practice and attention to detail. I like to think that no matter how great people are doing there is always something to improve. I take this concept to myself as well. This band is wonderful and to stay wonderful it requires someone who cares and tries to always bring out the best in them, both as people and as musicians. I think that I have been successful in doing this for the band of “O” and they have been successful in doing that for me.

Q. What is the best thing about being a musician?

Sleeping in as late as you want, although I do get up every day at 9:30 A.M. or much earlier lately - insomnia, go figure! Seriously though, I do feel truly blessed to be able to make a good living doing this - playing my instrument and making music for money as well as pleasure. Being a musician has introduced me to the most amazing people and situations as well.

Q. What inspires you?

The fact that my professional life has become so successful inspires me to trust and believe that my personal life will follow suit. I've always hoped that, professionally, things would go this well.

Q. What recommendations would you give to young folks just starting out, musicians who are interested in a *career* in music (as opposed to those who think they'll make the rare “big splash”)? My interest here is on what one can do when young to make a sustainable living performing music.

As with anything getting a real foundation in the basics of a craft is essential to having longevity in the chosen industry. These kids that just want to “be a star” are living very dangerously. They have no real skills at the craft, and as a musician I think it's more reliable and desirable to have a real, tangible ability to perform a service that cannot be subjective in its inherent worth. For example; you may think you're going to be the next Madonna but not everyone else will think so. But if you spend 20 years becoming a great pianist no one can dispute that you are a great pianist, if that's what happens from it. You will most likely always work. But as the next Madonna you may work, but most likely you will not. It's about choices and about how much time and effort you are willing to put into something.

I always thought that investing in developing content and quality as a musician was much smarter than trying to figure out how to fool people with image and glitz. What I do and what I am as a musician may not be as “sexy” as what Billy Idol, does but I'm not complaining. I take great comfort in knowing that, despite what trends may come and go, no one can dispute that I am a competent player and that I know my stuff. And this is because of the *time* and work I have put in and nothing more. It was a *choice*.

But this has definitely come at a price, a lot of time, sacrifice and work. But I wouldn't have it any other way. To me you either do something right or you don't do it at all. To think that you can depend upon what's “trendy” at the moment to propel you and yourself to riches and fame is a crapshoot at best.

So - in my long-winded way, to aspiring musicians wanting to have a long, enjoyable career in the arts I say this: learn the fundamentals, learn the basics, and learn them well. Do it right from the beginning and you won't regret it. There is no shortcut. Even if you become an amazing musician it is still a hard, tough road, full of uncertainty. And that's where you need to hone your people skills. You need both - hard work at the basics of your craft and great people skills. One without the other and you won't make it. And then be prepared to spend 20 years making it happen. And then *keeping* it happening. I never let my guard down for a minute. The time I do someone will come in and move me out. And one more thing to remember: have fun and don't take it too seriously. Important words. But by all means - learn music and your craft FOR REAL, not a shortcut via image and fads.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



STEBEN SISTERS

Trapeze Artists – Saltimbanco & «O»

« A Perilous Leap: The Steben Sisters »

Keith Johnson, 2007

This was my/our first real try at an "interview." We had done some short emailed pieces with folks before, but this – speaking live to the subject with a conversational give-and-take - was different. I made a lot of "newbie" mistakes. Offering to submit the final article to them for approval was one of them – we don't do that anymore! But I had no history or reputation and was willing to do anything to "get the story." The whole endeavor was a real struggle with long delays. Just to get the interview took a long time, as detailed in the introduction. Submitting it to them was another waiting game. In fact, they never "officially" approved it, but eventually all the parties moved on so three years later we published it.

I had a delightful hour with the Stebens. How naïve was I to think I would get "only" an hour and have to cut my questions down accordingly. It's much more common to get a half-hour, an hour is considered a luxury. And I can see how the question on compensation should have been considered "off limits." But we had heard that artists could make more money doing private/corporate events than by being in Cirque, and we wanted to know. I suspect that might be true of "best in class" acts like the Stebens but not so true of former athletes turned acrobats, which make up a large percentage of Cirque's rosters.

The Stebens were great, open and interesting. If the piece is good it's because of them, not me. Their description of the creation process was fascinating, it was the first time we'd heard the process described in depth by people who've been through it. We include here the original introduction to the article, which was re-written at our Zinzanni contacts insistence.



Here at Fascination! we don't get many opportunities to interview people one-on-one, to say nothing of talking with artists as renowned as the Stebens. Usually any politely worded request for an interview is rewarded with – silence. It's not like we don't try, though. But when we heard that the Steben Sisters would be appearing for a limited time in our local Seattle production of Teatro Zinzanni (www.zinzanni.org), we knew we had to try and see if we could talk to them. So I got in touch with Doug Cavarocchi, Head of Publicity at One Reel Productions (www.onereel.org), the non-profit arts organization that produces Zinzanni. Would the Stebens possibly consent to talk with us? I asked. Doug agreed to forward our request along and so we waited.

And waited.

For his part, Doug tried several times on our behalf to get an answer from the Stebens management (who clears all interviews) without hearing anything back. So we chalked it up as another polite, silent “No” and went about our business. Almost two months after our initial request Doug contacted me again. “Well, this is how it always is,” his email began. “Sarah Steben just stopped by and let me know that they would be happy to meet in person...Could you meet them at a coffee shop here near the tent...it could even be this weekend.”

After we picked ourselves off the floor reality started to settle in. This weekend? That's not much time to do research and come up with questions! Where does one start? Google searches turned up some information and the Carnivale website had a nice bio. There were also items scattered around the web, but much of it contradicted.

Of course any Cirque fan worth their clown nose knows of the Steben Sisters. Karyne (kah-HREEN) and Sarah Steben, identical twins, wowed audiences as the Duo Trapeze act in Saltimbanco. Their feet to feet and ankle to ankle catches were breathtaking (and can be seen in all their glory on the Saltimbanco DVD). They also amassed a mantle full of awards for their innovative act. From that fame they went on to also be featured in O. Since leaving Cirque they've conquered new vistas, such as appearing as the Siamese twins Alexandria (Karyne) and Caladonia (Sarah) on the spooky HBO series “Carnivale.” They've appeared in movies (“When Night Is Falling”), an Aerosmith Video (“Jaded”) and created an act for Madonna's “Drowned World” tour. Karyne even has two pregnancy fitness videos (available through www.progressiveparent.com).

[Since this interview, the Stebens have stopped performing as both now have children. They were last seen teaching a circus arts class (including a workshop especially for women) at Le Studio, a Santa Monica, CA rehearsal space run by fellow Québécois Nathalie Gauthier. (<http://www.gauthierartists.com/>) Though they say they may someday return to performing they are enjoying their break from the circus life, residing in LA where they live five minutes apart.] By the time I had completed my research, I had a full page and a half of questions. It was only then I found out the amount of time I'd have with them – one hour at the most. Oh my, time to edit those questions down to the really important ones! We culled and tossed questions until we came up with our “Top 30.”

It was a sunny spring Friday when my wife and I parked near Uptown Espresso at the corner of Fourth and Wall Streets in Seattle, just two blocks from the Teatro Zinzanni tent and right across the street from condos in which the Stebens were staying. I had my questions, and gift Aplets and Cotlets all at the ready. In a small conference room off to the side of the shop we set up and waited.

It wasn't long before a man and woman walked in and I knew it was my One Reel contact with one of the Stebens. Though since they're identical twins I couldn't be sure which one. As we shook hands I asked not to be told which Steben she was so I could take a stab at telling them apart. Though I was ready and had carefully studied photos of the duo, I didn't need to. Upon mentioning that her sister had to deal with "the baby" and would be coming by shortly, we knew instantly that this was Sarah. The cat was out of the bag!

Close-up the twins are adorable and virtually identical (though there are ways to tell them apart). As they spoke, their responses tinged with French Canadian accents, it was easy to tell how close they are - finishing each other's sentences, looking at each other as if sharing unspoken thoughts, occasionally touching. With Sarah (the "catcher") to our right, her sleeveless shirt revealing trim muscular arms, and Karyne (the "flyer") to our left, we began.

###

KJ: I found contradictory information about your history on the websites I looked at. Let's go through it. You were born in 1974 in Montreal, and you started appearing in your fathers' TV show, Les Satellipopettes, when you were six?

SARAH: Yes.

KJ: And you started gymnastics at age seven?

SARAH: Nine.

KJ: And then moved to the trapeze at age ten?

SARAH: Sixteen.

KJ: There are lots of errors out there!

SARAH: I know! People publish without checking with us first. And they make so many mistakes. (Laughs)

KJ: In your trapeze act, your foot-to-foot technique takes everyone's breath away. How did that become about? Has that technique been around a long time?

KARYNE: We were the second couple in the world to do it. The first were two African guys, the Ayek Brothers. Their teacher is our teacher as well. Actually our teacher was doing it too so I guess it comes from him. He says he tried it in practice but never performed it.

SARAH: He was a contortionist, very tall and impressive.

KARYNE: He's from Africa but lives in England and speaks Dutch. When we met him he didn't speak French very well and we didn't speak English. So it was really funny [trying to communicate].

KJ: Who brought you and your teacher together?

SARAH: Andrew Watson. He wasn't Artistic Director then, he was an Artistic Coordinator for Saltimbanco. And he wanted to take this project [us] under his wing.

KARYNE: So he asked Guy if he could take us and make an act.

SARAH: [Andrew] was a trapeze artist himself. So he contacted Basil [Soultz], who was his teacher back in London and told him, "I have these girls, they're identical twin sisters, they have long legs, I think we could do something great with them." And Basil said, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking? Let's do a feet-to-feet number." Basil had seen this technique in a circus performance when he was young and wanted to create an act like it.

KJ: So Cirque was responsible for creating your act? Cirque found you and put you together with your teacher of the feet-to-feet technique?

SARAH: What we said was, "Let's give it a try." And working with our teacher we found new positions and ways to do the movements. We also gave names to the movements.

KARYNE: And we invented several new movements. It was a really nice experience. At first when they asked us to try the feet-to-feet catch...

SARAH: ...We tried, for a couple of seconds. But we couldn't hold it!

KARYNE: We hid and cried. We were like, "What are you thinking? It's impossible!" It's hard enough to catch each other like this (clasps arms) because we're the same weight. I remember saying to my sister that night, "I don't want to do this."

SARAH: The bruising of the skin was the worst. The skin on the top of the foot is so sensitive and thin that it bruised right away. We broke the veins in our feet so many times, so there was this big bump. And they said, "Keep on doing it."

SARAH: You know you've had a successful move when you can feel the pain. If you don't feel the pain you know you're falling. (Laughter)

KARYNE: That was at the beginning.

SARAH: And now we have crocodile skin.

KARYNE: Yes, the skin got thicker. Now we don't feel anything.

KJ: In 1992, when you were 18, you won a Gold Medal at the Cirque du Demain (Circus of Tomorrow) Festival in Paris. When did you join Cirque?

KARYNE: We had already joined Cirque at that time. We hadn't signed anything, that was kind of the [audition]. They wanted to see how we performed. Cirque du Demain was our first performance.

SARAH: There was one before that in Russia though. Cirque sent us to Russia to make sure we were good performers.

KARYNE: It was quite an experience for us.

SARAH: They sent us to Latvia, and for us it was another world.

KARYNE: It was our first experience of circus. We were in this show - not a festival, it's called a gala.

SARAH: It was a little bit hard for us because we had this blue silk costume that was shiny with big diamonds and things.

KARYNE: Cirque offered these costumes to us.

SARAH: When we got there everybody was dressed in khaki or long, yellow, dirty, falling apart kind of costumes. We felt really bad. We didn't want to perform in our costumes.

KJ: So in only your second public performance you won the gold medal?

KARYNE: Yes. And then Cirque said they would sign us for the next tour. But as soon as we started training with Cirque [way before the Paris Gold Medal performance] we had an idea that we were going to be in the next show. But we knew that they wanted to test us and see how good performers we were. How we endure pain, etc.

SARAH: When they accepted us for training they said, "In one year you'll be the trapeze artists for the next new show." And that knocked us out in a way, but in another it gave us so much confidence. Because we had to do it, we had to go for the goal they gave us.

It gives you so much responsibility, even at 16. You become more adult. It's like, "They trust us, let's prove it."

SARAH: It was nice that they trusted us, so we took on the challenge.

KJ: That's a heck of an audition. Talk about pressure!

KARYNE: When we arrived in Paris we were sure we were going to win. Even though we had no idea, we had confidence.

SARAH: But we didn't know we were going to win the Gold.

KARYNE: Right, but we knew we were going to win the hearts of the people. Because we were trained to give to the walls. Which was hard because when you train in an empty gymnasium the walls don't give back. As soon as you get in front of the public it's like, "Whoa! It's so much easier."

KJ: So you had two years to develop the act you performed?

KARYNE: One Year. Six months before going to Russia.

KJ: Let's go through the rest of your history. In 1991 Cirque said they wanted to work with you. In 1992 you won the Gold Medal and joined Saltimbanco. Did you join during the creation process or after the show was touring?

SARAH: We arrived during the creation process, after everybody was hired. We had a number all ready but we had to learn the show and the dancing, the characterizations.

KARYNE: We were the first act chosen for the new show. I mean chosen and trained already. But we were really excited to meet the rest of the [crew]. Everyone was very welcoming, like family. It's a funny fact, but we're re-uniting with Andrea Conway, who was with us at the beginning of Saltimbanco, when we move to Teatro Zinzanni in San Francisco. We haven't seen her for 8 years.

KJ: In 1994 you won a Gold Ring Award at the First International Festival of Circus in Geneva, Italy when you were 20. And in 1995 you took a Silver Crown at the Festival de Cirque de Monte Carlo. Were you still with Saltimbanco then?

SARAH: Yup.

KJ: You were with Saltimbanco for the North American Tour but didn't appear in the Japan tour. Then you toured with Saltimbanco again for the European Tour?

SARAH: First we did the North American Tour of Saltimbanco. Then they asked everybody if they wanted to go to Japan. We battled between yes and no, to go or not to go. At that time the biggest concern in our minds was that we were still teenagers that

had been with our circus family for so long. We needed to go it alone, get away from our family for awhile. So we didn't go to Japan. We took classes, we also went and performed in the Tigerpalast cabaret in Frankfurt, Germany. We really wanted to see the world, just the two of us. But in the back of our minds we knew we'd return to Cirque one day. So when they asked us to do the European Tour it was very interesting so we said yes.

KARYNE: A funny fact - You [Sarah] had in mind you were going to be back with Cirque, but I was done. I was done three times with Cirque du Soleil. Three times I thought, "Let's move on, I'm ready for something else." And then they would call and tell us their plans. And we'd say, "Oh, that sounds cool," so we wanted to go back.

KJ: In 1998 you moved from Saltimbanco to O. How did you get involved in O?

SARAH: During the Saltimbanco European Tour, they talked about taking the show back to Japan and China. There was a big hard tour proposed that nobody really wanted to do. And for our feet-to-feet technique that would be scary to do in Japan because the humidity level is very high. And that's hard for us, no matter how much rosin you use, it slides. So for half our number we'd have to be really cautious, especially during the swinging part where we had no net. We would have been really nervous. It was too much for me to think I could drop her in Japan. So as we're talking about this, Gilles Ste-Croix, who was working for Cirque at the time, came to us and said, "Girls, how about a water show in Las Vegas?" Of course Las Vegas was not attractive, this was in 1996. But we said, "Let's do it, let's go for it." So at the end of the European tour we went home.

KARYNE: We knew we had a year. Half a year to relax and half a year to prepare.

SARAH: But in the relaxing time we still trained and prepared for O, to build a new number and characters. We did some other things during that time, too.

KJ: So you were brought in twice during the creation process, both for Saltimbanco and O. What's the creation process like?

KARYNE: Amazing!

SARAH: Exhausting!

KARYNE: But fun.

KJ: Have you seen Cirque Du Soleil: Fire Within? (Both nod yes.) It sounds like there are a lot of parallels between your experience and that of the aerial strap Atherton twins. Would you say what you experienced was similar to the process Fire Within documents?
SARAH: That's exactly how it is. Even worse.

KARYNE: Harder. Mentally hard. You give everything, and keep giving and giving. Then at the end of the day they say they're scrapping everything and we'll start fresh tomorrow. Or they change the apparatus. And you know all your effort is wasted, you just want to die.

SARAH: But it's nice because you learn about yourself. If somebody asked me to go through another creation process I'd jump right in.

KARYNE: But I wouldn't do it right now because of my child.

SARAH: You put in 12-hour days, even more. It's a big commitment. But with a director like Franco Dragone you also have to trust and put everything in his hands and he directs you. During that six-month creation process he calls the circus tent a Cathedral and he wants you to be respectful, as if you were in a church.

KARYNE: Because it could be a big mess if no one listens or respects, or if you don't do what someone asks.

SARAH: I think he's one of the hardest directors. He's demanding, but in a good way.

KARYNE: It's fun, he makes it fun.

KJ: Fans tend to think that Dragone directs the most interesting Cirque productions. They seem to spark the imagination more, are more open to interpretation, compared to later shows like Dralion and Varekai. But, for example, I like Varekai with its storyline.

KARYNE: That gives the story directly to the people. But with Franco, he makes it so you can take whatever you want out of it. It touches everyone differently, everyone sees it differently.

KJ: You were with O for two years, then you went away and came back for awhile some time in the Fall of 2002?

KARYNE: That was the other time I never thought I'd be back with Cirque.

SARAH: Karyne had just had her baby. Two months afterward we got a call. We had always told them if they had problems they could call us, and they did. The girls who were replacing us...

KARYNE: ...Those girls [The Alimova Sisters] are so sweet. They're so good, they learned the act in six months. They had never done trapeze before. And they're close to 30, and both have children. It's amazing...

SARAH: ...They had a hard time because one of them had a shoulder problem. And the replacement wasn't doing too well, she had had surgery. They had to cover 10 shows a week, which is hard.

KJ: So they called you and asked if you could sub for them?

SARAH: We did four shows a week.

KARYNE: They gave us a week to think about it. But after a day we called back and accepted. So we had a week to train, train, train.

SARAH: Karyne had had her baby, but it was a very fit pregnancy. In fact she has a pregnancy fitness video [available at www.progressiveparent.com.] So she was very much in shape from doing that.

KJ: (To Karyne) When was your daughter born?

KARYNE: August 9th, 2002. Azia Rose. (AH-zee-uh)

KJ: You were with Cirque du Soleil during its formative years, when the company was small and just starting to becoming successful. Fans are very interested, what's Guy Laliberte like?

KARYNE: He's passionate, kind of crazy...

SARAH: ...Very creative. A very hard worker, a workaholic. He used to be very close to the artists. Back then he would take us out to the beach in San Francisco to fly kites with him.

KARYNE: He was like a big brother...

SARAH: ...But the bigger and bigger the company got the less and less people could reach him.

KARYNE: Also he has no time.

KARYNE: He's omnipresent. But people don't know him.

SARAH: But we got to know him.

KJ: It's sounds like he's an ethereal figure. This person who just appears every once in awhile, like in Fire Within.

SARAH: Yeah. But we were there at the beginning. We went to Monte Carlo with him.

KARYNE: We know his mom and dad, they're from our town.

SARAH: But you know, Guy started on the streets. He left school...

KARYNE: ...He's open minded. But now I think he's so big and rich. He's not the same person, I guess.

KJ: There's a new book out, an unauthorized autobiography of Cirque du Soleil. It talks a lot about the early years.

SARAH: We'd like to write a book about us, our stories.

KARYNE: But we'll wait until we're 80.

SARAH: Then we'll have lots of stories to tell! (Laughter)

KJ: Do you feel Cirque compensates fairly?

KARYNE: You do make a fair amount of money for a young person. Especially if you come from Russia or China. When we started we were 16 and making more money than anybody else we knew. But it doesn't last forever. There isn't enough money on the side toward retirement, like sports like hockey have.

SARAH: It's a production similar to a Broadway show but isn't compensated like Broadway. Yet it's a circus. If you compare it to other circuses, like those in Europe, Cirque pays well.

KJ: What I hear from the artists perspective is, Cirque is the top. If you want to work for anybody in the circus world you want to work for Cirque du Soleil. Because of the type of product they produce. Where you're able to showcase your talent...

SARAH: ...And it looks good on your resume, too.

KARYNE: Circus is really nice for athletes because after your career is over there's not much you can do. To have this kind of opportunity is just amazing for any athlete. Someone who doesn't even think about what they're going to do after their competitive career is over. Except maybe teaching or doing something completely different.

KJ: Being independent contractors, how many jobs do you do a year?

SARAH: At least two a month. Sometimes more than that, say 5 a month. For us it's a big vacation.

KARYNE: It's like, "Oh, you're getting fat!" (Laughter)

SARAH: It's much easier. You can do less for more money.

SARAH: Yes, that's what's fun. You have more time to do other things, like research.

KJ: There was an episode of Solstrum that involved twins, fans were wondering why you weren't there?

SARAH: That was when we were filming the first season of Carnivale.

KARYNE: We were ready to do it, the contract was all done. But then the filming schedule for Carnivale changed and we couldn't commit.

SARAH: We were sad about that.

KARYNE: We read the script and it looked like fun. And the girl that was doing it was really fun.

KJ: In Teatro Zinzanni, what characters do you play?

SARAH: It's fun because we play a surprise kind of character. At first we're just one flower girl.

KARYNE: The flower girl is being invited to celebrate the birthday party of El Vez who's one of the main characters in the show. He kind of falls in love with the girl and she is kind of innocent. But something happens and we fool the public. I don't want to let out the secret though. (Smiles)

KJ: The concept of Teatro Zinzanni is very intimate. There's lots of interplay between the characters and the audience. That's different from being in a circus ring. How does that work for you?

SARAH: The biggest reason I wanted to do Zinzanni was the intimacy. When we were in Saltimbanco we were on top of the public a lot, swinging. We could see their facial expressions. And that was very intimate in a way with the tent, the sound and everything. When we got to O we started to suffer from the "fourth wall." We weren't out over the audience and it was a completely different experience. We missed the intimacy so much we thought we'd try something like Zinzanni.

KARYNE: In O I kind of felt far away from the people, it was less intimate.

SARAH: That's one thing we find that's special – when you're up there [on the trapeze] whatever relationship you have with your sister everybody sees. In O I was with her but I couldn't tell if everyone was connecting with what was happening. But here at Zinzanni everybody can see what's happening. It's good, it's a nice sharing feeling. We love to share, that's why we do trapeze. What we'd like everyone to take away from our performance is: Love each other no matter what. Whether you're brothers, sisters, lovers, or partners...

KARYNE: ...Trust. Help. When they're down pick them up, 'cause next time you'll be down and they'll pick you up.

SARAH: Use each other in a good way, that's the message we like to send. In Zinzanni it's very nice...

KARYNE: ...'Cause we feel like we can give that message.

SARAH: The fact that we touch people. At the end [of our act] we go down and we talk with the audience. That's a little bit hard, it's a challenge. Before we do our act it's okay, we're playing a character. After the act we try to play [our] character but everybody's like, "How old are you? Where are you from?" And you're thinking, "Ahhhh!"

KARYNE: We can't be mean and cold and not answer their questions.

SARAH: At first we would answer in French but they felt we were being rude.

KJ: What can we expect from Carnivale this year?

KARYNE: Even we don't know! And that's annoying. Before we went to film the first episode we had one script. Then the day before we left we got another script and everything had changed.

KJ: Fans want to know if your characters are going to speak.

KARYNE: They told us yes. But they have so much in the main stories that they have to take care of. And we're on the outside of that.

SARAH: We feel fortunate just to be there. It's fascinating to see how a big production like that functions. We've learned so much just sitting and watching. Every time they said, "Action!" we were so full of energy. We were like, "We've been waiting 12 hours. How can we not be ready?!"

KARYNE: They've told us they have ideas about our characters. So we're waiting.

KJ: What one thing or experience has had the most effect on your career, on your life?

KARYNE: Working together so intensely. For me, anyway. Because if we hadn't worked together and we each had done different things I think it would have been easier to see what our relationship is. I feel so close to her and so together in mindset. We're not just sisters, we're partners. We're this mix of things.

SARAH: Sometimes you forget you're two, you start to think you're one. It's a whole life experience to try and figure it all out.

KARYNE: We're trying to be more focused on, "Who Am I? Who Is She?" Our differences. Because we work together it's really hard [for us] to see. The first time we ever realized that there was someone else besides ourselves was the first week of trapeze we did.

SARAH: Andrew asked us, "What are the strengths and weaknesses of each of you?" And we didn't like it. We answered, "We're the same! We don't have any differences."

KARYNE: But Andrew said he saw differences, “You’re more flexible, and you’re stronger.” He saw the differences between the two of us. And it’s true. Since we were born we’ve moved forward holding each others hands, literally. And when we started doing trapeze he made us look at each other and see that there is a different person there. And to work together with the strengths and weaknesses we both have.

KARYNE: And that’s how I think it should be in companies, partnerships, or couples.

SARAH: You’re better at doing dishes, and I’m better at cooking.

KJ: Who inspires you? What inspires you?

SARAH: A lot of things. Music, we’ve always been really inspired by music.

KARYNE: Musicians in general, the way they express themselves with music.

SARAH: We like every kind of music except heavy metal. And country, we like so-so.

KJ: I understand you have done some demos of your music. How do I get a copy of your demo CD?

KARYNE: Our mom doesn’t even have one! (Laughs)

SARAH: We have one of our songs on the website. It’s not a finished version but we decided to put it there.

KARYNE: We’re inspired by our dad, our mom, our friends. The guy who washes the dishes. Everyone gives us something every day.

SARAH: Something we learned that we really try to live by is this: You can go walking in the mountains and be really amazed by the size and beauty of it. But you have to remember that when you walk in the park or on the street and you see a little flower that that is just as beautiful as the mountain. So if you don’t have inspiration look at the little things and try to find inspiration there. Performing is hopefully something you can also project, for people to get inspiration from and inspire others, too.

SARAH: You always have to be inspired so you can inspire other people. Every day we have to feed [inspire] ourselves with something, you know.

KARYNE: At the circus they give people the chance to take classes. Which is amazing because they pay for it. People can take classes in whatever they want. For me it was cello, for Sarah it was drawing. If you take a class during the day, even if it’s for just an hour you come out of it so excited. You did something new, you learned something new. And when you go and perform you have this new thing to give. Even if you stay home you can also be inspired, like by the radio. So learning something new is always good.

KJ: Is there one attribute you think someone who wants to be involved in circus arts has to have in order to be successful?

SARAH: A dream. Determination. Discipline.

KARYNE: Craziness. (Laughs)

SARAH: I think you need to have a dream. Of course, if I leave the circus world and I want to try something in another direction I'll have to see if it works. But we had a dream, we had a passion and we went for it 100%. We stopped seeing our friends, we didn't go out, we didn't drink. We just worked so hard at it that we got it. And I think if you're dedicated you can get pretty much what you want.

KARYNE: Also I think in the performing arts you need to have a lot of imagination. Because when you keep on doing something over and over, like in the circus world where you do something over and over, you need to be using your imagination every day, for every show. And feel like you're a bird, feel like you're flying or in the water, a fish, whatever.

SARAH: It's like taking drugs without having any drugs. It's like having a good trip every day.

KJ: What words of wisdom do you have for young artists? What would you say to encourage them or make them aware of what the challenges are?

KARYNE: When you want it, you can have it. If you really want it you'll be able to do it.

SARAH: And also, be open.

KARYNE: Be very open to ideas, everything. Another thing I keep on telling myself is, I'm a unique person even if I have a twin sister who looks like me. I am like a diamond, a piece of art, and diamonds are all different. We're all unique, each of us. So if I just stay myself and be truthful when performing I can project myself out to the audience. And people will be interested in seeing it.

SARAH: So people will see who you are.

KARYNE: Knowing that you're different than anyone else, that's really a big help. Even if I am trying something new, playing music or singing for example, I think about that. And I trust that people will be interested in it enough to see me inside it.

At that point our interview had to stop as they had to get to the tent to prepare for the evenings show. We chatted a bit more about our mutual love of Cirque du Soleil and other topics but were interrupted when adorable baby Azia came toddling up to her mommy. We also got to say a brief hello to Karyne's husband.

Karyne and Sarah are currently appearing (until June 14) in the San Francisco production of Teatro Zinzanni. We wish them all the best in their future endeavors. And perhaps someday we'll be able to meet again and play the "Which twin is which?" game.

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Our sincere thanks for this interview to Karyne and Sarah Steben for being so giving in talking with us, our contact at One Reel for graciously running interference, and my wife LouAnna for patiently putting up with my obsessive hobby.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



ALAIN VINET

Director of Cirque Musique

« Directing Cirque's Musique »

Keith Johnson, 2009

We often talk in these pages about Cirque music, its influence, popularity and the high esteem (and high expectations) it has amongst fans. Many have praised its unique sound and style while at the same time wondering about (and sometimes even questioning) decisions made by soundtrack CD producers.

These popular sellers are not taken lightly within Cirque's Montréal headquarters. In fact CDs are fourth in popularity for show-specific souvenirs after programs, apparel and DVDs. And why not - they're affordable, long lasting triggers of memory that don't fade or shrink in the wash. The music and discs can be found everywhere, distributed in Canada by Justin Time (a division of EMI), in the US by Red (a division of Sony) and worldwide by Universal, as well as on iTunes and in Boutiques in tents and theaters throughout the world.

A major part of Cirque's 25th anniversary celebration has been the June release of "25" a two-CD musical retrospective (reviewed in July's issue of Fascination!). Its eclectic selection made us curious as to how it was created and the thought process involved. So we went to the source!

Last month we had a chance to talk with the very kind Alain Vinet (Al-ahn VEE-nay), Cirque du Soleil's Musical Director, about his role in the creation of "25" as well as the show soundtracks so close to the hearts of many devoted fans. He started his DJ career in 1978 becoming famous in the Montréal club scene for his sets at (((Stereo))) and later at Circus. His show 'brand name' "Mouvement" was also the title of his 2-CD compilation set for Cirque du Soleil Musique (CDSMN10002-2, 2005).

We started by asking how he became Cirque's Musical Director. "That's a long story! I had been a DJ for 20 years and in Montréal I was everywhere. Guy Laliberté heard about me and in 1999 hired me for some private events. That led to DJ'ing for some of the premieres of Cirque shows, my first being Quidam in London in November 2001, and after that some other private events. And then the world premiers of Zumanity, KA, Love and BeLIEve. Throughout those years I became good friends with Guy."

He was then asked to contribute a dance music track to the “Solarium/Delirium” 2-CD dance compilation (Cirque du Soleil Musique CDSMCD 10021-2, 2004) released as part of the 20th anniversary celebration, remixing “Africa” (from “O”). “I worked on it with a friend, [Sam from] a production company called Quicksound. [He picked it] and I went along with it. I did the vocal and choral arrangements and a bit of the percussion. He did the didgeridoo when we decided to put that in. I have to share the credit because he really worked hard.”

“[Then] I was a consultant for Delirium [arena show] because it was more of an electronica venture and I come from an electronica background. Following that Cirque [wanted] to produce new musical artists for the [CDS Musique] record label and I was signed as an artist. I was the only one [whose 2-CD set “Mouvement” was released in 2005], because after that the company decided to regroup into what they know best, which is Cirque shows. So after they released my compilation I proposed to Guy to come and help the label because I have many contacts in the electronica world. He welcomed that and asked me to be hired. And that’s what led to my first contract as a director at Cirque, where I was mostly taking care of music for special events and artistically directing the albums of the shows. About a year later they added me as more of a consultant as far as the new shows are concerned, which is what I do now.”

The creation of “25” started, as many things at Cirque do, with a brainstorming meeting. “Two years ago we started talking about things that would surround the 25th [anniversary]. There were a lot of ideas brought to the table but unfortunately we couldn’t do all of them. (Laughs) [But] the CD was retained because it’s such a well-sold item. It’s something people tend to buy to have a piece of our shows. Most of our sales come from Boutiques in the big top or theaters. We [also] had good success with “Solarium/Delirium” for the 20th [anniversary]. But going back to more of the core business it was decided [to use] existing masters and [create] a compilation that reflects 25 years of Cirque.”

Chantal Côte, Corporate PR Manager, elaborated, “Music is also a very strong element of Cirque’s brand and one of the main creative components of a Cirque show. It’s made us distinctive over the years; Cirque music has a specific sound to it. So if we are to remember the past 25 years music should be part of that.”

“Music is [also] a great passion of Guys,” Mr. Vinet added. “Second to the whole [process of] creation he’s a person that enjoys a whole lot of different music and buys a lot of different music. I’d say music touches him in a way, a little bit above all the rest.”

In 2004 as part of its 20th anniversary Cirque released “Le Best of” (Cirque du Soleil Musique CDSMC10022-2, 2004) featuring a set of slower chilled-out tunes from then-current productions. How are this and “25” different? “Le Best of was an attempt to launch the record label. The idea behind it was to have a product that reflected some of the best Cirque music to make a punch. When it came to the 25th anniversary I wanted to stay away from [songs on the] Le Best of CD [so that] our customers [wouldn’t be] getting selections [they already had].”

“The purpose wasn’t to create another “best of,” but rather to create a general spirit of the last 25 years. But also to not go for the more obvious songs because most people already have those songs anyway. My goal was to have people discover a song that maybe they would have passed [over].”

Speaking of songs buyers might already have, we noted that two songs that might be considered “greatest hits” - the title track from Alegria and “Let Me Fall” from Quidam (the latter coming into public consciousness thanks to Josh Groban’s cover and use of the song in his concert DVD where he makes a set piece out of climbing a set of invisible stairs until he falls into a black abyss) - are missing from “25”. The original version of “Alegria” was on “Le Best of” so a slower version from Alegria Le Film was used on “25.” Was “Let Me Fall” considered?

“For Saltimbanco Gilles suggested I use “Barock” which is kind of a rock-ish sounding song. And to keep the continuity in the vibe of the “Dynamique” CD I decided to use “Rivage” (from Quidam) which is [similar] sounding to “Barock” to make an evolution in the compilation.”

Mr. Vinet then explained how and why songs were selected. “I asked a lot of questions of Gilles Ste. Croix and people that were here since the beginning to get a sense of their best souvenirs from that era. So some of the songs were picked by Gilles and a lot were picks that I made. For about a year I kept sending advance copies to both Guy and Gilles to get their feedback. But last year having been such a busy year for Cirque I was pretty much on my own.”

“After a while of not really getting any feedback I went on my own and really went through a process of flow. Guy always insisted that we would have one CD that is more like chill, down tempo, and one that would be more dynamic. So starting with that I took pieces from all the shows, listening to how they [worked] together when one finishes and the [next] one starts. It was really quite a painstaking process.”

“I also wanted to have songs that are not part of our regular show CD’s that are available in the marketplace. For example the Wintuk CD was never put out commercially; it is only sold at Madison Square Garden.” (Our readers should note that the songs from the first and second versions of the first “Cirque du Soleil” album as well as “Nouvelle Experience” and the “Journey of Man” soundtrack, though unavailable on physical CD are available as iTunes downloads. Alegria Le Film and the studio version of “Mystère” (both of which have one track each on the “25” set) sadly are not.)

“I was also able to get advance [tracks] from ZED, ZAIA, BeLIEve and OVO. On top of that I got two songs from [the very first Cirque du Soleil vinyl 45 from] La Fanfonfonie. They were René Dupéré’s band even before Cirque was created, in the very very beginning.”

That rarity proved a challenge. “[We used a vinyl 45] because it wasn’t possible to actually grab master [tapes] from that era. [But] there was a copy of the 45 [in the Archive] that [we put] through a whole mastering and clean-up process. And I was surprised because I thought the sound wouldn’t be good because it was made so long ago. But since I took it from vinyl it actually sounds louder than our later productions.”

But the special effort was worth it. “I insisted on having those two songs [from the 45]. One of them, “Cirque du Soleil,” was very important for me to be in there. The other one, “Le Funambule,” was a suggestion from Gilles Ste. Croix. Apparently this was the opening song of the very first show.”

Indeed, when we asked composer René Dupéré to list his favorite Cirque tracks (see our two-part interview in *Fascination!* issues #46-Oct 2005 and #47-Jan/Feb/Mar 2006) he commented, [“Funambule” is] one of my favorite melodies. I wouldn’t say it’s the best one, but it’s one of my favorites because it reminds me of souvenirs and remembrances and nice things that happened [in the early days].”

These two rare songs are a perfect fit for the CDs concept of a musical retrospective spanning all 25 years of Cirque’s existence. In addition to chronologically following the evolution of Cirque music throughout the years while separated into the two Laliberté-mandated “mood disks,” Mr. Vinet took special care with the links between tracks such as the sound of children at the beginning of the “Poétique” disk. “In the intro to the first song you can hear children in the background, sounding like the old street performances in Baie St. Paul. I wanted to add that little bit of flavor, [as though] we’re coming in [to the tent] and can hear the orchestra getting in tune and [the music] starting. These are little pieces that I added just to make kind of a link.” Other small bits have been added as well, such as a fragment from the original vocal sessions of “Lubia Doberstan” (from *Varekai*) tagged on as an intro to the song. “It’s from the original sessions; a little piece you don’t really hear but is there at some point. I added this piece for linking purposes as well.”

His work also extended to “cleaning up” tracks that appear on their original albums overlapped by other tracks. The acapella “amen” ending of “A Tale” (from *La Nouba*) in this set is free of the overlap from the next selection on the soundtrack CD, “Porte.” “I had to work on it a little bit. I did use the master but [at the end] I used a piece from the original session to make an ending, so that it would finish less abruptly and you don’t hear the next song coming in.”

The creation of “25” wasn’t the only project keeping him busy in Cirque’s 25th year. “All my creative power is now used at Cirque especially during the spring when we have a lot of special events. Because I build all the music [for them]. And this year particularly with the 25th Anniversary there’s a lot of talk about it in the media so everybody wants Cirque. So that makes me doubly busy. Everything that pertains to the 25th anniversary has music in it, and I do mean everything. So a lot has come through my desk.”

Did this include the music for the special Cirque du Soleil/Concept Fiatlux fireworks display as part of the Montréal International Fireworks Competition occurring Saturday, August 15, 2009 at La Ronde Park in Montréal? “Very much so; I built and chose the [musical] contents. The show itself should be around 35 minutes. I wish I could see it but I’m leaving Montréal a few days before that, and I’m going to miss it unfortunately.”

His duties as Musical Director during the almost five years he’s been at the company have always involved input into the creation of the show soundtrack CD’s. “[Initially] I would come in after the creation is done and pick a producer and give comments on what I wanted to hear on the CD as far as a general sound is concerned. And then I got more and more involved in the process of creation of the album. I really do take quite a bit of time with the producer in the studio, sometimes participating in the arrangements and the general flavor. Sometimes picking instruments that may not be in the show but add a color. For example Kooza has a very Bollywood kind of feel and in the show we have a couple of pieces using synthetic sitar, but for the album we decided to have a real sitar.”

Being in such an influential position we had to ask to what extent he felt a shows CD should reflect a shows musical sound. “I have mixed feelings about that. Of course I always want to try to keep as close to the show as possible. I read the blogs once in a while so I see pretty much what has happened in the past. And I take [those loyal fans comments] into consideration. I always say we have to add some audio imagery [to make up] for the lack of [visual] imagery so it stands alone. [While] always trying to stay as close to the show as possible. I want to make it so [the fans] are not alienated by what we added. [I want to] keep it faithful.”

“But that being said I was brought in to make these CDs stand alone, so that you can listen from one end to the other and even if you don’t have all the visuals it still sounds right. That’s mainly what I do. Sometimes I will add on to what the show music sounds like. Guy put me here specifically for that, to make sure we have a stand-alone sound.”

“And it was decided a long time ago to stay away from [live albums] as much as possible. Because it doesn’t sound right without the visuals. You [can hear] the difference in sound quality between the produced album and the live recordings. As a live bonus it’s OK but as a piece that represents the show on the regular CD the quality of the sound is not acceptable.”

“[Also] the arrangement is very important. When you do a show sometimes a piece will be 8 minutes long, on an album I don’t need more than five. And normally I will ask my producers to redo the arrangements to have a proper beginning and end to each [song]; I’m not crazy about fade-outs. Although on the ZAIA album there are quite a few. But we were running late!” (Laughs)

How does he judge what makes a good soundtrack album, or really any album? “The trip it takes you on from beginning to end. I was born in the 60’s so I come from the days of listening to albums, like Pink Floyd’s “Dark Side of the Moon,” where you listen from one end to the other and it’s like a story being told.”

“And that’s what I try to do with the [soundtrack] albums, trying to keep the order of the show but sometimes playing with one or two songs. For example “Kooza Dance” (from Kooza) happens right after intermission yet is such a thematic song. During creation you would always hear the creators talking about the “Kooza Dance”. And it’s such a nice, crooner-like song I said, ‘Let’s open the CD with that.’”

We noted the new ZAIA CD clocks in at a hefty 70+ minutes and wondered if the amount of music on a CD was ever a consideration. “In ZAIAs case the CD was produced by [ZAIA composer] Violaine Corradi at her demand. And at my demand too. Guy wasn’t too hot on the idea at the beginning but the result speaks for itself and he really loved the album. We have so much material since our shows last for 90 minutes and it’s hard to pick [what to] leave out, that’s why ZAIA has such a high minute count.”

The creation musicians, he acknowledged, also play an important role in the development of a new shows music. “For the sound of the show they are very very important. When it comes to the albums I always try to keep the voices from the show. And any peculiar instruments like folkloric instruments [where] it’s hard to find a good player we’ll insist on the show musician.”

“It’s hard to get [show] musicians to do studio sessions. But we still want to keep them involved because they are one of the big reasons of the success of the music. But on other occasions, like Kooza, we did all the production in Montréal except for maybe a couple of lead solos and the vocals because of a time constraint.”

It’s also part of Cirque’s normal process to not record a shows CD immediately after premiere. “We have a six-month process where we leave a show and let it go and find its place with an audience,” Ms.Côte explained. “Then the creators are all invited to come back with a new perspective and look at it. We call it fixation [FEEX-ah-shon]. It doesn’t mean the show won’t change over the course of the years but the main skeleton, the main creative elements will be settled for years to come.”

Mr. Vinet elaborated, “I cannot start working on a CD until fixation is complete. That means everybody’s happy with it and we can proceed. Until that is done we can’t do the soundtrack because the music can still vary. Sometimes a number might change or another piece of music is added. We want [the CD] to have, as closely as possible, the final music of the show.”

“Even then the show is going to change sometimes - an artist leaves, another one comes in or different music is created. That’s why you have songs in shows that are not on the album, because throughout the years numbers have changed and music has been added. Since I have been here the average is about a year after the show opens.”

With the tantalizing tastes of tracks from ZED, BeLIEve and OVO included keeping “25” up-to-the-minute, we asked Mr. Vinet to run down the production and release status of these new creations CDs.

ZED - "I got the masters about a month ago. In the US I don't know exactly when the release date is, another department [makes that decision]. But in Canada both ZAIA and ZED will come out on August 25. ZAIA is already out in the US; it came out there first." [Update: Since this interview we have learned that the release of ZED and ZAIA in Canada has been delayed and will occur in September or later.]

BeLIEve - "I was aiming for the first anniversary of the World Premiere which is Halloween, 2009. It's the date I asked Eric [Serra, composer] to make, so [we could] throw a little launch party with the first year anniversary of the show in Vegas. But we couldn't work on it because Eric is really busy on a movie with Luc Besson [the sequels to the computer-animated "Arthur and the Invisibles" titled "Arthur and the Revenge of Maltazard" (2009) and "Arthur and the Two Worlds War" (2010)]. I have to take him when he's available since it's in his contract that he has to produce the CD. Sometimes we have to delay a little bit but then again it's not any longer than any album normally takes since it takes about a year for a CD to hit the shelves."

OVO - "We probably won't have a CD until next spring, which is about average."

With ardent worldwide fans of Cirque's musical output hungry for Cirque music in all its forms we wondered if Cirque had ever considered smaller-run limited second editions of some of the rarer pieces of Cirque's musical legacy, such as the live recordings of Saltimbanco and Alegria that were issued as Christmas presents years ago. "There are no plans for that that I'm aware of. I'm sure we still have [them] in the Archive somewhere. Maybe the masters still exist but [they would need to be located]."

To which Ms. Côte added, "It's a good suggestion though." (A hopeful sign?)

His connection with Cirque and Laliberté has allowed Mr. Vinet to be a vital creative part of events Cirque fans would give almost anything to attend - show world premiers and the parties thrown at Laliberté's residence in Montréal. "It's always incredibly fun; people are there to have fun so it always makes for a really cool evening. Plus we always have performances and décor which you don't necessarily find in clubs. With all the added value it's really nice to meet and work with performers, it adds so much layering to the evening."

"For me it's like my old life, but also putting a little bit of "water in my wine" to accommodate less electronica-savvy people [so as not to] make them feel too alienated. But at the same time keeping my sound. Because as a DJ if I'm not allowed to play the way I play I'm just not going to play, that's a decision I made 15-20 years ago."

Being a re-mixer of note we wondered if he had attempted remixes of Cirque songs other than "Africa." "At the time [of "Solarium / Delirium"] I did an attempt at "Oscillium" (from Varekai) but the vocal and [organ] were glued together. It was a voice and instrument together [on the same track]. So it was really hard for me to split everything for a proper mix."

“I did remix “Let Me Fall” for one of the parties but nothing good enough to put out. It was done too long ago. But I have a lot of newer remixes - when I do a world premiere or a premiere of a show I make a remix of one of the show songs. And I’ve done quite a few [of those].”

“For the LOVE premiere I did a little mash-up of “Love You To” by George Harrison mixed with the beats from a Cirque song and some vocals from another Cirque song. Kind of a mash up of the three. And I did a mash-up of “Because” using the acapella [version] with the beats of “Alegria.” Just to signify the wedding of Apple Corps and Cirque du Soleil. Which was my way of expressing that.”

“I asked Guy last year when we were in Tokyo for permission to [release some of those remixes]. I have to iron out the details. But the beauty of it is they are all done already.”

His house music compilation set “Mouvement” demonstrated his skills as re-mixer and DJ, skills honed over many years. “I’ve been a club DJ in Montréal for 31 years, more in the underground than in the mainstream scene; that was where I grew up as a DJ and producer. When [house music] came out in 1985 it was such a fresh approach. It was taking some of the classic music and adding beats to it. It [was now within] the reach of anyone to produce that kind of music, you didn’t need to have a million dollar studio. It was the beginning of self-producing and computers and all that. That really appealed to me. And on top of that I’m a huge fan of electronic music, always have been since the days of Kraftwerk and even further back Pink Floyd.”

Having such a long history as a DJ means quite a collection of music. In addition to “a ton” of CD’s he has close to 14,000 vinyl recordings. His catalog numbers about 50,000 songs. “[When I DJ] I always carry enough music to play for 2 weeks. When I use turntables or CD I always use 3. [One reason is so] that I can prepare in advance a little bit more. Instead of just waiting until the song ends I can prepare the next one so I can keep my flow going. ‘Cause when you DJ you have an overall vision of what the night is going to be, its peaks and valleys. By adding a third player I can prepare in advance so I can have better continuity. And the other reason is sometimes on that 3rd CD I might put an acapella track that I will sample over whatever’s going on. Or a loop or all of the above. It just helps you be more [prepared], especially with CDs. With vinyl you had sleeves; it was very visual. With CDs, especially burned CDs, it’s [just] a line of text. That’s it, there’s no visual cue. So sometimes I need the extra time to do research in my books.”

What does he consider a good remix? “I know by listening to it. If it gets me, if the groove is good and, speaking specifically about remixes, if it respects the original then to me it’s a good remix. But sometimes you will have something more ‘dub-ey’ where not the whole vocal is there but pieces [of it], and if the groove is good that is also a good remix.”

“[What’s] important to me is what the song says instead of how it’s sung or spoken. I’m a big fan of spoken word. When I find songs that have something like that, automatically I will listen a bit more closely to what it says.”

He is especially attracted to “eclectic” music. “In my book eclectic means “not mainstream.” Something you would not necessarily expect, that broadens your horizons. “Eclectic” is my middle name. Even in my DJ’ing I went away from the mainstream 20 years ago. I like to provoke people, [make them] work for it, not give them everything tailor-made, ready-to-eat, ready-to-serve. No, you have to work a little bit for it. You have to be open minded to really appreciate the typical state of mind in the club environment.”

And it’s the open-mindedness of the people he has met (or, rather, one specific person) which has had a powerful effect on his life. “Meeting Guy Laliberté was really a turning point as far as the direction my career has taken, definitely. He’s really open and has broadened my spectrum by inviting me on trips, making me see the world and going to premieres and stuff like that. [I’ve met] so many amazing creative people. I have to say that was a big turning point for me.”

In a company so well known for its creative decisions it’s important to realize there are business decisions as well. “I’ve been here close to five years now and I can tell you it’s always a struggle between business and creation. Of course creators at Cirque are always super well treated. But there has to be a voice of reason at some point. It’s really hard to keep a perfect balance. [Sometimes business] will be going well and the creative [side rules], but like now with the economy we tend to stop spending where we don’t need to. Which is just a common sense compromise.”

His workload at Cirque doesn’t leave much time for other things. “[It’s a challenge] finding some time to work on my own music, that’s for sure! (Laughs) The 9 to 5 in general [is hard]. I’ve always been more of a night person. So I try to arrange my schedule so I do all my business [during the day] and then I might stay at the studio until midnight and just work away. When the feelings good and it’s working well I just stay at it until I fall asleep.”

But he finds the job inspiring. “Everybody that creates music inspires me in one way or another. Our composers inspire me incredibly, the music is so beautiful. [And it’s unexpected], you listen to a Cirque song and think it’s going to go from F to G but it doesn’t, it goes some other way. That’s what I love about Cirque music. That gives me a lot of inspiration. That’s actually what’s keeping me artistically alive, in the midst of business and all that.”

What gives him his greatest satisfaction? “At Cirque - Making sure that I always go beyond what is asked of me into areas where people would not have thought of sometimes. And I believe that’s what makes me successful at Cirque. Because every curve ball they threw at me in the past four years I always hit home runs.

That makes me really happy. Personally - Having a great DJ set. Producing a good song and playing it and people go wild. This is my greatest reward.”

What does he say to young artists? “Don’t mind the challenges, just go for it. If you believe it enough it’s gonna happen. Perseverance and discipline. Maybe I was lucky but that’s how I made it. I spent 10 years in the studio not making music for money but learning my craft. I never went to [DJ] school, everything I know I learned on my own.”

“Just play with it, have fun with it, because that’s going to reflect in the end product. And if you don’t have fun that too reflects in the final product; when you get blasé about it you can feel it. And you can note that throughout musical history. [You see] bands that do maybe one or two good albums [and then] get spoiled by the riches and the jet set. You have to keep a cool head about those things, because what life brings you one day she can take from you the next.”

“But you can’t stop just because of that; you go back and start something else. There are always possibilities, the world is my oyster!” (Laughs)

My sincere thanks go to: Mr. Alain Vinet, for so graciously spending time with us, Lise Dubois, Corporate Alliances Coordinator (for arranging the details), Chantal Côte, Corporate PR Manager, And my wife LouAnna for putting up with my sometimes obsessive hobby.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



VIOLAINE CORRADI
Composer – Dralion, Varekai & Zaia

« *Violaine Corradi: Working for Joy* »

Keith Johnson, 2009

Ms. Corradi was a fascinating interview and very open about her process and recording the music. In the end, very few people will hear her music for ZAIA due to the shows closing. In terms of amount of content, how it was recorded and who plays on it, it's one of the few CDS CDs that included so much of what fans wish for.

We hardly ever receive comments on our articles, so any feedback is treasured. In one of the few we have received from an interview subject, Ms. Corradi wrote back and said, "Just wanted to thank you again from the bottom of my heart for the great article you wrote in Fascination on my work at Cirque! It really reflects the content of the interview we had together -and, as you know, this is not always the case... So, many, many thanx to you for your very patient work!"

Good to know we "translated" it fairly.



With the release of the ZAIA CD (Cirque du Soleil Musique CDSMC-20029, 2009) in the US (and coming up in Canada on October 20), it is our honor and privilege to continue our series on the music of Cirque du Soleil with an exclusive interview with the Musical Composer of ZAIA, Ms. Violaine Corradi.

Violaine Corradi (VEE-oh-len co-RAH-dee, "In Italian they say co-RAAAH-dee.") was born in 1959 in Trieste, Italy and moved to Montréal at the age of four, the child of a composer/conductor father (who passed away when she was six) and an opera singer mother. She trained in voice, piano, clarinet and flute and was a musical prodigy at an early age.

From 1993 to 1998 she composed music for the radio series “Poesié/musique”, which featured leading Quebec poets reading their works. In 1996 she released her first solo album, “Passages” (Imagine Recors IND-2226). She also composed the musical scores for the IMAX films, “Bears” (Silver Wave SD-930, 2001) and “Great North.”

Her first Cirque assignment, as we all know, resulted in “Dralion” (Cirque du Soleil Musique CDSMC-20016, 1999). This was followed by “Varekai” (Cirque du Soleil Musique CDSMC-20017, 2002). ZAIA (the resident show on the Cotai Strip at the Venetian in Macao) marks her third collaboration with Cirque.

While it was 7am Seattle time and 10am Montréal time (where Corporate PR Manager Chantal Côte facilitated our conversation) when we spoke by phone, it was 10pm the following day in Macao. In a French-tinged accent she first commented on why she was in Macao, “I arrived in the beginning of May [2008]. I was supposed to be here 3 or 4 months [but] I fell in love with the place and I fell in love, period, so that’s why I stayed.”

We started off by talking about working on ZAIA. “This is my third adventure with Cirque; I’ve been with Cirque the past 11 years. I was invited by Gilles Ste-Croix to write the music for the show because they knew what the director, Gilles Maheu, was looking for and it sounded like it would go with my esthetic. And it did! It was a great meeting, a great encounter.”

ZAIA Director/Writer Gilles Maheu has called the stage, “the center of fire, a hurricane, a storm where forces align and dangerously confront each other.” “[Working with him] was like a dream for me,” she continued, “because [he] is very profound, coherent and sensitive. When I hopped on the project in June of 2006 (two years before the premiere) he had the entire outline of the show [ready], with of course some gray areas but the narrative was there. So it was fantastic for me to work with; I work very well when the director outlines exactly what he has in mind for each acrobatic number. The colors and the set design were pretty well advanced when I came in and we pretty much stuck to the narrative. Of course some elements had to change, because the reality is when [you’re] constructing and putting everything together [sometimes you have] to make different choices.”

“But the foundation of what Gilles proposed to me pretty much remained. That was inspiring to me. And the narrative - the story of a young girl who decides to leave Earth, to travel the cosmos and bring back notions of beauty to Earth - is so appropriate to what’s happening right now. So I was very inspired to write the music for this show.”

How does a composer work with a director on a Cirque project? “It’s a relationship. It’s very personal with each director because they each have their own personal way of bringing a project forward. It’s sort of like asking if it’s the chicken or the egg. Because the director first gives us the outline, then we bring our elements [to the table] and the director or whoever is around them will be inspired by what all of us in the creative team bring. And we nourish each other.”

“A lot of [the music] was inspired by the theme, the narrative itself. Of course as I see the development of the show - the costumes, the lights, the acrobatic sequences - this nourishes a lot of my process. And getting to know the artists - having a beer with them, all of that - you’re creating a personal relationship with all of them. For me this is very crucial and fundamental to my work.”

What’s the process of musical creation, we wondered? “That’s a great question. The first stage I work on is the nucleus, a version of about a minute and a half to two minutes of the essence, the foundation of the piece. And since I’m a singer and musician I can perform and produce it so I do the entire thing.” Some examples of these “nucleus” recordings can be found in the “Creator’s Notebook” for Varekai, (the first edition of the Varekai program) which included a computer disk with two of Varekai’s songs, “Gitans” and “Icarians.” “On those tracks I’m the one playing everything. The band was [together and] we were rehearsing but they took my pre-production [demo] tracks.”

After she creates the nucleus, “we try it out with the acrobatics, because they are also at the embryo of what they’re doing. And if we along with the Director and the Director of Creation and the Acrobatic Creators, if all of us feel it is right - the tempo, the colors, the feeling of the music is right - then I develop the structure from there. And then it’s back and forth until the last second before the premiere.”

While the acrobats are working with these early recordings, “I’m auditioning musicians, and as soon as the musicians come in we have charts written out for them. For this project I had a wonderful Assistant (to the Musical Composer) Thierry Angers. And this was a great encounter for me, now that I know him I can’t live without him! I could concentrate fully on the creation, the creative part of writing the music and arranging the parts, and he and I would take care of passing it on to the musicians. He would take care of writing the charts and preparing all of what was needed for what would be - I don’t like to call them sequences, [but there are] a few sequences. Most of it is played live but with some of the pieces I wanted it to sound a little bit more electro or trip-hop or house. And to do that we needed some samples I created that are triggered by computer. So I did all of that and my assistant would do all the charts. And I would go to the rehearsals and we would integrate the music live. Normally [the musicians] arrive several months before the premiere so we have the opportunity to really work on the music.”

Her composing process started long before premiere night in a situation that proved to be lower-stress than normal. “For [ZAIA I had] two years [to compose]. For Dralion everyone was [brought in about] one year before. On Varekai I had one year also. This time I was lucky, not only did the director have his narrative but two years to create the score was absolutely wonderful. So when we got to the tightest part of the funnel all the music was written, arranged and integrated with the musicians. When we arrived here [in Macao in May to start staging] they were playing it already (performances started in July).”

“This show gave me the opportunity to spend a lot of time with Sound Designer Steve Dubuc and his Assistant (as well as Sound Project Manager and Recorder of the CD) Jason Rouhoff. Every night we would rehearse and put the sound in the house. We have a mega sound system in the theater with surround [sound] and all kinds of goodies that we had such a good time with.” Including 18 subwoofers and 55 surround speakers.

“We had the opportunity to [work] every day, and that was amazing. This [was helped by the fact that I] hopped on this adventure two years prior to premiere. Once I got here I could work day and night in conjunction with Steve and Jason on exactly how I wanted the music to sound. And it took many many hours. This was a big big plus for me on this project.”

“It was a luxury that the team here was kind enough to accept that we would do sound [mixing] at 6 o’clock [in the evening]. With other shows and often other venues that I work in we do sound at night during what we call the graveyard. Everybody goes to bed but you have to stay up and [work] when you’ve already been playing and doing stuff for 12-15 hours. Here it was fantastic; we did it while they were eating. So while the whole [creative] team was eating the musicians, sound engineers and I stayed and didn’t eat. And we preferred that to creating the soundstage in the middle of the night. It was great.”

How the music sounds in the theater is naturally an important consideration to Ms. Corradi. “It’s my philosophy that the sound engineer is a member of the band. Because you might have geniuses playing - let’s say you’re lucky enough as a composer to get fantastic musicians, all at a very high level like what [we have] here - but if at the other end it’s not [properly] translated by the system and whomever is mixing the house - then it can kill it. I always think it’s important to have a clear relationship and bond between the sound engineer [and the band]. Here we have four sound engineers; [on Dralion and Varekai] we had three.” They are Hayden Clark, Roy Cressey, Sebastian Hammond and Chris Pardy. Other parts of the team include Head of Audio Eric Poitevein, Assistant Head of Audio David Finch and Lead Audio Technician Frieda Lee.

“When I go to do some follow-up work on tour I find it important to have these discussions and exchanges. I transmit the concept to the engineer because if it doesn’t get to him or her it can be another universe, it can completely flip around. So to me it’s very important.”

Having the luxury of time also allowed her to take on production of the ZAIA soundtrack CD, a responsibility she hadn’t originally considered. “It was a nice opportunity. [Cirque du Soleil Musical Director] Alain Vinet proposed [that I produce the CD] in spring of 2008. I wasn’t sure because I know that to create a Cirque show [requires] a thousand percent of yourself, and often right [afterwards] there is a little curve downwards where you need to relax. At first I said no, I’d think of somebody [else] to produce, and so we went along that line for a little while. Then once I got here I realized I was nicely enough ahead and I would have the energy plus the inspiration to produce the album.”

“It was very important to Guy [Laliberté] that the original musicians [appear on the album]. The last time that happened was with La Nouba 10 years ago. [With] “O” and La Nouba back-to-back (Composer and CD Co-Producer) Benoit [Jutras] and (CD Co-Producer) Rob Heaney produced albums with the original musicians and they did a fantastic job. For other albums it was mostly session musicians, original musicians of the show were cameoed and sometimes it wasn’t always the original singers. But for ZAIA we reached amazing levels of rendering the music. Alain Vinet was here for the gala in August last year and heard it and was also convinced [this was] the way it should be done.” The nine ZAIA musicians play a multitude of instruments on the CD (with a little help from members of the string section of the Hong Kong Symphony Orchestra as well as Ms. Corradi herself). Surprisingly, the band has none of the Canadian or French Canadian players that usually comprise a large part of Cirque creation bands. The musicians are:

Maria Karin Andersson - Singer - Sweden
“Chicago” Rose Marie Winnebrenner - Singer - United States
Steven Victor Bach - Keyboards, Bandleader - United States
Conrad Lewis Askland - Keyboards - United States
Oliver Alexandre Vincent Milchberg - Guitars - France
Rachael Cogan - Wind Instruments - Australia
Jay Aaron Elfenbein - Cello - United States
Darrin Eugene Johnson - Drums - United States
Eduard Harutyunyan - Percussion - Armenia

Recording the CD was, “another adventure in itself. At first we were contemplating having the musicians record in a studio here in Macao or in Hong Kong. And we played with that idea and realized it wouldn’t necessarily be the best for the project or for the show. And so we hopped on the adventure of creating a studio [inside the ZAIA Theater at the Venetian Macao]. With the fantastic technology we have now it was possible [to create a control room] within a week. We [already] had sound booths and microphone wiring for the musicians, and it was just a question of [creating] a control booth to do the recording.”

“[It was] recorded during the day and after shows while doing 8 to 10 shows a week. [It took] a month to record and a month to mix.” “[In the production] I went for a real interpretation. I worked one-on-one with all the musicians to put them in a mood to get a rendering [with] a lot of heart and emotion. Many, many days and many, many hours of work were put into that album.”

In our interview with Cirque du Soleil Musical Director Alain Vinet (see Fascination! Newsletter #67 - August, 2009) he mentioned that he works closely with soundtrack producers, often supplying comments. What comments did he give about recording ZAIA? “[He was] very encouraging. He is wonderful in the sense that he has a way to inspire. I can’t tell you exactly what his comments were because there were many things that were discussed. What I can tell you is that he has a wonderful way of [giving feedback] and a way of creating that makes us want to surpass ourselves.”

In a post-interview email, Ms. Corradi sent along the track list of the ZAIA CD with the translation of the titles and act they are related to:

1. Noi - (Theme of the show and Finale) - Us
2. Aestus Calor - (Ouverture) - A Flow of Fire
3. Ignis - (ZAIA's Departure) - Fire
4. Hatahkinn - (Aerial Bamboo) - (This is an invented word)
5. Aquilex - (Globes and Poles, Part1) - The One Who Finds Sources
6. Comissatio - (Globes and Poles, Part 2) - Feast
7. Blue Ales - (Lanterns) - Blue Bird-It's Flight is an Omen
8. Adrideo - (Old Clown Act with Onofrio + Tom) - Laughters
9. Ardor Oris - (Back-up number + walk arounds) - Ardour
10. Aequor Oris - (Fire Dance) - Ocean of Fire
11. Caelestis - (Aerial Frame) - Celestial
12. Undae - (Time Transition) - A Flow of Water
13. Temperatio - (Jugglers) - Balance
14. Ellâm Onru - (Hand to Hand) - All is One
15. Gaudiumni - (X-Board) - Joy
16. Utinam - (Straps duo) - May the Heaven's Wish So

"I came up with the titles many months ago. In the reality of everyday I still call them their working titles so I have to get used to calling them the name we call them on the album. If I give the [album] song title to the musicians or the Artistic Director they don't know what I'm talking about, so I have to use the work titles. Every piece has at least 3 titles, and the [song is] baptized [with last one] when we lay it on the album. You made me realize though that, now that the album has just been released it's time for me to memorize which musical piece the new titles I found are associated with...Thank you!"

"We actually recorded everything, the music of the entire show, 95 minutes. I knew that I was not going to be able to put everything on, but the songs that we weren't able to put on the album - and I'll need to discuss this with Alain - we may be able to put them on iTunes or something like that. But we have them. On the album we put what Alain and I felt would tell the story of ZAIA. The rest exists and we'll see what we do with it."

Those unreleased songs include: "Travelling Cowboy" - (New Clown Introduction), "Automat Dance" - (Automaton Dance) and "Alobaloro" - (Rola Bola). And there was one song that, due to the continuing evolution of the show is on the soundtrack but isn't in the show anymore. "Adrideo" is the clown act, or should I say, it was our clown act until approximately a month ago. Work in progress... new clown act = new music!"

Ms. Corradi dedicates the album to "Mariposa." "Mariposa" means "butterfly" in Spanish. This butterfly I know is an inspiration for me. And the symbol of the butterfly is related to the show. The fact that a butterfly goes through four stages in its cycle before it becomes a butterfly is really related to transformation, to a journey where you have to throw yourself into the void. [The concept of letting] yourself be reborn again is really appropriate for this show. So Mariposa is a person and also a symbol."

Unlike the soundtrack to Varekai, which was more electronica-influenced and took some liberties with the music, ZAIA seems to be a return to the sound of the music as heard in the show. Much of this is due to recording the album with the show's original creation musicians in the ZAIA Theater. But it was also a philosophical decision. "To tell you the truth I think [soundtrack CDs] should always reflect the show. If there's going to be other projects inspired by the show music you should [label them] as being inspired from the show. When it's the show's soundtrack I feel that it should reflect the music of the show but not necessarily in every detail, you can enrich it. For example for this CD I had to restructure [the music] to put it in a format that was independent from the image, from the visual."

"For Varekai it was an executive decision to work with [CD Producer Nitin Sawhney]. We had an intimate dinner at Guy's house in Montréal with Nitin and Bruno Gaez (who was the Musical Director at the time). And Guy felt [there] was a new tone for Cirque du Soleil starting with Varekai, because (Cirque Co-Founder and first Company President) Daniel Gauthier had left and it was the first show that had been created without him. It was Guy's desire to explore other avenues and he asked me if I would feel comfortable with that. And I said yeah, I approved it. It was great, it was a fantastic encounter and I think it spoke for itself. It [was in] the Top 5 in Billboards World Music section for weeks.

Interesting sounds are one of the hallmarks of Ms. Corradi's music. Such as a rapid breathing singing sound used in ZAIA on "Undae." "It's called "panting" or "throat singing." It's a specialty of one of the musicians, Racheal Cogan, the wind instrumentalist. And I integrated it into two of the pieces because I find this sound brings us to the beginning; to me it's really evocative of the origin of humanity. Hopefully it creates that in the imagination of others. And so far so good, people that have heard it here feel the same. So we'll see how it echoes back as the album lives its life."

In a prior interview she mentioned how one of Guy Lalibertés' favorite instruments was the "bandaneon." What's that? "Bandaneon is the name for an accordion, but instead of having a keyboard it has buttons. Guy loves accordion sounds - he used to play it - so I know that he loves the sound. In the last 11 years he would really be turned on when I would come up with an accordion or bandaneon sound."

"Guy loves very simple melodies and melodies that bring people together. And he loves everything that is rhythmic or percussive or [music that is] very trendy. But he explained to me that he loves music and melodies that bring people together. And to him an accordion is a great instrument to do that." (This might explain why the bandaneon/accordion shows up in almost every Cirque recording.)

The ZAIA album continues Ms. Corradi's considered use of strings and woodwinds. "I think they are very warm. [In ZAIA] we don't have violins per se. [We have] a bow specialist who plays viola da gamba and the ancestor of the cello, the rabab. Sometimes it might sound like a violin but we're not using a violin. To me these sounds are very real and warm. They have a mode of expression that is strong and close to the human voice."

“With Dralion’s original instrumentation the first musician I hired was a cellist/violinist, he would play both. And [for ZAIA] the wind instrumentalist [was to] be mainly an oboist but they also play didgeridoo and other wind instruments. I love to put the two together. I think all Cirque shows have bowed or blown into [instruments], I’m not the only one. If I look at Cirque orchestral formations I think we find that you always have keyboard and percussion but you need people who blow into something and people who bow string. First we do it with synthesizers. [But it’s] so expressive when a specialist in an instrument gives a real rendering with a real soul interpreting and with all the mechanics and ornaments you have with a real instrument instead of having a keyboard play it.”

ZAIA Keyboardist Conrad Askland quotes Ms. Corradi as saying musicians are the “soul of the show.” He also called her a “musical shaman.” “I auditioned [and selected] every musician in the show. I’m totally part of the process. The Director of Creation for the Show Neilson Vignola accompanied me through the process.”

“For the other shows normally I am involved, but they will know if I am too busy to hire or audition other people. Normally I am always the one choosing the musicians because it is part of my mandate - Composer, Arranger and Musical Director, that comes along with it.”

“With singers, because they are characters in the show, once I make my choices we [show them to] the director for him to see what they look like, because he would have to work with them. We would have to reach a consensus. He was very happy with the people I found.”

ZAIA incorporates two women singers, was that her choice? “These ideas always come from the director. [For the other shows] the director saw a man and a woman but for this show Gilles wanted two female singers. I was happy to get the request and work with it, and I make the best of it I can.”

Listening to her Cirque albums one wonders if vocalists have difficulty with some of the more tongue-twisting aspects of Cirque’s made-up language. “On the contrary, I get more positive comments that it’s interesting and challenging. Because they perform 8 to 10 shows a week and - let me put it this way - I make sure they don’t fall asleep! They have enough challenges [with] the difficulty of the melodies and the way to interpret it, what I’m looking for in dynamics and sensitivity, rendering, interpretation. I make sure the mountain is high enough they have a nice climb. And to be able to have [their souls] open at every show. Maybe they’ve thought it was hard but nobody’s ever told me.”

Creation musicians are “crucial, absolutely crucial” to a show’s final musical sound, Ms. Corradi insists. “These musicians are choices that I made very meticulously, of what kind of interpretation I’m looking for. In this show I was looking for multi-disciplinary musicians, especially [with] regards to plucked strings, bowed strings, and winds, so we get all kinds of textures. It’s also like a journey in time, in contemporary sounds as well as ancient, like the rabab and the oud.”

“So I made sure that I found the [right] musicians. Of course this is crucial, because [they create] the foundation of [how future] musicians will be asked to interpret the music unless I’m lucky enough that the original members of the band stay forever. Which happened [with] both Dralion and Varekai, most of the team is the same.”

“So it’s absolutely crucial, they lay down the foundation of the score. Because I may lay down a line of aoud that I will play myself with a very good sample, but it’s never [the same as] when it’s the instrument interpreting it itself.”

For the “Solarium/Delirium” and “Delirium” arena show CDs Cirque utilized several of Ms. Corradi’s compositions. In fact her songs alone make up 40% of both projects! Songs utilized include: From Dralion: Ombra, Aborigenes Jam and Spiritual Spiral. From Varekai: Lubia Dobarstan, Emballa, Oscillum, Patzivota, Le Reveur and El Pendulo. How does it feel to hear her music in such a context? “It’s exciting, it’s inspiring. I like [hearing where] inspired arrangers and producers bring [the music]. [On Solarium/Delirium] there’s “Ombra” where we have two completely different universes being expressed on the same album; one is more Latin and the other really trip-hop. I love it.”

“If I would write a piece [for a show] and it was really new and I offered it to the musicians and they would start playing it like [the remixes] I wouldn’t agree because I have an architecture, an esthetic that I ask them to respect. Because the architecture and esthetic have meaning in conjunction with all my other colleagues and creators. We create an esthetic together and if they were to change the [musical] style I wouldn’t agree. But when it comes to doing remixes I find it very exciting and inspiring and I’m happy that people are doing it.”

“I saw [Delirium] once when it premiered in Montréal. I was open and just received it. (Music Producer and Arranger) Francis Collard did a great job. Sometimes it sounded like a homeopathic [dose] of what we created. He had a big mandate to take all those [songs] and make something for this mega production but he did his job well, I think he did a great job.”

How would she populate a Violaine Corradi “Best of”? “That’s a very hard question. I have no idea. It’s the type of question I can’t answer because I have to sit down and listen to everything and make it work together. And I’d probably ask my friend Alain Vinet what he thinks. I don’t know, I would have to do it then tell you.”

Whatever songs end up on that mixtape, they would all reflect the Violaine Corradi style which she defines as, “a juxtaposition of different styles and different cultures. I find a lot of inspiration in what I call “root music.” I don’t like saying “folkloric” music, but original music that has been played for hundreds or thousands of years from every country. That’s what I listen to when I write music, and I try to bring in a contemporary approach. I also like to juxtapose diverse styles, like classical with trip-hop, or house with Latin and whatever. I’ve always written like that, and I guess that’s why Guy invited me to be part of the team 11 years ago.”

So what's currently in her MP3 player? "These days I'm listening to "Tuck & Patti" (vocalist Patti Cathcart and guitarist Tuck Andress). It was released in the 80's and I haven't listened to it in ages, I downloaded it maybe a week ago. It's just voice and guitars and it's just great, it's amazing. It felt so good to listen to that again. They write their own songs and do some covers. Just beautiful to hear a human voice with a very simple recording, very transparent. Tuck is the guitar player and he plays amazingly, with so much feeling. That's what I'm listening to [along with] so many other things. But that one is first on my list these days."

Is there something about composing music that the public doesn't realize that she'd like them to know? "That's such a good question! I don't think I want them to know because [it's] a lot of work. I think the general audience [doesn't] have one hundredth of an idea of all the work that [has been done] when they listen to an album or listen to any kind of show. Of all the human effort and inspiration and generosity and talent, everything that it takes to put it all together."

"Let's just take ZAIA. We have nine musicians. All of them [have put in] how many hours and years of work just to get there? And then to put the soundtrack together?" "How can I put it? I don't think an audience that aren't musicians can envision everything it takes to put all this together, so I think I'd rather they didn't know. Just enjoy it! On our side we have so much joy doing it."

"It's work and joy at the same time. I'd rather the audience just keeps the joy of listening. The joy of listening is equivalent to the joy we have of giving it to them. Because if we didn't have joy all this work would mean nothing. In my life [I've known] people that couldn't understand what I was doing. They would wonder why I put so much energy on a note or a measure or on 8 bars or 100 bars of music. These people are not in my life anymore."

Her work ethic was imprinted on her early in life, "[by] my parents, but especially my mother. My mother was my music master; she studied at the Pittsburgh School of Music in Philadelphia. She was an opera singer and music whiz and she passed it on to me. My father was also but he passed away when I was six so my main master was my mother. She taught me everything about music but especially how to materialize and actualize my ideas and bring [them out]."

"I remember in Quebec when I was nine years old I started to do television. They would come to see the kid that could compose music at nine years old, so they would put me on TV and stuff like that. She would have me write out charts for the musicians or to be able to [copyright] the piece at BMI. And she told me, "What you start you have to finish." And at nine years old to write a chart for musicians was a big big endeavor. And I would cry, "No, why don't you do it?" "No! You started it, you finish it!" So I think that was the [development] of my courage and endurance and stamina."

“You need inspiration and talent but you [also] need courage to put forward and actualize and materialize your ideas. And you have to have the courage to keep going until it becomes complete. That is my philosophy.”

What can we expect to hear from her in the future? “For the moment we’re still doing a lot of changes [to ZAIA] so I’m busy doing that. I also have some album projects [in mind]. And of course (Vice-President of Creation) Pierre Phaneuf at Cirque told me the last time I spoke to him that they had projects for me. So we’ll see. I think they’re letting me finish [ZAIA] and then we’ll see what my new collaboration with Cirque will be. So coming up - music music music music!”

As our time together was running out we had one final question, one of our favorites. What words of wisdom does she have for young artists to encourage or make them aware of the challenge of Art as a career? “Hmm. That’s a very good question, and a hard one because there are so many things I want to say. Maybe I’ll write it to you [later].”

Later she wrote, “To be an artist... to be a true artist means to be totally engaged, totally dedicated to your craft; in fact, you can't even imagine living or breathing for a millisecond without Art in your life! If this is the way you deeply feel then there are chances you will have enough willpower and inner strength to carry you through.”

“As the famous French star Georges Brassens liked to say, “Talent without technique is just a bad habit.” Knowing this first-hand and also knowing what my peers and I have to put in to realize our dreams and visions, I can confirm that the artistic adventure will challenge and test you to the bone; to the marrow of your soul; it will carve you like the sculptor carves marble in order to reveal your true nature; your beauty and your full rainbow potential.”

“If you feel you have the talent and hear this “Call” to passionately live the artistic odyssey (and what I just told you didn't make you want to run in the opposite direction...), then jump right in without any second thought. Because it means that your dedication to your art and to the world and what will be requested of you to succeed won't be “work” for you.... your long hours, days, months, and years will be total “play”; full, total “joy”!”

And as she signed off Violaine Corradi had some kind words for us at the Fascination! Newsletter. “I think it’s precious that you take time to speak with me and to speak with us. You’ve done some great work and every element counts. It’s very precious and I thank you.”

Likewise, Ms. Corradi.

My sincere thanks go to: Ms. Violaine Corradi, for so graciously spending time with us, Lise Dubois, Corporate Alliances Coordinator, Chantal Côte, Corporate PR Manager, and my wife LouAnna for putting up with my sometimes obsessive hobby.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



FERGUSON & ALLAIRE
Album Producers – ZED

« Making Unexpected Magic Timeless »

Keith Johnson, 2009

When the ZED CD was released, some fans were vocal online about perceived "problems" with it. Most of their complaints had to do with how they felt there was a lot of editing done to the music. By going to the source, in this case album producers Lord-Ferguson and Allaire, we were able to get answers to those concerns. The duo had a good "because" answer to every "why?" question I asked. How the ZED CD was recorded was interesting and totally unexpected. The duo are now working on a musical set to debut next year that they hope to take to Broadway, "N-The Queen of Paris." It's too bad this beautiful music (one of Dupéré's best scores) has been silenced.



When the soundtrack CD of the Tokyo, Japan resident show ZED (Cirque du Soleil Musique, CDSMCD-10031, 2009) was released reaction was enthusiastic, yet fans wondered about some of the decisions made in the albums production. So we at Fascination went right to the source, the albums production team of Martin Lord-Ferguson and Ella Louise Allaire (EL-uh Lou-EEZ Uh-LAIR).

Working on the soundtrack in conjunction with veteran Cirque composer René Dupéré, they both come with extensive histories. Ms. Allaire has a Master's degree in composition from the University of Montréal, and has previously released two CD's, "Heretique" (1999) and "Mon Or" (LaChapelle LACHAPCD-9184, 2004).

Mr. Ferguson has been involved in over 30 albums in his career. "I've done a lot of French singers. Mitsou Gélina and Ginette Reno are known French Canadian singers, but I don't know if you'd find them in the USA. The most successful thing I did outside of Cirque and outside of "Energia" would be a TV series I did as a composer called "Fortier (FAH-tee-ay)." It was huge throughout all of Canada. It was an "Alias"-type series that I did about nine years ago." (10 episodes of the series aired on French-Canadian television in 2001.)

It was around that time that he met René Dupéré, first recording and co-producing the Dupéré, Élise Velle and Boris Bergman album “La Belle Est Dans Ton Camp” (Netza NET2-1441, 1991). They continued that arrangement for the Saltimbanco re-recording and re-release (Cirque du Soleil Musique MDSMCJ-10005, 2004). In addition to co-producing and recording the soundtrack to KÀ (Cirque du Soleil Musique CDSMCJ-10024, 2005), he also provided vocals for “Forest.” It was here Ms. Allaire became part of the team, writing choir arrangements as well as singing on the songs “Koudamare” and “Threat.”

After KÀ they were involved in several non-Cirque projects, including music for the Conservatory at Bellagio in 2005 and the soundtrack for the TV movie “Journey to the Center of the Earth” in 2008 (not the 3-D Brendon Frasier version, this one starred Rick Schroder and Peter Fonda). They also composed two volumes of film score “cue” music for APM Music (www.apmmusic.com - more on that later). And just before becoming involved in production of the ZED Soundtrack, they co-composed with Mr. Dupéré the soundtrack for the Holiday on Ice(.com) show, “Energia” (BUMA/STEMRA DPCD-1101, 2008)

Being Mr. Dupéré’s associates over several projects (Mr. Ferguson for 10 years, Ms. Allaire for 6 years) has brought a smooth working process to the trio. This helped with their first big project, KÀ.

ELLA LOUISE ALLAIRE (ELA): “[ZED] was a pretty smooth process, [compared to] KÀ [where you could have long delays caused by] the gantry stopping at some point in the show. There were a lot of technical issues with KÀ.”

MARTIN LORD-FERGUSON (MLF): “KÀ was also the first time we were using the Giga with the Symphonia system.” (This system allows individual pre-recorded instrument tracks to be played back in sync with live music, including recalling specific sections of musical cues. It is especially helpful when a musician or singer is unable to perform.) “We were using 32 tracks of playback and there were lots of technical issues. [We then used the same system with] Saltimbanco live arena. [ZED] was the third time we were using the same system. Technically [the creation of ZED] went very well.”

“All the shows can be stressful, but we [had] to adapt more for [KÀ]. And we were called in later in the process; KÀ was [just] three or four months. For ZED we had two and a half years so there was a natural process; we really had more time to ponder [each] decision. For us the soundtrack of ZED is the result of those two and a half years.”

ELA: “It was a long process. We’d do a bit, then another bit, then another bit, [starting] in 2007. For ZED Martin and I were involved from day one, from the first mock-up to the last final note. What’s on the album is a large palette of everything in the show, which we had to reduce to a certain length.”

For ZED, Martin Lord-Ferguson is listed as Musical Director and Co-Arranger, while Ella Louise Allaire handled Orchestrations and Arrangement for the Chorale, with Mr. Dupéré handling Composing and Arranging. But the three work together during the process.

ELA: “When René comes to our studio we listen to what he's written and make suggestions. Then we make a mock-up, which we take to the band or to the director or to the choreographer, and we make adjustments when asked. It's very easy going. The first thing is to present the music with all of its characteristics - the tempo, the drive - to the [creative team]. Then if the choreographer says, ‘We're missing this' or ‘It's not fast enough' or something then we re-work it. And the director has his own opinion. We sort of jumble around with the music until there's a consensus that the number is good.”

MLF: “If there are parts or structures missing we re-do it with René. We add the band as a flavor and we also add [prerecorded tracks] as a flavor.”

Being brought in at the beginning of creation also presented the opportunity to be part of the process of incorporating and auditioning musicians. This included luring bandleader and keyboard player Michel Cyr, a musician with deep familiarity of jazz, away from the Franco Dragone production, *Le Rêve*, at Wynn Las Vegas, to be bandleader for the new Cirque production.

MLF: “We first did an interview with [him] in Las Vegas. And then we were at all the meetings with him and all the auditions.”

ELA: “[During Creation] the director, François Girard, would often use the band to play and jam just for the feel. Over the months that process created a sound for the band. There's a piece in the middle of the show where they jam as well – during the intermission and at the beginning of the [second] act.”

This “band sound” was then mixed with the music to create a complete musical whole, which is described in the CD liner notes as, “juxtaposing musical elements that initially might have appeared from different genres.”

ELA: “For instance, the last piece, “Hymn of the Two Worlds,” has a classical flavor, “Vaneyou Mi Le” has much more of a world feel. And the live band is much more funky. [We had] classically trained string players and a classical chorus, [with] a more world voice [in some songs]. Because [show character] Noit's voice has a more Scandinavian type of ornamentation. And [you have] the band that is very jazzy funky.”

MLF: “One of the best examples of a juxtaposition on the CD is, “Reaching Up.” You have the jazzy feel from the band, Johanna (Lillvik)'s voice very ethereal on top, and you have some world flavors added.”

/// BLENDING THE ELEMENTS

Recording for the CD actually began way before the show premiered.

MLF: “The [orchestra and choir] recordings for [both] the show and soundtrack were done about a year before the opening of the show. We [traveled] to Slovakia to do the recordings for the orchestra. For the choir the decision was made to do the recordings in Montréal because we were in the staging process at Cirque at the time.”

ELA: “[The chorus] was recorded at the Schulich School of Music of McGill University with a chorus of about 50 singers.”

It was always planned that of Mr. Ferguson and Ms. Allaire would be producing the soundtrack CD and not assigning it to an outside producer. But Mr. Dupéré was never far from the process.

MLF: “[Most] of the creative process [for] the songs was done in the months [before] and right after the premiere. After that René would come and [observe] the different steps of the process all the way up to when we finished the soundtrack in June.”

ELA: “At first we said, ‘Let’s listen to the live show and see what elements we can take and incorporate into the tracks, and how we can make this blend together and make sense.’”

The desire to incorporate the creation musicians whenever possible led to an interesting ‘hybrid’ approach to recording.

MLF: “For ZED it was definitely important [to use the creation musicians]. When we had our first meetings three years ago we knew that we wanted to do a more live performance-oriented show than KÅ. So we knew right from the start that we wanted to use the musicians [for the soundtrack CD].”

ELA: “It’s not a challenge to convince [the musicians] since obviously they want to be part of the soundtrack. The challenge is to fit [recording into] their schedule of 10 shows a week, which is very demanding. [With] two shows a day it’s difficult to put recording before or after that. And they really need their days off. So it’s challenging to [find] a timeframe. That’s why, in the case of ZED, the live tracks that we put on the album were very much appreciated. We had a few additional [recording] sessions but not like a complete album from [beginning to end].”

MLF: “[The band recordings] were done after the show debut. We recorded some live shows in February 2009, and from that we used [much] of the material. We had done special planning with the sound crew at the show and we knew how they were going to record on those special days. We also took two months to do the extra sessions with the live musicians to fine tune what we needed, because we wanted to [record] them on days where they only had one show instead of two. [On a one-show day, when] they would do a matinee they would finish around six o’clock and would record from seven o’clock on.”

“For the Tokyo [sessions] we set up a small recording studio in the Tokyo theater, but we [Mr. Ferguson and Ms. Allaire] weren't physically there. We arranged a camera setup via Skype so we could see and hear them while they were recording. We had an engineer recording [the session] and we would watch and comment.”

ELA: “We could give them direction, [such as] how to interpret pronunciation. It was quite challenging because of the time [difference]. But also because of the scheduling of the musicians. [If, on a one-show day] they had a matinee they could record after that, but it would be very early in the morning for us [in Montréal]. So it was pretty tricky to schedule.” (When it was 7pm in Tokyo it would be 5am in Montréal.)

So were most of the tracks live recordings, or were most of them recorded later?

MLF: “It depends on the musician. Most of the percussion, drums and bass are from the live recordings. Keyboards as well, but there are [extra] layers of programming that are in the show and on the soundtrack that were added. With the soloists [such as] violin, bassoon, and duduk sometimes they are live and sometimes [they were] done afterwards. Of course the vocalists were done afterwards because we used a better mic and they were in a quiet environment and [we were] able to do multiple takes.”

While the other songs on the CD feature some combination of “live” and “studio” recordings, “Blue Silk” (used in the aerial silk performance) is a totally live performance, with the vocals recorded separately.

/// DIFFICULT CHOICES

Once the live recordings were done, the next task was made more challenging by a request from Cirque's Musical Director, Alain Vinet.

ELA: “Cirque wanted us to produce an album of about 50 minutes [length]. And we were allowed a certain budget as well. 50 minutes [of music] needs a certain type of budget that we had to respect. So obviously, since the show was an hour and a half we had to make difficult choices about what would go on the album and what wouldn't.”

The first job was to trim the live recordings from their longer performance-based length to a more reasonable three to five minute pacing for CD's. However, in order to make the 50-minute length requested by Cirque, some songs had to be cut. This included the music for the Lasso act, the instrumental played at the end of intermission and, initially, “Kernoon's Fire.”

ELA: “[With regards to] Lasso, originally the piece was [composed in the key of] G. And the strings we recorded were in G. [But] later on the number was sped up and we couldn't use those [string] tracks anymore, because the song was now in A. For some [time] the Lasso music was in question - should it be different, should it be [in the new key]? (Eventually it was decided to keep it in A, the key it is in now). Because of that we put it aside since we had to eliminate [songs] to make it a 50-minute album.”

MLF: “The live [version of the] song changed often during staging to fit with the number. [Since] the staging and speed changed around technically it was a more difficult song for us to do.”

“It's the same reason with the intermission music. It's not that the song isn't good; it's a very good song. It was actually the first version of, “Reaching Up,” and of course during staging that number changed so the music also changed. The band really loved that song; they were disappointed when we had to [cut it]. So we said, ‘If you're willing to play it at intermission...’ So we actually moved [the original song] to the intermission. But again, because of the 50-minute [limit] requested for the CD that was one of the songs that was cut.”

When viewing the show in Tokyo, we really loved “Mirror of the Two Worlds” (the baton act) in the show, but felt it was too short. The song is essentially the same length on the CD, and we wondered if there was ever a consideration to lengthen the song?

MLF: “The first draft [of the song] wasn't exactly like it is now. The number was longer and was actually bigger musically [with] more orchestra and choir, it was a very big number. In staging it was reduced and compressed and the staging was changed. For the soundtrack we also wanted to put “Mirror” (the song that plays at the start of the show) onto it. So that's why we wanted to keep that particular [song at the length it is in the show].”

A fan has noted that the beginning of “Birth of the Sky” has some talking and singing in the show (after Johanna Lillvik's initial vocal solo) that is missing on the CD.

MLF: “During the live show she's actually talking to the bungee people around her; she is basically doing an improvisation, [saying] something different every night. We didn't feel that was necessary for the soundtrack.”

ELA: “[Johanna's talking] wasn't written for the soundtrack by René. The way you hear it on the album is the original writing. We [realize] that the show lasts many years and over those years you can have new [singer] interpretations coming into the show; everybody adds a bit of [themselves]. But we are the guardians of the original ideas. And that was the way it was written and intended, so that's why it's the way it is [on the CD] now.”

Another fan has noted there is a drumbeat throughout “First Incantation” that has a rhythm exactly like drums at the beginning of “O Makunde” from the KÀ CD. How did this drum rhythm and sound get into both scores?

MLF: “This is the first time I've heard about that. Ella, René and I programmed both of the soundtracks so sometimes there can be some [similar] elements and flavors that we use. To be honest I don't think it's the same; it might be a rhythm that's close but I'd have to listen to it.”

Mr. Ferguson says in the liner notes for KÀ, “This disk has its origins in the show but is both a reflection and an extension of the show.” How do soundtracks “extend” a show?

MLF: “One of the things about Cirque is that these shows last for a very long time. Longer than most Broadway or other shows; like *Holiday on Ice* is maybe three or four years, but not fifteen. So in the soundtrack process we want to make it timeless. I remember for KÀ that since it's a permanent show in Vegas we wanted the soundtrack to be as timeless as possible. That's why we went to record the strings at Paramount [Studios]. That's why it's an extension of the show, because we used more programming for the live version and live strings for the soundtrack.”

Ms. Allaire and Mr. Ferguson sang on the demo mock-ups of the music used in the creation process. In fact, Ms. Allaire's voice can be heard on pre-recorded tracks that are played back during the live show! Though creation singers Johanna Lillvik and Kevin Faraci sing throughout the live show and the majority of the soundtrack album, there are three exceptions. In the case of “Vaneyou Mi Le” Ms. Allaire handles the vocal.

ELA: ““Vaneyou Mi Le” is [actually] an Abraka (AH-bruh-kuh) number. In the story of ZED you have the people from the sky and the people from the Earth. The people from the sky have these ethereal, very high voices. And [the people] from the earth have a more guttural [sound]. The voice I use to sing on “Vaneyou Mi Le” is more of someone from the Earth or from the deep world; more related to Abraka's world, not the sky world.”

After recording, mixing, and editing the CD to a running time of 51 and a half minutes it was presented to Cirque. The feedback from Alain Vinet was – interesting.

ELA: “When the album was finished he really enjoyed it, most of his comments were extremely positive. The only thing he asked was maybe an extra song.”

MLF: “We had submitted the album and Alain asked us to [go back and] put “Kernoon's Fire” on. So we discussed it with René. In the show Kernoon is a separate character.”

ELA: “Originally Kernoon was supposed to be sung by a third singer because it's a different character. For instance Kevin plays Abraka. Kernoon (kur-NOON) is a creature of the deep Earth. And Noit (nu-WEET) is a creature of the sky. When Alain asked us [for the song] the album and all the recording sessions with the Tokyo crew were finished. So we needed a solution for a vocal, respecting our budget and timeframe. And for many years Martin has been singing René's pieces because René is very fond of Martin's voice. I think Martin has a great voice. Since it was last minute and we were very close to the deadline [it was] a natural decision. [Especially] since [Kernoon is] a different character. So we didn't feel it would soften the score or the story of the show.”

/// OTHER ENDEAVORS

The trio of Dupéré, Ferguson and Allaire work together under the banner Creations Netza. (www.creationsnetza.com). (“Netza” is the name of one of the three male

“Sephiroth” or emanations through which God reveals himself, from the teachings of Kaballah.)

MLF: “It was a suggestion from René’s wife (Élise Velle) who was studying the Kabal at the time. Not the religion, she was just interested in the Kabal. We wanted to have an original name, and naturally we went to Netza.”

Their work includes a number of projects outside Cirque. One of the more intriguing is something called “Sonic Elixir,” of which they have released two volumes on AMP Music.

MLF: “Ella and I do film work more and more now. The APM collection is a collection of [musical] cues that are used in film, television and commercials. We’re actually releasing three new CD’s that are going to be part of the Composer Collection. It’s more and more an integral part of what’s happening on the LA/Hollywood scene, to have film cues that are different.”

ELA: “It’s more of a Hollywood guideline type of music - big scores, big production. It’s not [available to] the public; it’s only open for the industry to license for their purposes.”

Another outside project of which they are particularly proud is the soundtrack for the Holiday on Ice show, “Energia” (touring Germany through March, 2010). Ms. Allaire composed five tracks for the show, Mr. Dupéré four and Mr. Ferguson three. The recording of the soundtrack was a career highlight.

ELA: “The recording of 100+ musicians at Air Studio that we did for “Energia” [was such a highlight]. Working with (Chief Sound Engineer) Geoff Foster, hearing your music being played by such a large orchestra was such a blast it was indescribable.”

MLF: “That was something we did last year. Usually orchestras and choirs are [recorded] separately and layered on. For “Energia” we had 140 people [playing at one time]. We did some layerings but most of it was done in one day. That was certainly one of the great climaxes of our career.”

Their next Cirque du Soleil project is already in the works, a resident show in Dubai. When can we expect to hear that music?

ELA: “That’s a good question that we don’t have an answer to at the moment. There is some delay because of the world economic situation. We know that in December [2009] they’re either supposed to fix a date or get more [information] on when [it will debut]. We don’t have an answer unfortunately but it’s definitely on.”

MLF: “We are working on it together with René. We did about a half-hour mock-up that was presented and everybody’s happy. It’s a bit like ZED because since we are involved much earlier in the process we have the time to make it work. It was scheduled to open in 2011 but I believe it will be sometime in 2012.”

ELA: “The music is a totally different world, but we won't say too much. It's going to be a great show!”

When we interviewed René Dupéré (See Fascination issues #46 and #47) he said of Mr. Ferguson: “He's a fantastic mixer; he's been working with Pro Tools since he was a kid. He makes the sound bigger than I would have been able to.” How does he make things sound bigger?

MLF: “I've been doing mixing and producing for more than 20 years. And I've always had a natural feel for doing bigger productions. There are different aspects to it. There's what we call layering that we use a lot; we add different layers of sound and textures. And there are lots of mixing tricks.”

ELA: “He can't tell you them all, it's part of the secret recipe! (Laughs) The show [ZED] was amazing and huge, so it needed an amazing soundtrack.”

Finally, as our time was once again winding down we asked, as we always do when we talk to Cirque creatives, what words of wisdom do they have for young artists?

MLF: “I think one of the magical things about Cirque [music] is that it has a whole bunch of styles. It's not [confined] to just pop or rock or classical, it's a bridge to multiple types of music. For us it's always been very natural to be open to all genres, from rap to classical to country to film music to pop to rock. So we encourage writers and composers to always be open to other genres. There's some good stuff in country music even if you're a dance composer.”

ELA: “Magic often happens with unexpected elements. For example someone may not have any music training but [may] have a natural feel for it. Or you might have someone who's classically trained but needs to loosen up some of their habits sometimes. Or world musicians – we had a fantastic ehru player on the Energia show who had totally different notation. All these things make you learn more about music. I talk about that a lot; we learn more every day about music and how to use [different] elements to make it more expressive, and to meet the directors' view.”

“Every decision we make in our process we try to make with all the honesty and creativity and emotion that we think the work is going to bring to the people. We always keep that as a guideline, to always to do as good as we can.”

“Put your prejudices aside. Be as creative as you can. Go for your passion and find your personal sound.”

My sincere thanks go to: Mr. Ferguson and Ms. Allaire, for so graciously spending time with us; Lise Dubois, Corporate Alliances Coordinator; Marie-Noëlle Caron – Public Relations Information Agent; and my wife LouAnna for putting up with my sometimes obsessive hobby.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



DANIEL LAMARRE
President & COO Cirque du Soleil

« *Joining the Circus* »

Keith Johnson, 2010

When Ricky proposed the "dual-city" CirqueCon 2010 (New York for Banana Shpeel and Montréal for Totem) my wife and I knew we would be making our third journey to Cirque's hometown. So, after almost a decade of writing about Cirque and its workings, I thought I might have a good shot at a big "get." So I asked to speak with either Guy Laliberté or Gilles Ste-Croix. Neither was available, I was told. (Drat.) But time could be arranged with Cirque's President, Daniel Lamarre. (Score!)

We came to Montréal ready with our questions, but the interview only seemed to be getting going when we were told it was the end of our time. In my haste I had, once again, forgotten to confirm how much time I had. I thought we had an hour, but we only got a half. The resulting article shows it and suffers. But that's it! Now I always start interviews with agreement about the time. Feel free to criticize me for not starting to do that earlier.



When it became clear we would be able to add Montreal to our CirqueCon 2010 weekend in New York, our journalistic minds went into high gear. Who in the Cirque organization, we wondered, might be interested in talking with us for Fascination?

Thanks to the kindness of our friends inside Cirque IHQ, my wife and I were able to spend the afternoon talking with those we have known from afar but had yet to meet face-to-face. And we were very fortunate to arrange a short bit of time talking with the highest profile person ever to grace these pages in interview form, Mr. Daniel Lamarre (Dan-yell Luh-maarrh), President and Chief Operating Officer of Cirque du Soleil.

After a wonderful lunchtime spent chatting up several of our Montreal IHQ friends we were escorted to a large elevator in the middle of the building and taken to the third floor.

As we ascended floors in the IHQ the atmosphere got quieter, with less of the hustle and bustle found on the ground floor. The third floor is a quiet respite.

After being escorted into his office we ended up sitting comfortably around a brown conference table in his smart but modestly-appointed offices on the south side of the building. Mr. Lamarre was very gracious with us, calmly and knowledgeably answering our questions in his light French-Canadian accent. We started by asking about his responsibilities and how he came to be in his current position.

“[My responsibility is] the overall management of the organization. To use less corporate terms and use Cirque terminology my job is to put in place the right conditions for the creators of Cirque to be able to create the best shows there are. Therefore, I have to make sure that everything we do within this building, within this studio, supports the creative and production process. The other thing I have to do is ensure the sustainability of Cirque du Soleil. Bringing new projects, bringing new shows, and protecting all those jobs of people that are very very passionate about what they do. That’s how I see my mandate.”

His first encounter with Cirque founder Guy Laliberte, though, occurred many years earlier. “It’s a funny story. I was a partner in a public relations firm (National Public Relations) in Canada, and in 1986 I was doing a mandate for Guy Laliberte but he couldn’t pay me. He came into my office and said, “Daniel, I’m sorry. We have no money, we’re brand new. I don’t know what to do with this.” And I [tore up] the invoice and said, “Forget about it, because what you’re trying to do is so amazing. I wish you the best of luck.”

“Years later [Cirque] had become successful. I sold my firm because I was becoming the president of a television network (TVA, Quebec’s largest private TV broadcaster). I called Guy and said, “I would love to have the TV rights for Cirque du Soleil.” They were hugely successful by then and he said, “Daniel, it would be impossible. This international firm is looking after those rights.” And I said, “No problem. I just wanted you to know that if ever they are available I am interested.”

“The following day I received a copy of a note to the guy who was in charge of the TV rights at Cirque saying, “This guy helped me out years ago. He wants the TV rights, do what you have to do.” And I was really touched by that, first that he remembered and second that he was moving on it. So we started to see each other a little more regularly because of the TV shows that we were working on for Cirque.”

“Five years later he called me out of the blue. He was in London and he said, “Daniel, I had this amazing flash last night.” And I said, “Yeah, what was it?” And he said, “You’re going to join the circus!” (Laughs) And I said, “Whoa, Guy, I have a job. I’m happy. I’m not sure about that.” And the rest is history. Three weeks later I was joining Cirque and I’ve been here for nine years, starting my tenth year. It’s been an interesting story, Guy and I, because we knew each other without really knowing each other. And now we’ve been working together more than nine years.”

With the company carefully tended by Mr. Lamarre, “Guy wants to stay away from the day-to-day [operations] of the business, to make sure that his creative juices are there. So my job is to make sure that he works as little as possible, that he continues to travel the world to find new treasures for our organization. Because that’s one gift he has that very few people in the world have.”

Mr. Lamarre has presided over a vast expansion of the Cirque du Soleil brand around the world in the form of not only new shows but new show models. These include repurposing older shows so they can play in arenas (Cirque calls them “venues”) in smaller cities that Cirque hasn’t previously played. They have discovered a new style of show with the dance-centered “Love” and “Viva Elvis.” And with “Banana Shpeel” they are developing a show that will play in heritage (older) proscenium theaters (ground that competitor Cirque Productions has covered for many years). This expansion has brought with it some hard-learned lessons.

“I think what we’ve learned is that people understand our brand, which is positive but which brings limits. For instance when we opened “Zumanity” people were expecting to see a “Mystere” type of show and were very disappointed.

So now we have to be careful how we manage expectations, that people understand that our creators like to try something new. We have to educate people about that, and in some cases we downplay the brand or use a different brand. That is a conversation we are having internally. We have been through that with “Zumanity” and we are going through it with “Banana Shpeel” because it’s a different type of show. But, mind you, I was at the show last night (opening night in New York City) and I thought that the reaction of the public was quite encouraging.”

Referring to the challenge of expanding into new parts of the world, such as with ZAIA in Macao he commented, “The toughest parts of the world for us are places like France, Italy and China where there is a huge tradition of traditional circus. When they see the name “Cirque” they think of a traditional cirque, and it takes us a while to educate people about how different we are from their circus. That’s the biggest challenge. After they have discovered that we’re not a circus but we are theatrical and we are different, I think we will be very, very successful.”

Moving to questions we as fans have been wondering about, we asked about changing the running time of ZED. We had been told that a 90-minute show was the original artistic vision but that Oriental Land Company (who manages the theater, concessions, and food and beverage) had requested an intermission in order to help meet their income projections. This was accommodated by Cirque, though its’ critical success in its 2-act form made fans wonder why other resident shows are based on the 90-minute model. It was even more surprising when ZED was changed to a 90-minute show. We wondered why and where the original 90-minute model came from.

“At the beginning [it was] a casino issue, because after an hour and a half they wanted people to go to the gambling floor. But through ZED we have experienced that it makes

a lot of sense, because we have so much technology involved and the experience is so sensorial, that having an intermission for theater shows was a bit of a downer.”

“As in the casino business, where after 90 minutes people want to go back to the gaming floor, at Disney after 90 minute shows people want to go back to the theme park or to other attractions. So it made more sense in this environment to have a 90-minute show.”

The change also makes it easier to sell ZED as part of travel packages offered to busy Japanese tourists, for whom the Tokyo Disney Resort is quite a jaunt out from the city and something to be carefully planned.

With Cirque’s interest in expanding internationally we were keen to ask about whether fans around the world should expect the Cirque video catalog to be issued into their DVD region? “As we expand geographically, [DVD product is] also a way [we present ourselves]. We’re expanding geographically more and more now which will force us, in a positive way, to make sure that our shows are available.”

The success of “La Nouba” on DVD has been, in Mr. Lamarre’s words, “Very very positive” and has improved ticket sales.

With that and the filming and broadcast of “KA” on German television fans curiosity was piqued about the possibility of resident shows being issued on DVD. It was our understanding Cirque’s contract with MGM/Mirage forbids issuing videos of shows, but not according to Mr. Lamarre. “It’s not by contract, it’s more the philosophical approach of the casino. They’re afraid we will lose clientele, which as a matter of fact, is totally contrary [to what we’ve found]. Because when we put our shows on video it entices people to come to the show.”

In the biggest piece of news to come out of our short time together, we were happy to learn there are plans to bring “ZAIA” and “ZED” to DVD for the American market! “Yes definitely. That’s something we’re exploring right now. ZAIA will come first, but yes.”

But it doesn’t mean every Cirque production will see the light of day on video. For example, a finished video for “Delirium” was booked into cinemas as a special event. Why not put it out on DVD since it’s already done? “There’s no plan for that now. The problem is that we are creating and producing so many shows at such a rapid pace that we don’t want to have too many DVD’s in a market where DVD’s are getting tougher and tougher to sell. The DVD market is decreasing at a very rapid pace, so it’s a business decision to not bring out too many DVD’s. And if I’m bringing [out a] DVD, I want the DVD [to be] of an actual [current] show, to help promote the show. And since Delirium is no longer in presentation it isn’t a priority of ours.” (I think we can safely assume that will also apply to “Wintuk,” seeing as how it’s in its final year at Madison Square Garden.)

What direction, then, will future DVD releases take? “The one thing right now that might change our lives is 3-D. You know, Cirque du Soleil has not been a great product for television. But people who have seen Avatar, for instance, are saying, “Wow! These are the textures of Cirque du Soleil characters that are in shows.”

And now all of the sudden all of the major studios are talking to us, saying they want to do something with Cirque du Soleil in 3-D. So that should accelerate the number of new shows that we produce, not only on DVD, but in 3-D. That’s something we’re exploring right now.”

How does Cirque measure success? Is one show more popular than another? “For touring shows it has nothing to do with the quality or the popularity of the show, it has to do with markets. And obviously when you open more and more markets the latest show is the most popular one, because our brand is at maturity and we’ll sell more tickets of any new show we produce.”

“There are shows that seem to be better received in [particular] countries. For instance there were a lot of questions about Dralion when we opened in Montreal. But it broke all ticket sales records in the United States, for reasons that were unclear. It was very very popular and had a broad appeal in America.”

“OVO was a great surprise to us because when we decided to do OVO we never thought that the show would be so appealing to kids.

But when you think about it it makes a lot of sense, because with the insect theme of the show it has a huge appeal to kids. So in touring shows I would say that they all have been big successes for different reasons.”

“For permanent shows, obviously the amazing success of “O” is alone in its league. There has never been a show that has been clearly sold out for so many years. That’s a first in the history of entertainment. But now we have “LOVE” that is at about the same level of success, and “KA” and others, but “O” remains in a very specific and exclusive situation.”

All too soon, our time was drawing to a close. But we wanted to make sure we asked the President of Cirque du Soleil what he thought was the best BUSINESS decision Cirque has ever made. “Definitely Vegas. People don’t realize it, but at the time there was a lot of controversy within the organization. I wasn’t here but I’ve heard so many stories. People and artists were asking Guy, “What are we going to do in Vegas? Vegas has nothing to do with the artistic values of Cirque.” And Guy had this famous answer, “I’m going to plant a flower in the desert.” And I think that sums it up, because today we have more than a flower, we have seven flowers, soon eight. So I think that was the real breakthrough of the organization.”

My sincere thanks go to: Mr. Daniel Lamarre, for so graciously spending time with us, Chantal Côte, Corporate PR Manager, And my wife LouAnna for sitting in on the interview, and putting up with my sometimes obsessive hobby.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



JERRY NADAL

Senior VP, Resident Show Division

« Keeping the Value »

Keith Johnson, 2010

There are a few people inside Cirque that really seem to understand the desire of fans to want to understand more about the company and its creations. Not from the standpoint of just selling tickets, but actually helping us understand. Jerry Nadal is one of those people. We will never forget the kindness he showed us with CirqueCon. In this article (we got an hour this time!) he provides lots of yummy new knowledge that we didn't know before. Updates: Michael Bolingbroke (who preceded Mr. Nadal in the head of Resident Shows position) has now moved on to F.C. Internazionale Milano, as CEO of the Italian soccer team. And instead of going to London, Zarkana went to play in Spain.



We love Las Vegas, my wife and I. Not the gambling mind you, but the atmosphere, the ambiance, the life of the place. And the shows, especially the Cirque shows. Seeing *Mystère* together, and realizing the joy we shared in that beautiful show, was one of the experiences that helped cement our relationship.

Over the years the Las Vegas market has become a critical part of Cirque's business as they have expanded from one to now seven (soon to be eight) shows on the strip. The overall management of those shows, as well as others taking up residencies in cities around the world, now rests in the hands of Jerry Nadal, Senior Vice-President of the Resident Shows Division.

We got to know Mr. Nadal during the planning and execution of CirqueCon 2006: Las Vegas! (www.cirquecon.com), when he was General Manager of Resident Shows. With his approval the Resident Shows division staff (as well as staff at the five Vegas shows) pulled out the stops to make the weekend truly memorable for our members.

As we were preparing for our latest trip to Las Vegas (to see Viva Elvis! and catch BeLIEve “2.0”) we asked if we could sit down with Mr. Nadal for a chat, to talk about the shows and his outlook on things of interest to Cirque fans. We were delighted when the theater veteran with much press experience (“I was even asked why we hire kids, because it’s ‘child abuse.’”) found time in his busy schedule. Our hopes were dashed, however, when an equipment delay on our connecting flight to Las Vegas meant we would miss our appointment. But fortunately for us, Mr. Nadal (who was also experiencing travel mishaps himself) had time on our last day in Vegas.

It was mid-morning on Monday, September 17, 2010 when we arrived at the newly-renovated Cirque Resident Shows HQ just south of McCarran Airport. The heat of mid-morning abated quickly as we waited inside the building just next to the new front desk area. It was also the day representatives from several area universities were in the building talking with artists about educational opportunities and career transition topics. Mr. Nadal greeted us soon after we arrived and escorted us back to his office on the south side of the building, a private office with windows facing the Airport. The occasional soft roar of jets and heavy trucks rumbling down East Sunset Road provided a backdrop to our conversation.

51 year-old Jerry Nadal (Nay-DELL – “It’s Spanish; my grandfather came from Spain.”) hails originally from New York. He spoke openly and frankly about Cirque and its business. Some of what we spoke about at the time would later change – it wouldn’t be too long after we spoke that Banana Shpeel was cancelled and closed, the Radio City Music Hall show was named (Zarkana) , and the “Michael Jackson The Immortal World Tour” was announced and tickets put on sale.

/// PLACING PRIORITIES

But we first wanted to hear about his history. While he might have ended up where he wanted to be, it didn’t start out that way. “I have a bachelor’s degree in Transportation Management and I’d always wanted to go to law school. You think of all the touring I did, it actually works! (laughs). I really did a whole business track.”

“In my junior year of college I worked for Irving Trust Bank on Wall Street and from there went to United States Lines. Then I started going back to school, looking at some marketing courses, and left U.S. Lines because they were going through bankruptcy. I ended up at Chase Manhattan Bank doing marketing at the branch level. But I had always done theater work on the side, tons of community theater.”

“When I was 28 I realized I was calling in sick for a week at a time because I was working [overnights during technical rehearsals] at the theater as a Technical Director. I forget what production I was doing, I think it was, “Anything Goes.” I came home [one morning] and it was like 5:30am. I was [living] at my parents’ house and they were having breakfast, getting ready to go to work. They knew it was tech week so my Dad said, “Are you going to work today?”

I said, "No, I'm not going in all week." And he said, "Don't you think your priorities are a little misplaced?" I said, "I'd love to have this conversation with you, but I'm going upstairs and going to sleep now." (laughs)

But the question stayed with him and got him thinking, though perhaps not in the way his father might have intended. "Right after the show opened I went in to Chase and quit. I just said nope, not interested in doing this anymore. And they thought it was a joke until they realized everything was gone from my desk."

"My first ["real" theater] job was a couple of months after that in the Equity Library Theater in Manhattan which has since closed (Ed: in 1990). They were like a workshop place, a "letter of agreement" theater. That was my first gig, five dollars a day. My parents thought I had completely lost my mind, but they were supportive. They said, "As long as you can pay your bills, do you thing." And that's where I started doing theater work."

As his career developed, Mr. Nadal worked his way up through the theater ranks to working in Las Vegas. "I was Business Manager on "Starlight Express" when it was running at the Las Vegas Hilton. We opened on September [14] of 1993, a few months before *Mystère* opened. I [had] never lived here; I was working for Troika Entertainment (www.troika.com) doing a lot of Broadway stuff - one-night-ers, touring. When "Starlight" closed in 1997 (Ed: Nov 30) Karen Gay (who is now our Director of Global Citizenship) was Company Manager. [Cirque] had just posted an opening for a Company Manager job on *Mystère* [which Karen got]. Karen called me one day a couple of months later and said, "Hey, they're looking for a Company Manager in Biloxi [Mississippi]. Steve Wynn's (Ed: then-CEO of Mirage Resorts) building a place down there and they're going to put in one of the touring shows. Would that be something you'd be interested in?"

"I'd had enough of the one-nighter Broadway circuit so I put my resume in [and] flew out to Vegas [to meet] with Bill Riske (the General Manager at the time) and June Wood (the H.R. director). [Cirque] had four shows running at the time, and we talked about Biloxi and they asked if I would ever be interested in a position in Vegas. And I said no, I don't like Las Vegas - and I learned never say never!"

It seemed he was in the right place at the right time as he accepted the Company Manager position for "Alegría" at the Beau Rivage. "I think timing in life is everything."

"When I started [Cirque] was a very small company [and] in 1998 we had just decentralized. Which, if you look back now, was probably too much too soon given that we didn't have all that much product [at the time]. But [that] was the year we almost doubled the size of the company; "O" and La Nouba opened and we had Dralion in production which opened in April of '99."

"We moved Alegría into the theater at the Beau Rivage in Biloxi (Ed: opening on May 20, 1999). So I started in the Resident Shows division, which was brand new at the time.

They created the division because [prior to that] it had only been Mystère, and “O” was coming online [soon]. I got to work with the European division because Alegría was in Europe, and I went over there to negotiate contracts with the artists [for the Biloxi run]. So I got to meet all the people in the Amsterdam office and worked with that group. I [also] stayed with [Alegría] for the last few cities because the Tour Manager at the time was getting ready to bring Quidam over from the U.S.”

Then in Montréal I met a lot of people because we had a production team [there]. [And also] working with the Vegas [Resident Shows] division proper. We ran about 18 months down [in Biloxi] and then put the show on tour (Ed: to Australia and Singapore). They asked me to stay as the Tour Manager, so I took the show over to Asia and got to work with everybody in the Singapore office. [It was during] our Asia tour in 2001 when [Cirque President] Daniel Gauthier gave his notice and said he was leaving the company. So we re-centralized the company, closing the Singapore office and downsized the Amsterdam operation. I then began working under Jacques Marois and the people in Montréal for a year.

I then left the [Alegría] tour to come here and start as Company Manager on KÀ, which then started to have its multiple delays because of the size and scale of the thing.”

“So I really made my way around the company and got to meet all of the major players at the time. And about three months before we were going to open KÀ Michael Bolingbroke, who was [General Manager of Resident Shows] at the time was given a promotion. [Cirque CEO] Daniel [Lamarre] wanted him back in Montréal and he became Senior Vice-President [of Resident Shows]. They posted the General Manager job and I got [it]. And when Michael left the company (Ed: In 2007 to become Chief Operating officer of England’s Manchester United football club (www.manutd.com)), Daniel then took his job and split it up. It wasn’t even an option - he said, “I’m making you Senior Vice-President!” (laughter) So that’s how we get to today.”

As befits the title of Senior Vice-President his responsibilities are wide-ranging, which means lots of meetings and travel. It also gives him the opportunity to be on the Board of Directors for the local NPR affiliate, KNPR 88.9FM. Though it makes him wish for more time for himself and his kids, twin boys Harrison and Wilson that he and his partner Gene Lubas (Artistic Director at Viva Elvis!) adopted in 2007. “For the Resident Shows I’ve got [responsibility for] 12 shows. Seven here [in Las Vegas], one [each] in Orlando, Macao and Tokyo. And Theater Shows [which includes] Wintuk, Banana Shpeel, the Radio City Music Hall production, and Kodak. And the Asia operations.”

“So I oversee two General Managers and everything that’s under them. (Ed: They would be Kathy Meranchnik-VP & GM Theatre Shows Division and Jack Kenn-VP & GM Resident Shows Division.) The General Managers are really focused on operations for the shows. And I have the division level stuff; finance, H.R., I.T., Marketing & Sales. [I’m] generally [responsible for] the operations of shows and anything that’s new, [such as] when the contract is signed [and] it comes to us and we start gearing up for the operational and sales and marketing aspect.”

/// LOOKING FOR OPPORTUNITY

We began our discussion of Cirque business by asking how the demographics of the various show types (touring, arena, resident, theater) vary. “The one thing I found, even doing the touring shows in Australia and Asia and over in Europe with Alegría, is that the demographics on tour tend to be more families. Although with La Nouba at Downtown Disney we find that the audience is never more than 10% children at any given time. We see fewer families, obviously, here in Las Vegas.”

“In Tokyo [for ZED] it’s much broader. Many more kids, mostly women and children. Men make up a much smaller proportion of that market just because of the way Japanese culture works. [In] most families the wife does not work and stays home with the kids. So that’s why we have primarily a matinee schedule in Tokyo. And also because of the distance from Tokyo out to Tokyo Disney Resort (www.tokyodisneyresort.co.jp). The shows are at 1pm and 4pm now.

We have about 20 night-time shows scheduled at 7pm (Ed: spaced out over several months) because of school trips and the group sales we do, and then we’re adding performances where necessary.”

With seven shows currently running in Las Vegas, press and fans are wondering if the forthcoming Michael Jackson resident show will be the long-discussed “saturation point?” “Guys’ take was always, “If there’s a theater there [and] somebody’s going to have a show in it, it may as well be one of mine.” And I think we’ve made a conscious effort that, [although] there are similarities between “O” and Mystère - what you might call “classic old-style Cirque shows” - I think everything else we’ve done since then has been a broad departure.”

“There are people that look at Viva Elvis! and say it’s not enough Cirque. But if we asked people, “If we took the Cirque name off of it what would you think?” they’d say it’s phenomenal. So it’s an educational process with the audience, on the marketing side it’s about how we market and how we go after market segmentation.”

“I think Michael Jackson will be something different, and [will] bring a whole different audience. Because Michael Jackson was popular across generations. So I think you’ll have people that are my age that grew up with Michael Jackson and you’ll have those fans that continue to follow him. And it’s going to bring us a large African-American audience which we don’t currently attract right now. So I see nothing but opportunity there for us.”

Mr. Nadal has been quoted as saying that 85-89% of Cirque’s Las Vegas tickets are sold within 1 week of performance, and that half of Mystère’s tickets are sold day of show. Changing economic conditions mean that statistic is in need of revision. “That was an old article. Now I would go even further and say the majority of our tickets are being sold within 3 days of performance, the majority being sold day of. Especially in this market.”

Even “O” with its legendary sell-outs? ““O” doesn’t have the advance [sales] it used to. [In Las Vegas] we sell on a four-month rolling advance, so we’re always opening up weeks of shows [four months in the future] as we move forward. And [for “O” they] would always essentially sell out [way in advance]. But that’s not the case anymore; we’re probably selling out a maximum of a month [in advance].”

“But it totally reflects the traffic coming into the market. There’s a lot of last-minute people coming in, a lot of package deals. We’ve sold a lot more tickets within the context of packaging with tour operators than we’ve had in the past, because people that are coming here [now] are really on a budget. Very quickly, within three months in 2009 the market went from high-end convention into maybe what Vegas was 20 years ago.”

But that change doesn’t mean they would consider revamping the Las Vegas shows, as has been done with La Nouba, ZED and ZAIA. “Let’s take Mystère for example, which is the oldest [Las Vegas] show (Ed: debuting at the end of 1994). It’s still doing very good business; we’re still [at] 80% [ticket sales]. [For] the amount of money it would take to do any kind of major refresh of the show, you couldn’t lift the occupancy enough to cover the cost. [From a marketing standpoint] you wouldn’t be able to say it’s all new or half-new.”

“[The changes to La Nouba were] a Disney request; we accommodated them on it. [With] La Nouba we hadn’t touched anything. It was essentially the same, a lot of the same people stayed. So we replaced the German Wheels at the beginning with a Japanese skipping act. That concept [came] from Quidam and [we] took it to the next level. Then we replaced the chair balancing, which is in Viva Elvis! now, with the juggler from Kooza.”

Cirque has seen much growth come through creating new shows and converting older ones to a format that can tour arenas, opening up new, smaller markets. With a number of successful resident shows, we wondered what factors determine where a resident show might be a good fit. Is it the city, the demographics, the deal with the theater partner? “All of the above.”

“Obviously we look at the demographics, not just the city. It’s really got to be more of a tourist destination, that’s why [Cirque] has worked so well [in Las Vegas]. [It’s] why Orlando is working, why it made complete sense for us to go to Tokyo, and Macao, frankly. [Decisions] come from Montréal, that’s Daniel Lamarre. We all discuss it - see opportunities that come up - and discussions happen with Daniel and the Executive Committee.”

It has been our understanding that casino resident show contracts forbid issuing videos of shows, but we wanted to know for sure. Dovetailing on the answer given by Cirque CEO Daniel Lamarre in our exclusive interview with him back in Fascination #77, June 2010, not issuing Las Vegas show videos is by mutual agreement. “[The contracts] don’t forbid it, but they have exclusivity. And we’ve never felt there was value [in doing a video].

And the casinos didn't feel that there was a value in broadcasting the show or making it available. They wanted that exclusivity, that if you want to see it you have to come here to see it."

That runs counter to the success Cirque found with the La Nouba DVD, however, as the broadcast and DVD sales of that show did boost ticket sales. "[As opposed to Las Vegas] you're going down [to Orlando] with a different mindset; you're going down there for the theme parks and everything. Because of our deal with Bravo at the time [after the broadcast of La Nouba in April of 2005] we actually saw an increase [in sales]. People would say they saw it on TV and it was something that interested them. It did [increase sales] and we've said that to people."

"But the hotels say they want to maintain that exclusivity and we don't have a problem with that."

That means the broadcast of "KÀ" on ARTE-TV (Association Relative à la Télévision Européenne, a French-German TV network, www.arte.tv) back in late December of 2008 wasn't a hint of a future DVD release. "It was an opportunity that came to us from the TV station; they asked to do it. It was [broadcast] over two nights over a holiday period. One night was [the show] and one night was behind-the-scenes. We thought it was a good opportunity. At the time because of the growing international market we thought there was great value in showing what was there, the size and scale of it, because what we've had through Europe have been touring shows."

"So we thought there would be good value there. And we knew that through social media and YouTube there would be chunks that would end up making the rounds. I don't think it's hurt the show at all."

For shows outside of Las Vegas however, we have reason to be hopeful. With regards to both ZED and ZAIA, "We are looking at taping those shows. We haven't done it as of yet, but if we taped them obviously they'd be for sale in North America."

The upcoming 2-hour PBS special, "Flowers in the Desert," coming in late November, is also something for fans to look forward to. "I know Daniel Lamarre is in the middle of negotiating that now. We've had conversations with the hotels because it will involve filming at each of the shows. I think it will be a great selling card for us."

/// MORE BELIEF

One of our major reasons (or, really, excuses) for visiting Las Vegas this time was to revisit Criss Angel BeLIEve to see the revamped production. If there is one show that has been extensively revamped, it is this one. It is much different now than when we first saw it. We agree with what several others have said and written – most of the "Cirque-ish" elements have been removed in favor of a more straight-forward magic show. But we wondered if we had seen the "final" version of the show, and what might happen next.

“Was the straight jacket back in?” Mr. Nadal asked. No, Criss did not do his straight jacket escape in the show that we saw. “That’s going back in; we had some rigging stuff we needed to correct on that. I think the majority of it is in now. Cast changes are in, costume changes are in, music changes are in.”

“He was talking about wanting to add additional stuff but at [some] point we had to say, “Here’s the budget, we don’t have any more money for that.” Because he, like us, is one of those guys that will dream something up and want to put it into production. And we would [have to] say - no, we have to present a show that’s finished and let it run.”

He then talked about changes being made to the marketing of the show. “We’re redoing the marketing visual. The name’s going to stay the same but the visual, the key art, is going to change. There will be a whole new marketing campaign that will go out around the second anniversary, right around Halloween. And then I think it will be more of a PR push.”

“What we’ve seen is that when he went out and did his whole P.R. circuit for the sixth season of “Mindfreak” our sales jumped significantly. And he’s been much more low profile with [BeLIEve] because he wanted to get all of his changes in. And with all of his responsibilities that’s not something you [can] change in two or three months.”

Indeed, the process has taken more than a year. “It’s taken that long. We had contracts with the other artists and we didn’t want to [suddenly] say, “You’re out.” We let the contracts play out until July when they were finished. So I think it just took this long, without killing anybody, to get to where we are.”

“[So there’s] going to be a big promotional component to it. I can’t envision doing another press night and having it all ride on another night individually. The press has been wanting to come back but they’ve been respectful [when we’ve told them] it’s not done yet. But if we go out and say – “We’re done!” – and people want to come back and see it, they’ll come back and see it.”

“I think social media has much more influential power than the mainstream press does anymore in that regard anyway. So if people have seen it in blogs, that kind of thing, I think it will take on a life of its own.”

The other show we came to Vegas to see was Viva Elvis! We liked the show, it was large and powerful and very personality-centric and literal; appropriate for an icon as large as Elvis Presley. We were surprised, though, to find an insert in the newly-published program crediting Napoleon and Tabatha “NappyTabs” Dumo (who have become highly visible due to their work on Fox’s, “So You Think You Can Dance”) as well as Mark “Swany” Swanhart and Catherine Archambault as choreographers. Were they brought in late, we asked, to assist Writer and Director Vincent Paterson, who is listed in the main program as co-choreographer along with Bonnie Story?

Mr. Nadal was frank. That's part of the evolution we're going through with it now. "Viva Elvis! started with Vincent Patterson doing everything. And Guys' feeling was it was too traditional an approach, including the choreography [which] at the time was very 50's to match the costuming. Guy's whole take was always - If Elvis were here today, if Elvis was performing on that stage, and [knowing] he was cutting edge and revolutionary in his time, what would be on stage right now? [It would] be more contemporary, more hip-hop kinda stuff. Napoleon and Tabatha represent all of that so we brought them in and it did change the choreography around quite a bit.

/// NO BREATHING SPACE

Turning our attention to other shows under Mr. Nadal's purview, we had to ask about Banana Shpeel's closing two months early in New York. (When we talked it was still intended for the show to continue touring, it would be some weeks later the tour was cancelled and Banana Shpeel erased from Cirque's website memory.) "I think we had so much baggage attributed to the show because of the delays in New York that the show's fate was sealed," he replied. "Regardless of the fact that the reviews for the show were much better than they were in Chicago. So it was a financial decision to close it."

Were more changes made to the show before its opening in Toronto? "We had the layoff during the summer and there were more changes and tightening that was done. We just opened in Toronto; last night was press night. And it got 3 out of 4 stars from the Toronto Star. I think the review was like, "Third Time's the Charm!" (laughter) I'll take it."

"But [it was] a very different departure for Cirque and the reviews said it, even in Chicago. We were constantly compared to a touring show or a Vegas show, and it's not. And we asked people specifically, "If this did not have the Cirque name on it what would you think?" "Oh, it would be different then." The idea that the name Cirque du Soleil conjures a certain image in the mind of the public, and that perhaps Banana Shpeel didn't fit into that image, is not lost on him. "There's a huge expectation factor with the Cirque name. We've managed to get a certain degree of success and set a certain degree of expectation. The name of the company is big and it brings big expectations."

Mr. Nadal commented that future engagements for Shpeel would have been, "...three weeks, two weeks, one week. It's on a North American Broadway-style tour. After Toronto we're next at the Golden Gate [Theater] in San Francisco. We have it booked until next July, and we'll see how it does and take it from there. The idea is to keep it [touring]."

And what was the biggest take-away from the difficulties of launching the show? "You do not do it in the eye of the New York press! (laughter) And Chicago is not an out-of-town market!" (laughter)

The instant (and mostly negative) reaction Cirque got from the first previews of Shpeel in Chicago got us to talking about a larger issue.

“There was a great article in the Wall Street Journal talking to Broadway producers. [And it talked about how] in live entertainment you need an audience to shake a show down. You can rehearse comedy in a studio as long as you want. [But you need] somebody sitting out there that it’s fresh for, and [see if] they’re laughing or not. That’s how you shake down your show and work on it. And that was always the idea behind preview periods. You got to work on your show, whether it was in New York or on the road, before you basically said you had a finished product on your hands.”

“Now the minute you open your doors [and] let somebody in with an iPhone or any kind of device, they sit there and they’re tweeting away and ...” There’s a review up on the web the next day, we added. There’s no breathing space anymore. “No breathing space,” he agreed. “And it’s unfortunate because it needs that. It’s a challenge for the industry for sure.”

Turning to another New York production, it seems Wintuk’s future is in doubt after this fourth season, a victim of Cirque’s prodigious replication. “We were talking about touring it, redesigning the sets to fit into theaters. But we’ve got so much product in North America we thought it probably wasn’t a good idea. So I’ve been looking around for different places to put it.”

His mention of so much product in North America set my wife and me off on our latest Cirque rant. For some reason Cirque du Soleil has decided to inundate the Seattle market with no less than four shows over a two-year period. In 2010 we had Kooza in the Spring and Alegría Arena in the Fall. In 2011 we can expect Quidam Arena in the Spring and OVO in late fall. While some might think this an abundance of riches we think having so many shows in so short a time can burn out the “specialness” of a Cirque du Soleil visit. Mr. Nadal agreed adding, “We’re looking at that internally now. Because last year Daniel divvied us up into Resident & Theater Shows (Ed: which Mr. Nadal oversees) and Arena & Touring Shows (Ed: overseen by Jacques Marois). And we’ve been discussing a much more comprehensive review [of the touring plan] for the last couple of months.”

/// ASIAN REVAMPS

The resident shows in Asia were next on our list, as we were very interested in the process and rationale behind changes to both ZED and ZAIA. His explanations shed quite a bit of light on how you adapt a show to local cultures.

We started with ZED, which has been changed from a two-act two-hour show to one-act 90-minutes. But Mr. Nadal was quick to point out, “It was originally designed as a 90-minute show. Then about a year or so before we opened Oriental Land Company (www.olc.co.jp/en/) came back to us and said, “You know, with what you guys do with Fuji (Ed: Cirque’s corporate partner for its Japanese tent tours, www.fujifilm.com) with the big top, it’s an intermission show; we want to have the same basic experience.”“

“Our feeling was [that] it’s apples and oranges. In a resort setting people have a limited amount of time, especially [in Tokyo as] compared to Orlando. The average length of stay [in Tokyo] for people that actually stay in the hotels is 1.1 days. It’s essentially a day-tripper market; if you’ve got your day planned out, to take two-and-a-half or three hours to [see a show] is too much.”

“And that bore out after the first year. We saw that and recommended we go to a 90-minute version. Without the intermission the show ran for just under two hours. So Pierre Parisien, our Senior Artistic Director and Anne-Marie Corbeil, the Artistic Director on the show, came up with a plan. Basically they took the whole show and just snipped at every act – 30 seconds, 40 seconds here and there, and that brought it down. It actually worked out quite well. If you see the show now, and you had seen the full version, you really can’t tell the difference.”

“What [that’s] allowed us to do in Tokyo is work with Disney a little bit more. Because they have what they call an “After 6” discounted park ticket because it’s only open a couple of additional hours. So we’re doing a combined After 6 Park Ticket and the ZED show ticket, so it’s a big incentive for people coming in.” (Ed: Tokyo Disney Resorts’ “After 6 Passport” is offered for 3,100 yen on Monday-Friday and allows visitors access to the parks from 6-10pm.)

As we began talking about ZAIA, we first reminded Mr. Nadal of a comment he had made about the deal for ZAIA being structured so that Cirque didn’t take any risk. From what we have come to know about Cirque over the years this seems perfectly in character, but we wondered how exactly they did it. “We said, “No!” (laughs) When we had discussions with the Venetian (Ed: www.venetianmacao.com/en/), at the time we said that we didn’t think it was a market that was ready for anything like this. And we said we’re basically risk averse, we don’t do real estate. Which I think has put us in very good stead these past two years with the economy the way it is.”

“So we just said no, we’re not interested. And they kept coming back, and Sheldon [Adelson, Chairman and CEO of Las Vegas Sands] just said they had to – had to - have it. And we said, “Well, this is what it’s going to take to get us.” And we did the deal and that’s the deal that they signed.”

“[Venetian Macao] had a rough period financially in 2008-2009. When they signed the contract with us they looked at it as a loss leader, and then they were saying they couldn’t look at it as a loss leader. [And we said,] “Well, then you have the wrong show here, because this is what we designed and built for you based on these specs.”“

“Franco [Dragone]’s show (The House Of Dancing Water) just opened across the street last week. Which is great, because now it establishes Macao as a destination. So the whole idea of an integrated resort isn’t just the Venetian anymore, it’s there now. And all these other properties coming on-line have to provide entertainment, [it’s] in their deal with the mainland government.”

“I think Macao had like a two-year setback because of the economy, but I think it’s got the potential to literally become the Las Vegas of Asia in the next five to six years.”

The challenges of opening a resident show for the Chinese market were considerable, but it didn’t keep Cirque from thinking big. And from adapting to circumstances. “We [originally] wanted a poetic show, a cabaret show, and then a mega [show], something even bigger than ZAIA [in Macao]. So when Steve Jacobs (Ed: CEO of Sands China Ltd at the time) came in and we [mutually] decided OK, we’re no longer going to [have] a three-show format in Macao, [and we were] going to keep the one show, we looked at what we could do to upgrade the acrobatics.”

“We’re in the middle of doing [those] upgrades now because we delayed it; it’s taken awhile. We’re doing a new [double] trapeze act. The issue with trapeze is that at some point you have to give the catcher a break, there is not a lot of non-stop action. By doing the double structure [like the trapeze acts in ZED and La Nouba] it’s going constantly and it’s got great energy. So we looked at what we were doing in Macao and we said we wanted the [trapeze] act to reflect what we did with ZED. We also wanted to change the music there.”

“The opening number is [now] much more acrobatic than dance in nature. They’ve rebuilt a lot of the [set] buildings, there’s some trampoline-type work between the buildings so it’s much more energetic, much more high-energy.”

“The Globe and Poles [act] has been replaced by an acrobatic Chinese lion dance, similar to Dralion (the dance on the balls), but with more acrobatics - the lions jump from the balls onto different elements. [The Globes and Poles] never really worked because of the height of the space, with the [support] lines that you could see; they looked like they were just hanging there.”

“And we’ve put in a roller-skating act as well.”

“We [also] looked specifically at the clowning. Now that [we know] it’s primarily a Chinese audience, as opposed to the international audience they thought they were going to get, [we realized] the European style of clowning doesn’t necessarily work with the Chinese. Now it’s much more slapstick.”

“And the storyline, from what we’ve been told by the Chinese, wasn’t extremely evident. They like to know what they’re going to see and what they’re seeing. The whole idea of [the “Zaia” character] being this little girl like Alice [in Wonderland] who travels through space kinda got lost on people. There was [also a] love interest with Romeo and this duet strap act [that they did]. Well, the original [Zaia character] girl just left her contract. So we didn’t replace her with another acrobat but with more of a character, and the guy that plays Romeo [now] does a solo strap act. And [Zaia the character] now appears in every act as it goes through these different planets and stuff. You’re on the journey with her, and that’s become much more evident so it’s cleaned up the storyline.”

“We’ve done a lot! Pierre Parisien’s (Ed: Cirque’s Senior Artistic Director) in the process of finishing that now. In October we take a two-week break and take out the old structure. The new structure gets loaded in and the new act doesn’t go in until the end of December. It’s currently being built now by the Tabaras family in California; they’re building the act for us. And then it’ll go over there and we’ll rehearse on it.” (Ed: The Tabaras family are owners of Circus Vargas, a California circus troupe, www.circusvargas.org.)

“The idea is to re-launch ZAIA but a little bit bigger in mid-January next year. We’re also looking at the visual [artwork]. We made the decision [originally] to not have a Chinese name for ZAIA, [which] probably was a mistake in hindsight. So now we’re coming up with a Chinese name that’s all been researched by the [Cirque] Brand department and with the Brand department of Venetian within the Chinese market.”

Cirque’s Chinese experience has caused some introspection as well. “We tend to go into markets and not play to a specific market, and we’re realizing in China that you may not be able to get away with that. It really is an educational learning experience.

You can see a ton of acrobatics in China but you’re maybe not going to get the level of acrobatics or artistic element that we bring to it. So there’s an educational process that has to go on with that.”

And what happened to the other Macao shows that he mentioned? “The Macao II show is on a back burner. I think if we have another cabaret-style opportunity [the idea might get developed]. Macao III was just a discussion that we needed a big show, so that hadn’t really gotten very far down the pike. But we’ll see what opportunities come up in Macau. They’re going to be building theaters in those properties across the street, they have to put something in them.”

In other international Cirque plans, we wanted to know how the announced Dubai show was progressing. “It’s about as active as the construction in Dubai right now. (laughs) I guess it all depends on what ultimately happens in Dubai. That’s so far on the back burner it’ll be quite a while before it gets resurrected, if at all.”

/// NEW CHALLENGERS FOR 2011

Back on the domestic front, 2011 poses two significant challenges for Cirque on opposite ends of the country. Firstly, Zarkana will soft open in New York City at Radio City Music Hall on June 6th with the Gala scheduled for June 29, and Mr. Nadal was interested in telling us about their preview event. “Last week we did a big sales event at Radio City Music Hall. We needed to do a big event now because Radio City’s our bigger challenge next year. Its 700,000 tickets we have to sell in 17 weeks.

It’s a big show, on the size and scale of [the Las Vegas shows]. It will travel and do two or three cities a year. Right now we’re looking at two or two-and-a-half 747 cargo planes to move it; it’s massive. It’s [run is] 17 weeks in New York City.

We're negotiating right now with a big city in Europe for the November-December period (Ed: Later said to be London, England.). Then we have a contract for the State Kremlin Theatre Palace in Moscow for 10 weeks [from the] end of January until April. And I'm looking at another city for a couple of weeks, and then back to New York. So it's going to do two, ideally three cities a year. European and US [cities], too, depending on the US market."

"But Radio City's where it's going to kick off so we brought in anything sales-channel related in New York. Tour operators, group sales people, tickets brokers, ticket operators. Last week we sent out 2,100 invitations and got 2,000 people, which was fantastic. We had [Cirque President and CEO] Daniel Lamarre speak. George Fertitta, who's the CEO of New York City & Company (the tourism board) spoke and really got behind the company. He went, I think, way beyond his prepared remarks with a very nice endorsement of the company. (Ed: NYC & Co is "the official marketing, tourism and partnership organization" for New York City, www.nycgo.com.) We brought in two special acts to present. [Show director] François Girard got up and on their big LED screen in the back showed all of the renderings of the show. He described the show and told people what was going to happen.

And Elton John did a video for us because Nick Littlemore is the Composer, and he's a protégé of Elton John's. He's an Australian who has been working out of London and Elton's been working with him. We premiered one of the pieces of music to one of the special acts we did. Jay [Kimbrow, Director of Sales for Theater Shows, whom Cirque hired away from Disney last year because of his New York City contacts] came out and gave a sales pitch and we handed out sales kits. It was about a 45-minute event at Radio City that went very well."

"The same thing's going to happen this week for Kodak," he continued. "We're meeting a bunch of city officials tomorrow night and then on Wednesday afternoon we're doing a luncheon for about 1,500 people; tour operators, ticket brokers, to help set up the run for Kodak." (Ed: Working on that will be Director of Sales for the Resident Shows Division Pamela Devine, Mr. Kimbro's counterpart.)

Shortly after Zarkana comes the show moving into the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood, IRIS (soft opening July 21 with the Gala September 25). "Next year Hollywood is going to be a test for us because we're not anchored to anything. These [Vegas] shows are here because we drive 3,000-plus people a night through the rest of the casino. [La Nouba is] an anchor for Downtown Disney; when we're not running those restaurants tell us that they see a major drop-off. So we bring a lot of people into Downtown Disney. And you get a lot of ancillary revenue."

"Hollywood is going to be interesting because, [while] we're part of the Hollywood and Highland complex it's really going to be more like the Broadway model in that we're hanging up a marquee saying, "Come See The Show!" So we're putting a lot of pre-planning emphasis into tour operators, working with the cruise ships, going after national audiences."

“We’re actually the last show of the 2010-2011 season of Center Theatre Group at the Amandson. (Ed: In a season that also includes “Next to Normal,” “33 Variations,” “God Of Carnage,” and “Les Misérables.”) Because Jordon had a relationship with them we spoke to them a couple of years ago and asked if they were interested in doing a special offering to their subscription base. Because they have a huge subscription, about 40,000 subscribers. And they said no, because for them it’s all about customer service and how they treat their subscribers. They’ve built that group over [many] years and once they walk out of their space (their theater) from a customer service standpoint they no longer have control.”

“So we asked them to give us their concerns and [let us] see if we could address them. We guaranteed them prime seating for their customers. [We’re] the last show of their 2010-2011 season, in a four-week window toward the end of [Kodak] previews,. They actually put it on the subscription without knowing anything about the show; just based on the strength of the company and what they’ve seen come through L.A. before. We’re excited about it. It gives us a little cushion going in. Plus those subscribers are the major theater-goers in L.A. and that creates buzz that goes around.”

We also talked a bit about the forthcoming Michael Jackson shows, for which just a few details were available at the time. We first asked if the two shows (the touring arena show and the Las Vegas resident show) would be the same. “[They are] two completely different productions. The touring show, which is going to open October 2 in Montréal and is designed for arenas, is really an arena tour. And then there will be a second show that’s done here in Las Vegas at a theater yet to be named.” (Ed: Turns out it will be Mandalay Bay, opening in early 2013.)

“From what I’ve been told [there are] two separate creation teams, two different Executive Producers. And from what I understand now there will be two different Musical Directors as well. I don’t know what the creative plans are, that’s kind of under wraps. Jamie King is directing [the arena] show [and] I think there will be multiple choreographers.”

Would the success (or lack of it) for the touring show have any impact on the resident show? “I don’t see how [the Michael Jackson show] could possibly lose. Not with the people that we’ve got and the interest in it. To have done the Beatles so many years after they broke up, to do Elvis so many years after he passed away. With Michael Jackson it’s still raw, I think. There’s still an intense amount of interest.”

“And Sony’s going to be releasing new [Michael Jackson] albums as we go along because of all the material that they’ve found. I don’t see [the show’s success] as a problem. Plus the [MJ resident] show is going to be well into its creation phase by the time [the MJ touring show] opens next year.”

/// STAYING CURRENT

As our time was running down, we asked Mr. Nadal some of our favorite questions. Our question about the best business decision Cirque ever made gave him pause. “There have been a lot of good ones, so it’s hard to peg. I think the best business decision is that – at Guy’s insistence - [with] any deal we’ve done with anybody we’ve never given up an inch of creative control of the shows. Whether people liked them or not, we maintain 100% control. Creativity is the heart and soul of the company and I think the fact that we’ve never compromised on that to make a deal with anybody has served us very well.”

We always like to ask our interviewees what suggestions they have for those trying to make their way into the theater (or circus, or music) business. Mr. Nadal started by pointing out Cirque’s outreach to the technical theatrical community. “It depends on what you’re doing and where you’re coming from. If you come out of school and want to be a stage manager, one of the shows in Vegas is probably not the one to start on; you want to get some more experience first.”

“We have a large outreach to the universities through our Technical Show Support department. We’ve given a lot of assistance to the Stagecraft Institute of Las Vegas. There’s a couple out of Oklahoma, [teaching] in university settings, that lived in Montréal back when Cirque was first starting up. They got to know Gilles Ste-Croix and lent [Cirque] one of the theater workshops [at] the university when Cirque was building one of its first sets, or so the story goes. And they’ve stayed in touch. So we help support [the universities], we [take] about 20 or 30 people that come from different universities and put them through our training. If you’re going the automation route, or those specific channels, we end up doing internships and we hire directly [from that]. We do a lot of internal training as well.”

“[When we give talks I say], ‘Get as much experience as you can, work in as many places as you can. And don’t worry about whether it’s union or non-union. It’s all about getting as much experience as you can. Any experience is good experience. And the pay level doesn’t matter. I tell people grab what you can, never be out of work, even if you’re working for low money. I did that. I did a children’s theater tour, I did a summer stock production, buying Ramen ten for a dollar.’”

When we asked him for suggestions for young executives, he commented, “You need to stay current with what the competition is doing. For me, you need to view anybody that sells a ticket as competition. Because there’s only so many entertainment dollars [to] go around.”

“And it tends to be the first thing that people start to cut back on, or people look to find value on. Because it’s disposable income. But like Guy has said many times, if you take a look at the Depression or the recessions that have followed, the entertainment industry has generally been the last to go into a recession and the first to come out of it. Because people need escape. I think that’s what we provide really well; it’s a great escape whether it’s 90 minutes or two hours.”

“So I think staying current with what’s going on in the industry [is important]. [Also] making sure your employees are happy and the culture of the company is respected at all times. Constantly talking to [your] people, because the higher up you go the less you hear. Hence getting on the Cirque Tribune website (laughs). But just making sure people are happy.”

Huh?! Wait a minute - wait. Did a Senior Vice-President at Cirque du Soleil just admit on the record to looking at Cirque fan websites? Indeed! “I go on the Cirque Tribune website [occasionally] to see what’s going on. [Inside the company] we’re aware of [Cirque’s] projects but not the nitty-gritty of it. And then you find out, wow, these people know more than we do internally. It’s kind of cool. Because obviously people that are on Cirque Tribune are your core. These are the people that are talking about you non-stop, and that ultimately sells tickets.”

His interest in his “core” audience also extends to CirqueCon (for which we are eternally grateful). “If you have your core fan group, your rabid fans coming in, to be able to give them access and that kinda stuff, the return comes many, many times over. [With CirqueCon 2006: Las Vegas!] we weren’t looking to see if there was an immediate bump in ticket sales because it was a small group of people. But if each person talks to 10 more people it’s like throwing a rock in the middle of a pond and you watch the ripples go out.”

He finds his greatest challenge to be, “Ticket sales, and making sure that it’s a broad enough appeal. [Cirque is] a high-end product, there’s no other company in the world that has 70-75 people on stage, 100-150 technicians. That’s a huge chunk of money on a weekly basis to keep the shows running. But we have to make them affordable, so they have to have broad appeal. So that it’s not just in that luxury-brand niche, that it’s an affordable ticket for people coming in with a family.”

Not only keeping the shows affordable and the appeal broad, but meeting the expectations of the audience as well. “I think that they still come expecting major acrobatics. I would hope we get to the point when people see [the name] “Cirque du Soleil” they know they’re going to get high quality, top production values, and value for their ticket price.”

All the hard work and travel away from home brings great satisfaction, knowing, “...that we make people happy; seven days a week, around the globe, 24-7. You just have to go into any of the theaters [and] listen to the audience response to be gratified with what you’re doing. Especially in the kind of time frame that we’re working in now.”

And he never regrets taking his father’s advice and rethinking his priorities all those years ago. “It was a leap of faith. It [was] one of those situations where you follow your heart, and [theater work was] really where my interests and my passion were.”

“And I gotta say, since I left the bank in 1989 I’ve never taken a sick day!”

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



BOB & BILL

Album Producers – Koozå & Totem

« Believing & Dreaming »

Keith Johnson, 2011

The pressure cooker of a Cirque du Soleil creation can't be for the faint of heart. Being creative to a deadline isn't for everyone. Our interviewees this month found themselves thrust from one deadline-driven pressure cooker to another, resulting in the quickest show premiere to CD turnaround we've seen.

The tasks of both creating the music and producing the soundtrack for Cirque du Soleil's latest touring creation, Totem (2010, Cirque du Soleil Musique CDSMC-10034), fell to the Montréal musical team of "Bob & Bill." Their 'real' names are Guy Dubuc (Ge Doo-BOOK) and Marc Lessard (Mark Less-ARD) – so who is "Bob" and who is "Bill?" "It's a big secret," Marc hinted, when we talked in late October. Explained Guy, "It's a team actually. Nobody's nobody, the team is called Bob & Bill."

/// MUSIQUE REDUX

That team's first major project was the musical soundtrack for the popular UbiSoft video Game Splinter Cell (Pandora Tomorrow). Though their production of the Kooza CD was the first time Cirque fans had heard of the team, it wasn't the first show they did for the company. That would have been the show that turned into Soleil de Minuit/Midnight Sun. "As a matter of fact, that was the first show we ever did with Cirque," explains Marc. "It [came about] from one of our friends [at] the International Festival de Jazz de Montréal, Laurent Saulnier (Ed: Vice-President, Programming and Production). He talked to the circus about us and that's how we ended up doing the special for the 25th anniversary of the Jazz Festival and the 20th anniversary of Cirque du Soleil." They were responsible for Remixing, Arrangements and Orchestrations and were Musical Directors for the 2004 show. "We had an orchestra of at least 70 musicians, and a lot of singers. And we were also playing. [We worked with] two great Directors, Michel Lemieux and Victor Pilon, who did Delirium after that."

Two years later a concept album with arrangements and production by the pair was released, *Pink Floyd Redux* (2006, Zone 3 ZON-22176). “It’s a concept album we wanted to do, with lounge [versions] of Pink Floyd music sung by girls only,” said Guy. “We re-arranged some of Pink Floyd’s biggest hits in an electronica, lounge-ey, all-girls aspect.” It was two years after that that they released their first album under the team name Bob & Bill, *Crime Report* (2008, Orange Music OMCD-5551).

It was also in 2008 that they were asked to arrange and produce the Jean-François Côté-composed soundtrack for the Cirque show *Kooza* (2008, Cirque du Soleil Musique CDSMC-10028). In an interesting aside, Marc confided that the DVD was recorded before the CD. “The same team that [mixed] the DVD sounds did the mixing of the CD (Ed: that would be Rob Heaney and Brian Mercier), [and] we used tracks from the DVD to start building the [CD’s] songs. So we kept some tracks from the DVD.” This led to some interesting track credits on the CD, including guitar and percussion tracks taken from the DVD.

They also expanded the horn-infused soundtrack with three brass sections. Guy: “As we worked with [composer] Jean-François Côté we wanted some [of the] brass parts to have a big band sound. In the live show it’s only two brass [pieces], sometimes three, but [with some of] his songs it’s really cool to [include] big brass. So in Montréal we hired a small big band to play on some songs, more like a basic big band track. And we used the instrumentalists of the show to do the solos, to [reflect] the personality of the show. We also had a classical brass section, [which was] used for the orchestral parts.”

/// FIRST NATION INFLUENCE

But it wasn’t just their production of the *Kooza* soundtrack that gave them the inside track on the composers job for *Totem* (which these French-Canadians pronounce tow-TEM, not TOW-tum as Americans might). Guy: “We were already working with Cirque du Soleil as arrangers and occasional composers for special events, so we [were working] a lot with [Cirque Musical Director] Alain Vinet. And he proposed to director Robert Lepage and (Totem Director of Creation) Neilson Vignola [that we] do the music for Totem.”

The soundtrack melds many forms of World Music, but places special emphasis on First Nation (what those in the USA might call “Native American”) music. But to incorporate that music successfully involved special care. Guy: “We worked with a First Nations guy from Quebec City who is the singer in the show right now, Christian Laveau (LAV-oh). He’s a Huron, and [we] proposed [him to] Robert Lepage because we knew him from working on other projects. This way we had somebody [whom] we could consult musically, to ask questions about the music.”

Marc added, “And of course the show is based on the evolution of man, so we had to find music of all different nations...”

“...In the world actually,” said Guy, completing the sentence. “For [First Nations] music, we consulted with Christian a lot. Not only about the music, but also for the staging. That was the point of having somebody [like Christian], we could ask if we could go [to a musical place] or [even] further.” They also utilized Mr. Laveau for lyrics to “Onta,” composing the others themselves in “traditional Cirque-ish.”

Songs can be like children to their composers, but do the pair have any favorites? “I’m pretty happy with “Koumaya” (Koo-MY-uh), for the girls with the bowls,” answered Guy. “It’s a mixture of African and Chinese music. We got the idea and it was a good flash.”

“And it’s a song we wrote really fast, it [took] ten minutes to write,” said Marc. “It’s been [in the show] from the demo [stage] and everybody liked it. When we tried it with the girls it worked perfectly.”

“I also like the finale, “Omé yo Kanoubé,” Guy continued, “because it’s a very happy song. And for a show it’s fun to write something really happy. Sometimes we wrote stuff that was too dark. We always came back to listening to the old [Cirque] shows and [re]working the parts that were too dark. We wanted a really nice happy soundtrack.”

“From the beginning it was important for us to have some happiness in the music,” commented Marc. “It’s hard to bring happiness to music; it’s easy to get into really dark things, and we were telling ourselves, ‘Let’s get more happy.’”

/// QUICK TURNAROUND

With Totem premiering in Montréal in late April, 2010, and the CD being available in October, the six-month turnaround must be the quickest in Cirque history. How did it come about, and why? Guy elaborated, “We had a quick OK from Guy Laliberté to start producing the CD. Guy asked us to do the CD right after the premiere.” It was important to Laliberté to produce the CD more quickly than had been done in the past. Which was not easy, Marc said, but, “We had a deadline. That’s what we do in life, too, [when] we produce albums. With our [own] music it was not easy but it was quick.”

The request to immediately start work on a soundtrack CD after being involved in the vortex of creation meant jumping from one frying pan to another. Marc: “We took like a two-week break and then started recording everything. It took about three months, we started in May and finished in August. [Cirque Musical Director] Alain Vinet produced the album with us, which is really important to say. Which was good; we’re so into our music that it was a big help with Alain being there, [it was] another set of eyes on the music.”

The experience the duo had working on the Kooza CD didn’t directly apply to the recording of the Totem CD: “It’s completely different,” Marc explained. “With Kooza we were only arranging Jean-François Côté’s music. [With] Totem it was our music so it was a bit different.” Guy added, “Yeah, because for Totem we wrote the music from A to Z. For Kooza we were the producers and arrangers.”

One of the earliest decisions was who should play on the album, explained Marc. “We’re musicians, that’s what we do in life. I always play drums, bass and guitar, and Guy plays keyboards.” But he then reassured, “First of all, it was a must to incorporate everybody in the process of the album, which we did on Totem for sure.”

Guy concurred. “To Alain Vinet it was important to incorporate the band and to have album versions [of the songs in the show]. It was important that the album have songs that you recognize from the show and have the same sound. It was also important to go other places and incorporate other people and different sounds to make the production a CD [that stands by] itself.”

“There were some parts where we used other people, as in “Toreador.” In the live show (drummer) Nick D’Virgilio’s singing the whole part, but on the CD we used a really traditional Spanish guy from Montréal (Marcos Marin). We still kept Nick in the response in the chorus though, because he has such an amazing voice.”

“The production [used] many instrumentalists and we decided by feeling. For example, we would think - OK, it would be nice to have Nick the drummer on “Crystal Pyramid” - and we started adding people this way, instead of recording all the tracks ourselves.”

Marc elaborated. “Sometimes we kept drummer Nick’s track and I [would] play drums over it, and then we [would] decide which track works best for the CD. It wasn’t so much a matter of us wanting to play on the album, it was [trying to get] the best sound we could. We love the guys so much that we tried to put them on the album as much as possible. That was important to us, they are a big part of the CD. Because those guys have been there since the beginning of [the shows] creation; they were there for three months of rehearsal in Montréal. They worked really hard and we know it. It’s a big thing at Cirque that it’s really important to incorporate the musicians and we did it as much as we could.”

On the finished CD, there were two songs fans wondered about since they didn’t seem to be in the show. Marc explained, “[“Cum Sancto Spiritu”] is not in the show right now. It was a number that was supposed to be [in the show] but didn’t make it. “Kunda Toyé” is the backup number, for a hand-to-hand act. But we liked the music and with Alain Vinet we decided to put both “Cum Sancto” and “Kunda Toyé” on.

Of all the musicians that appear on the CD, one, Daniel Taylor, appears courtesy of another label (Sony Classical). Guy: “He’s a guy we’ve worked with before (Ed: On Crime Report), a star international classical countertenor singer. We thought about him because the part is really really high, so he has a little feature part.”

In addition to the creation musicians, several musicians familiar to Cirque fans also appear on the disk. Francine Poitras and Mathieu Lavoie (From Saltimbanco and Quidam/Varekai respectively) sing on “Terre-Merre,” and Wayne Hankin (also from Varekai) plays woodwinds on several cuts. Guy: “We work a lot with them on [Cirque’s] special events, and they’re good friends. We used them on the demos where we presented the songs, so it was natural for us to include them in parts of the CD.”

A wide variety of musical styles is evident throughout the CD, including two songs that, on first blush, stick out. “Indie-Hip,” the music that accompanies the Rings scene in Act One is one such piece.

What inspired its Indian musical leanings in a piece whose setting is Muscle Beach? “It actually was the aesthetic of the number; if you [look at] the costumes they come from Krishna colors,” Guy explained. “So that’s why we went with Indian music, a mix of Indian and hip-hop.”

In a departure from most other Cirque soundtracks the music from the Act Two clown piece, “Fast Boat,” is also on the CD. This wasn’t a hard choice, according to Marc. “Working in collaboration with Alain we put all the songs [together] and then decided which ones we [should] put on the CD. We really liked “Fast Boat;” it’s a clown act but it’s kind of groovy. Of course it’s a different song, but one nice thing about the circus is you can go anywhere [musically], and we went somewhere else with that track.”

“And it’s kind of cool that it’s on the CD,” Guy added, “because it’s in the show and if you saw the show it would be a reminder of that number.”

Marc also clued us in to a worthy musical inclusion. “Charles Denard, Jr., who is our chief musical director (Ed: and plays keyboards in the show), has [pretty much] the only keyboard solo on the CD and it’s on that track. He’s from New Orleans and he’s a really good Hammond B3 organ player. So if you listen carefully to the song there’s a big solo by Charles on it.”

When we asked if there was anything missing from the CD they wished they could include, we got an interesting answer from Guy. “There’s a remix from Alain Vinet we wanted to put on the CD. Because Alain is [also] a DJ, and whenever there’s a big premiere or party for Cirque he DJ’s. And he was always playing that [remixed] track and everybody was liking it. So we wanted to put it on [the CD], but it was a matter of budget.”

/// DREAMING THE FUTURE

Completion of the Totem CD doesn’t mean their collaboration with Cirque ended. “We just came back from Shanghai (China) playing a big show with the circus [at] Expo 2010 Shanghai said Guy. “It was our personal Bob & Bill project - our songs, with a singer and brass section, Marc playing drums and [myself on] keyboards.”

“And it’s house music, so it’s party music,” Marc added. “And we did pretty well there.”

Guy agreed. “People were really happy. We made the Chinese people move, we had a great time. Thanks again to the circus because it was so well organized. Sound and everything was amazing.” The duo is now on to working on their second studio album, a house music project.

Their ability to tackle the wide variety of musical influences needed for a show about man's evolution was something for which they have been preparing for a long time. Marc: "The thing that helped us most was the variety of styles we'd been performing before. It's been happening a lot in Montréal, which is a big cosmopolitan town. Guy and I have been partners for ten years, but we've been playing together in [many different] bands for 20 years. African bands, Brazilian bands, a lot of jazz music, all [types of] music actually. That's why we were so happy to work on the Totem project, because it's the way we've always worked, [with] different sounds and [music from different] places on the planet."

Guy was quick to add, "We must [give] flowers to Cirque du Soleil and Guy Laliberté. From (Musical Director) Alain Vinet to (Director of Creation) Neilson Vignola to (Director) Robert Lepage to (Founder and Guide) Guy Laliberté to (Vice-President of Creation for New Shows) Jean-François Bouchard. They respect the creators. They always let us do our thing and then choose our stuff. They never said, "Don't do this, don't do that." So for us having done so many different styles, it was natural to do a show like this. They just [pointed us] in a [particular] direction."

And their words for young artists? Marc was quick to answer. "Believe in yourself. And keep working. You know, it was a big break for Guy and I to do a Cirque creation. But it's been since Soleil de Minuit (in 2004) that we [first] thought that we could and would like to do this. We kept believing in ourselves and we kept saying don't give up, keep dreaming."

"Yeah, believe in your dreams," Guy added. "It took as many years as it [did] because we had to go through [what we went through] to make this. That's what we did. It's all about dreaming."

My sincere thanks go to: Mr's. Dubuc and Lessard for so graciously spending time with us, Chantal Côte, Corporate PR Manager, And my wife LouAnna for putting up with my sometimes obsessive hobby.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



ERICH VAN TOURNEAU
Musical Director – Viva Elvis

« **Takin' Care of Business** »

Keith Johnson, 2011

Cirque du Soleil was quick to realize, with the critical and financial success of *The Beatles Love*, that it could expand its stable of productions beyond ideas and characters generated exclusively in-house. Many of the lessons learned during the creation of the Beatles project would be applied to its next collaborative endeavor – a show based on the life and work of *The King Of Rock And Roll*, Elvis Presley. But while the creative thrust of the Fab Four show - illustrating the life and times that inspired the Beatles along with bringing the characters from their songs to life - worked well for that show, it would not work as well with Presley.

Instead of placing him within a strictly historical context it was decided to update The King's songs and image, bringing both into the 21st century for modern audiences. But it wasn't going to be a remix effort (most notable of which was the JXL remix of "A Little Less Conversation"). This would involve updating the music and arrangements, utilizing Elvis' vocals while placing them inside arrangements and instrumentation different (sometimes vastly different) from when they were originally recorded.

This task fell to Viva Elvis! Musical Director Erick Van Tourneau. When we spoke with Mr. Van Tourneau back in early December from his cottage in Montréal Blanc (in northern Montréal), it was just weeks after the release of the soundtrack CD, *Viva Elvis – The Album* (2010, Sony/RCA Legacy 88697-77582-2). The album has gotten high marks for its creativity and power, if criticized for its brevity. (At 42 ½ minutes it's the shortest Cirque soundtrack album since the very first Cirque album back in 1987, which was originally produced for vinyl LP.)

Mr. Van Tourneau first came to Cirque's attention at the end of 2007. "[Someone at] Cirque du Soleil called me a couple of months before Elvis [was announced], to have my press kit and information about the work I did to [put] in their bank of creators, because I've produced several albums in Montréal for different genres of music and for different labels."

“[Then] I heard about the Elvis project [and] they asked me to do a pitch. I pitched two songs; “Hound Dog” and “One Night With You” (Ed: both of which are in the show but not on the CD). I didn’t have access to masters at the time so I found a version of “Hound Dog,” I believe from the ’68 comeback special, and worked with that version.” These demos, it turned out, are “really really close” to the way they sound in the finished show. “It’s funny, sometimes you create something and it’s more unconscious. I hadn’t explored and listened to the catalog of Elvis songs [when I did the pitch], so in a way what I created in the moment was really pure.”

“The director [Vincent Paterson, was] really happy with the music he heard, so that was the beginning of this great adventure.”

/// SAMPLE THIS

His research included listening to all of the Elvis recordings he could, both official and unofficial, a task that took more than 3,000 hours and resulted in a bank of more than 17,000 samples of music. But only a fraction of those samples made it into the final show, and not all of the samples in the show made it to the CD. Fortunately, for those who are interested there is a listing of the samples used in the CD at www.vivaelvis.com/samples. (It doesn’t include samples (if any) used in “Memories,” “You’ll Never Walk Alone (Piano Interlude)” and “Suspicious Minds.”)

Working on the actual songs involved a great number of creative decisions, not the least of which was what material out of Elvis’ original recordings to keep and what to re-arrange or augment. “It [was] really a case-by-case situation, depending on the song. Like I’ve mentioned many times the most important thing, the heart of the project, was really Elvis’ voice. In each song I tried to keep the melodic line and Elvis’ voice intact and paint new colors around him. The clash was really coming from that, keeping the heart of the song, meaning Elvis’ voice, and clash that against new colors.”

“[Let’s] talk about “That’s All Right” for instance. [The version I used] was the one from 1954 where he recorded at Sun, it really represents the ripe incarnation of Elvis. It’s not a version from the 1970’s, it’s the purest one. In “That’s All Right” there’s no drum, the upright bass was really doing the drums job. So to really bring the song into 2010 and have the same kind of force that it had in ‘54 I had to bring a drum into the new arrangement. Also to have that hard rock feel I had to muscle up the rhythm section and record new bass and new guitars. But it was really important to me to have that clash, that mixture of tones. [So I kept] Scotty Moore’s guitar in there, because the sound of Elvis back in ’54 was coming from his voice but also from Scotty Moore’s guitar. That’s something everybody can easily recognize. So I kept [snippets] from Scotty Moore’s guitar, but mainly it really goes around the voice.”

Creating the soundscapes involved technology unavailable during Presley’s time. “To isolate Elvis’ vocal I worked with the program, “Digital Performer” (Ed: a software recording/editing/mixing package from MOTU-Mark of the Unicorn), but I used a program called “Melodyne” when I had to change the harmony in the Jordainaires

introduction to “Can’t Help Falling In Love.” It came from “Known Only To Him,” an old gospel song. I had to change the harmony because it was clashing with the chord progression. (Ed: Melodyne is a digital studio package from Celemony, www.celemony.com.)”

He also worked with an old friend, a pioneering stereo digital sampler released in 1988, the Akai S-1000 (see a picture with info at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akai_S1000). “[Laughs] It’s my sampler, my companion; I’ve had that sampler for years. I [had to make] some new knobs [out of] Fimo clay (Ed: a polymer clay paste like Sculpey, www.fimo.com). It’s really archaic, really old, I think the memory is 32 meg so it’s a joke. But it’s my old companion and I did a lot of mash-ups and breakbeats on the album [with it].”

/// TO CD OR NOT TO CD

As Mr. Van Tourneau worked on creating the show’s music, he wasn’t thinking toward an eventual CD soundtrack release. Indeed, though it’s desired to have a soundtrack as part of a Cirque shows merchandise mix it’s never a given, especially when somebody else’s music is involved. “In this industry nothing is taken for granted,” said Mr. Van Tourneau. “Of course it’s natural to think there would be an album, [as with] LOVE. But I didn’t take that for granted. I was delivering song after song and doing my best just to stay on the boat in this adventure and keep everyone into it. Because [this] was my first project with Cirque and I didn’t have the name or history of (Beatles producer) George Martin.”

“[At one point] we were in Las Vegas at Guy Laliberte’s place there, and we had a meeting listening to all the songs with the people at Sony. And it was really the first time that I could feel and sense that [people] were really into it and interested in the music by itself, not just as part of the show. Because the music is serving the show and, depending on the act, it has to serve a purpose. [But] there was really a good vibe and it was really the first time I could feel that we could have an album [that would stand] by itself.”

“I really began to work on the project at the beginning of June. (Ed: In order to meet Sony’s desire to have the CD in stores by the 2010 Holiday Season.) I [had produced an album during the summer] once before and promised myself [I wouldn’t do that again]! [laughs] Working during summer is really tough for a creator,” he continued. “I was working from 5am until 10pm. Mentally it was tough to [be working and] see my dog running outside. But I couldn’t refuse to produce [the CD] because it was my baby. Sony only gave me three months so it was really, really fast. The vocals were really complicated to deal with, so three months was [not a lot of time].”

Keeping with the practice of recent Cirque soundtracks, Mr. Van Tourneau made efforts to include musicians and singers from the live Vegas band. He even went so far as to have show guitarist Jean-Sebastian “The Flash” Chouinard record parts in the Viva Elvis Theater at night after shows.

Yet there is one notable musician missing from the CD, percussionist Kit Chatham (who is a very present musical personality in the show). Kit is a fan favorite from his days as drummer with Corteo, why does he not appear on the CD? "Because of his bad attitude! [laughs] No, no, I'm kidding. Kit is so cool and has a strong presence in the show. I clearly remember when I saw his audition tape. [I got] a really strong impression of Kit and he was the first musician that I chose."

"I think the main difference between the album and the live performance is really an aesthetic one. [With the CD] I tried to bring Elvis samples into the picture as much as possible. So when I had a choice between using a musician from the show or using samples coming from Elvis' work or world, I would use Elvis samples. I tried to use the musicians every time it was possible, but if I had access to nice percussion coming from [the world] of Elvis I would use those." (Indeed, there is no one listed as performing "Percussion" on the CD.)

The resulting CD features Elvis on 10 of the CD's 12 tracks with a running time of just over 42 minutes. Why not more tracks and a longer running time? "It was just a question of time. If I would have had six months I would add maybe four more cuts. But in my opinion more than 16 cuts on an album is too much. When you listen to the album as it is now, for me I'm exhausted at the end. Because it's really intense emotionally and energy[-wise], it's like a 45-minute long rock concert. So I preferred to leave on a high note rather than do 20 cuts."

Missing from the CD are such show set-pieces as "Got a Lot of Livin' To Do," "Hound Dog," "Are You Lonesome Tonight," "It's Now or Never," "Jailhouse Rock," and "One Night With You." The short time to produce the album meant hard decisions of which songs to include had to be made. "I really loved "One Night With You." I didn't touch a hair to [it] since the creation of [the original pitch demo], it was really solid. I loved the emotional side, it's really different. But it was [a duet, and it would be] too much to have four duets on the album. That was really the main argument for song choices, to have Elvis singing on the album. The name of the show and album is Viva Elvis, so for me it was fun to have maybe a couple of duets, but other than that it was too much."

Might this lead to a second volume of the show's music? "Personally I would love to work on a "Volume Two." After that I think it's a question for Sony and Cirque. We'll see how "Volume One" goes. I did ask Sony to print a vinyl version of the album for collectors. It [would be] so cool, having access to [an Elvis album on] vinyl. I am anxious to see that happen, I would buy one!"

(Answering his request, the soundtrack album has since been released on 180-gram audiophile vinyl by Sony Legacy Recordings, with a UPC code of 8-86977-67661-1 and can be purchased through Amazon and other sources. But it doesn't look like there will be a surround-sound version as there was with the limited-edition CD/DVD-A package for The Beatles Love.)

The final CD also incorporated assistance to mix the final tracks, bringing in Serban Ghemea and renowned mixer Brendon O'Brien. Utilizing them helped in several ways, Mr. Van Tournear explained. "It was [a matter of] time but also competence. I am a big fan of Brendon O'Brien's work. And Serban Ghemea is an amazing mixer, I think he's mixed more than 1,000 albums. I wanted Brendon to work on the songs that were really rock (Ed: he mixed "That's All Right," "Heartbreak Hotel," and "Suspicious Minds"). And I wanted Serban to work on the songs that were more urban and hip-hoppish, with machines and drum machines (Ed: he mixed "Blue Suede Shoes," "Bossa Nova Baby," "Burning Love," and "Can't Help Falling in Love"). Serban did a really cool job because it's a big range. [Like in] "Blue Suede Shoes," where it's more urban with the beat and handclaps, and you have real drums and real fat guitars."

"It was really complicated to find someone that could understand all the musical influences that are in there. I was fortunate to have those two guys."

It wasn't too difficult for him to pick his favorites from the CD. "I don't have the set list [in front of me], but for sure "Blue Suede Shoes" is one of my favorites. It's so eclectic and modern and at the same time so relevant to and using all of Elvis' roots. Like using Delta blues, a harmonica and a Bo Diddley beat. But clashing that with DJ scratching (such as the stuttering "go-go-go"), all the samples coming from Milton Berle, and all that stuff. I really love the infectious energy of "Blue Suede Shoes," it's really decadent."

"On the other side I [also] love "Can't Help Falling In Love." It's sensibility, [with] Elvis' voice sounding so amazing and rich, and I love the female vocal. The beat is really urban, a really 2010 kind of R&B, Bill Withers beat. And the ending is really one of my favorite mash-ups [where] I bring "Love Me" into the picture. You have Elvis singing and the curtain falls, and there's a big gospel choir [with] Elvis in front of them. For me it's really a nice tribute to Elvis' roots, he was so into gospel music. Those two I really like."

/// THE SOUND OF SILENCE

When he finished working on the show and soundtrack CD it was time to take a well-deserved break. "I just came back from a road trip, I was on the road almost two months in the United States. And every time I'm driving - and I did a lot of driving, sometimes fifteen hours a day - I didn't listen to music at all. Because it was so intense, working so hard during the summer and the last two years. When I can I don't listen to music. Sometimes I like to play piano and guitar with friends at parties, and have a glass of wine and play and jam, but I don't listen to a lot of music at the moment."

"I imagine it's the same when you work [hard], like you're working sixteen hours a day, when you have a chance to disconnect and do other things I think you do that. When I work I listen to everything that can have a connection with the project. I'm a big big fan and freak of music of all kinds, so it's really from Abba to Zappa. I like that expression really, because I listen to everything."

As our time drew to a close, we asked Mr. Van Tourneau what characteristic he felt was most critical for success in music. In a word, "Discipline."

"Because you can have talent; if you don't have talent don't expect to work one hour in the business. I think that's the minimum, the first thing you need to have. But after that it's really hard work. I was fortunate to have a father that is really a kick-ass person that is really disciplined with his projects, and I learned a lot just [watching] him."

Discipline that equipped him to create a powerful album starring the King of Rock And Roll in a short three-month timespan.

Takin' Care Of Business, indeed.

My sincere thanks go to: Mr. Van Tourneau for so graciously spending time with us, Chantal Côte, Corporate PR Manager, And my wife LouAnna for putting up with my sometimes obsessive hobby.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



BENOIT JUTRAS

Composer – Quidam, «O» & La Nouba

« Making Time Stop »

Keith Johnson, 2011

It was a special treat to talk to Mr. Jutras. When the KÀ CD was released we had ample excuse to talk with René Dupéré, but a reason to speak with Mr. Jutras was more elusive as he wasn't composing for Cirque. Then Cirque announced he had composed new music for the high bar act in *Mystère* and we had our excuse! We got a full hour to talk and it was well spent. I even tried prying into why he was asked to leave KÀ four months prior to the scheduled premiere, but I didn't get very far. (Hey, I had to ask!) He did come back to work for Cirque later, re-arranging show music and creating interstitial music cues for the "World's Away" film.

I will always remember his response to why he was in Vegas when we called – he was there to work on the then-new "ballroom dance" sequences in *"Le Rêve"*. "It's always a continuing project, it just never stops," he said of the show. But then his guard dropped and his voice sunk, sounding weary and tired as he added, "Never ever."

His "House of Dancing Water" soundtrack was never released in the Americas on physical CD. That and *"Le Rêve"* are available digitally at both Amazon and iTunes, though the version of *"Le Rêve"* available does not, ironically, include the four "dance" tunes he alluded to so wearily. They ARE available on an "ultimate edition" of the soundtrack. The "compilation" CDs he mentions, however, have never been issued.



Due to our desire to carry physical CD's when we travel rather than pack an iPod, two disks always make their way into our CD case. One is the René Dupéré-composed Holiday on Ice show *"Exotica"* (1998, Netza 1751). The other is always the Benoit Jutras-composed Cirque du Soleil *"O"* soundtrack (1998, Cirque du Soleil Musique CDSMC-10013). Invariably, both disks get a listen at least once during any trip we take. The beauty of them both transport us.

Any Cirque fan with more than a few soundtrack CDs in their collection knows Benoit Jutras' (BEN-wah JHUUT-ruh) name and have appreciated his music. His sound, with its strong lyrical line and powerful connection to the stage image took Cirque music to new heights. His soundtracks for the Cirque rank among fans favorites. As we have said in this context before, it is the music of Cirque du Soleil that, through the ears, prepares the mind for the wonders about to unfold before the eyes.

Returning to the Cirque du Soleil fold again to write new music for the high bar act in *Mystère* to celebrate its 8000th performance, his career has been quite a ride. Holding a Masters Degree in Composition from the Conservatoire de Musique de Montréal, he first became involved with the Cirque by joining the circus band in 1987. Writing many pieces of music for early Cirque shows (and being named Best Circus Composer at the Monte Carlo Circus Festival in 1996), then sharing composing duties on *Mystère* with Mr. Dupéré, he was finally presented his own show to compose, *Quidam*, in 1995. He went on to also score "Alegria Le Film", "O", "La Nouba" and the "Journey of Man" film before moving on from Cirque to other endeavors. Those included film soundtracks, television productions, the "Glow in the Park" parade for the Six Flags parks in 2008, and two more shows in collaboration with Franco Dragone, "Le Rêve" in 2005 and the recently opened "The House of Dancing Water" at the Wynn Macao.

His website, aptly named www.benoitjutras.com has samples from several of these projects as well as others. On the front page of that website is some interesting calligraphy – a scribble that works out to the words, "Music in All Its Senses." Where did this come from, we wondered as we began our conversation? "My friend, who was doing my website at the time, came up with it and I thought it was a really good idea. It's written in another way than just the normal way. You're the first person to find what's written so you're quite good, nobody sees it."

/// ONE MORE NEW THING

We started our questions for the Montréal-born 47-year old Mr. Jutras, who now calls Barbados home by asking how he came to write new music for the high bar act in *Mystère*? "Sandy Croft, who was the Artistic Director [for *Mystère*] at the time, told me that she felt the show needed just one more new thing."

The request didn't come from show director Franco Dragone? "No, Franco hasn't asked me for anything regarding the Cirque since we were in Orlando [for *La Nouba*] in 1999; we haven't talked about Cirque since then. It was just an idea [that came about] one evening when I was talking with Sandy, but [later she] called me and said that it would be nice to actually do it. She felt the high bar music was too dark for the way the high bar people felt. And I knew that the high bar people always felt it was a bit too dark and serious for them. So I said I'd have a look."

"At the time I was in the middle of my rush in Macao (Ed. working on *The House of Dancing Water*) so I had to wait nearly a month to have the time. It wasn't an emergency for them, they had music already.

I did the first draft really fast, during two weeks that I had a little less to do. I was in China when I did the final draft. I would say [it took] two or three months. I decided to have fun with the music, and Sandy liked it and (Cirque Senior Vice-President of Creative Content) Gilles Ste-Croix liked it.”

“It has been a long time since I [have done] something new for the Cirque. I don’t remember when the last time was, but it has been a while. I just thought I had the time and it would be nice for the show, [it’s] been running for so long it deserved one more new piece.”

Though Mr. Jutras & Mr. Dupéré are now listed as co-composers on the show it didn’t start out that way: *Mystère* was initially credited to Dupéré alone. But as Mr. Jutras pointed out, “When [*Mystère*] opened (in Dec of 1994) at least 30% of the music in the show [was mine]. René was the official composer at the beginning, and the original soundtrack was only René’s music. I was not supposed to be a core composer; it just ended up [like that]. It was the same thing with *Cirque Réinventé* (1987-1990); the last few years I had maybe 60% of the music and more music than René, but René was the [only] official composer [up to *Alegria*].” (Ed. This is reflected in the second version of the “*Cirque du Soleil*” CD (1990, *Cirque du Soleil Musique CDSMC-10001*) where four of the twelve cuts were composed by Mr. Jutras.)

“By the time *Quidam* arrived I had written a lot of music for *Cirque Réinventé* and *Mystère* and for the show in Switzerland [Ed. that *Cirque* did in conjunction with *Circus Knie* in 1992] and all that. In ‘95 René decided to take a break, he felt a bit of pressure to match *Alegria* since it was such a huge success in Canada. Guy Laliberté thought of me since I did so much music before that, and I was really happy to finally have my own show. It was quite easy.”

The writing for the show begat what is probably the best known piece of music in the *Cirque* canon, “Let Me Fall,” made famous by its inclusion on singer Josh Groban’s self-titled first album (2001, 143/Reprise 48154-2). Mr. Jutras had a story about meeting Groban, “I worked with Josh Groban two years later [Ed. That would be around 2004], we were in Vegas for three days, a working session to see if we could come up with something else. I played piano for him, and he signed [a CD of] “Let Me Fall” for me.” But he was not aware of how Groban would perform the song in concert, using projections to “walk” up a grand staircase off of which he fell into the “void” at the end of the song. “Really?! I should try to find the DVD.”

/// “O” AND LA NOUBA TAKE FLIGHT

His next assignment was for the water-based “O” creating the soundtrack that has graced the speakers of many rental cars we have used in our travels through the years. The first time my wife and I were enraptured by the beauty of “O” one of the instruments that stuck in our minds was a haunting stringed instrument that we later found was called the *erhu*, sometimes called the Chinese Fiddle. What about the “O” music led him to use it? “It’s such a beautiful instrument. I knew I wanted a bit of a world-beat feeling for “O”.

And a month or two before I had heard [show musician] erhu player Lei Qiang play in the park in Montréal. And there were some Asian acrobats [in the show], so I thought there could be a certain link there. So it was a question of timing, the erhu was suddenly in my life at the time and I thought it would be a good idea.”

Fans are intrigued about the changes, sometimes subtle, made to a shows music over the years. One fan, in an old topic posted on Cirque Tribune, wondered why in 2004 the woodwind position was eliminated from the band and the parts rewritten and some of the songs received a key change. “I didn’t even remember that we changed the key,” Mr. Jutras commented, “It’s probably to fit the act, the acts are always moving a little bit.”

“The woodwind player was playing [several] ancient instruments. And because of the nature of the theater, with the humidity and all that, it was simply hell to keep the instruments tuned. I knew when we started the show that [would be] part of the game and the instruments would be a little out of tune sometimes. It wasn’t because she was a bad player, she was a really good player but it was just too hard [to keep the instruments in tune]. So we got a second woodwind player and it was even harder. After the second one we [knew] we had to readjust.”

It was a short two months after the premiere of “O” in 1998 that previews began for “La Nouba” in Walt Disney World. In interviews Franco Dragone has said opening two major productions back-to-back exhausted him. Mr. Jutras agrees, “Thank God I was ten years younger so I was able to survive! It took me months to recover.”

“In a funny way, “O” was a really easy show for me to do and La Nouba was extremely difficult. The main reason was that Guy Laliberté wanted more of a modern soundtrack [for La Nouba] and Franco doesn’t really do modern. He hated electronic music at the time. Now he’s listening more to modern stuff, but at the time he didn’t really listen to modern music. So it was really hard to find music that would please both. I had to struggle a lot, and at some point you get tired of being in a rush for 8-9 months straight, working 7 days a week with no break. At some point you just get slower, so I suppose I got a little bit slower.”

Following chanteuse Dessy Di Lauro as singer in La Nouba was Sisaundra Lewis. Another fan wondered what it was like to hear her sing the score for the first time? “She was simply amazing; I was smiling the whole time. It’s a gift when you [hear] a performer, mainly a singer, singing your score and suddenly the score takes flight. It’s just a blessing and you feel so lucky. It was the same thing in Quidam, André [Boileau] sang it for a long time (Ed. for three different stretches from 2005-2009) and for me he was the perfect voice. Every time I saw Quidam during the years he was singing it was like, “Ahh, thank you, this is just perfect.” It had the right emotion; there’s so much emotion that comes through the voice.”

Though he is not currently writing music for Cirque Mr. Jutras keeps in touch with his shows, though not as much as he used to. “I’m trying to do as much as I can. In the first years I was going to every show at least two times per year.”

“Now Cirque policy has changed, the shows have been running so long and depending on the show they are so stable they don’t really ask anymore. But if there’s a big change [I try to go]. I’m trying to go at least one time per year, even if it’s only to talk to the musicians and have contact. And there are always notes; I’m quite hands-on with my projects.’

Before expanding beyond Cirque one more project awaited Mr. Jutras, composing the soundtrack for the 3-D IMAX Cirque film, “Journey of Man.” Though the CD (2000, Sony/Legacy SK-89097) contained all the films music, it also contained a song not featured in the film, “Trip Hop.” Where did it come from? “It was because the soundtrack was way too short. It’s not out of the blue completely, there was definitely a link with the movie, maybe not in the arrangement but in the [feeling] that the movie [had]. We needed to add something [to make] it a longer CD and it felt like a little bonus.”

It would be years later that Mr. Jutras would be called back to Cirque to begin work on the show that would become KÀ. He would work on it almost a year before leaving the project in a mutual parting of the ways. Was any of the music composed for that show used in other venues? “Yes, actually. I did reuse a few pieces for *Le Rêve* and *The House of Dancing Water*. The main theme for *The House of Dancing Water* was originally created for KÀ. And there were two other pieces but [I only used] the ribs [of them]. I’m writing so close to the image most of the time that it becomes difficult to reuse the music. If I can I just reuse a few bars or the main theme. René has more of a tendency to write songs so it’s easier to move. My structures are shorter and so close to the action that when you take out the action it just doesn’t make sense anymore.”

Mr. Jutras’ next show project would be his 8th collaboration with Franco Dragone, the show *Le Rêve* at the Wynn Las Vegas. Mr. Jutras has been the only creator that has stayed with the show through its evolving incarnations, ensuring that the only musical voice you hear is his. In fact, as we were talking that late January morning, Mr. Jutras was, “...working on *Le Rêve*. I’m calling from my room at the Wynn, I’ve got my studio here and we’re writing two new pieces. It’s always a continuing project; it just never stops, never ever.”

Neither does his creative collaborations with Dragone, which is fine with Mr. Jutras. “I have a meeting with Franco a little later [today]. [He] just called me this morning; he’s in town and wants to talk about another project.”

Through the years they’ve developed a working relationship that suits them both. “The fact that we’ve been working together for so long means that we don’t need to talk that much. There’s a trust between us that’s nice. It’s actually really rare that Franco will tell me, “I’d like you to go there, I’d like you to do that.” He trusts me. It’s probably quite well known that Franco can sometimes be a hard man to work with because he has quite a big temper. But it’s like second nature working with him. For each project we worked nearly a year, so [that’s] eight years of my life where [we’ve worked] really, really close. Franco changes his mind a lot.”

“Of all the directors I’ve worked with that is maybe the biggest challenge of working with Franco. But at the same time he never asks for any specific thing so I feel completely free, I feel like I can do nearly whatever I want.”

His most recent project is another water-based show, *The House of Dancing Water* at the Wynn Macao. How is this shows music different from *Le Rêve*? “The House of Dancing Water is definitely a story-driven show, so in that sense it’s more of a movie soundtrack than any other show. [There are] themes that [recur], themes that are associated with characters. It’s still show music, it’s different than if I was to do music for a movie, but it’s still closer to that than anything I’ve done before. And it’s probably the most orchestral of the shows I’ve done. Not as much as “Journey of Man” but definitely the most for a show.”

In composing music for the Chinese market, were there certain Chinese elements he tried to make sure were included in the music? “Yes, but at the same time not too much. I didn’t want to [go that direction] and I made that clear from the beginning. I’m not a Chinese composer; I’m a North American composer. I didn’t want to make a Chinese score because that would just be faking it, there would be an essence to it that I would miss, it would sound like it but the essence wouldn’t be there. So it was clear from the beginning that it wouldn’t be a Chinese soundtrack. But at the same time erhu is one of my favorite instruments and I knew that there would be an erhu player in the show. And there are certain sonorities that I really like. I really like the pipa [Ed. A four-stringed instrument sometimes called the Chinese lute] so I put a lot of pipa in the show. I tried to put [Chinese influences] here and there, but I did it the same way as I would put [Chinese] inspiration in [any other show].”

/// FINDING THE LINK

In encouraging news for fans of Mr. Jutras’ music, he informed us that Dragone Productions had just signed with EMI music, with plans to release both *Le Rêve* and *The House of Dancing Water* on CD worldwide! “I actually finished the [House of Dancing Water] CD a week ago. But because of the Chinese process of censoring and all that it can take up to two months once the CD is finished to get final approval from the Chinese government. It’s not going to be out before April.”

Fans have also wondered whether the more recent music composed for *Le Rêve* (including the ballroom dancing numbers) would find their way to a re-vamped soundtrack for the show. “Yes, we’ve been talking about that, at some point there should be, I think it would be nice and respectful to have another soundtrack.” But there is one sad piece of news on the soundtrack CD front, concerning Mr. Jutras’ score for the Six Flags(.com) parks “Glow in the Park Parade.” “There was supposed to be [a CD]. The CD is done, but just as we were going to distribute it Six Flags got themselves into really big financial trouble. So they decided to hold it and I don’t think they’re going to release it now. Which is sad because it was a fun little project, it’s really different.”

Though his website mentions the possibility of two compilation CD's (which were supposed to come out in 2009), Mr. Jutras informed us that that was in error, but not completely. "I've been asked to do a compilation which I will probably do this year. I just started looking at that about a month ago after I finished The House of Dancing Water. We thought that maybe now would be a nice time."

What songs might populate it? "It changes; often the latest project becomes the most interesting to me because I haven't heard it over and over. I suppose there are a few pieces that I prefer. If we're talking about a CD, [some] pieces make more sense on CD than others, it's the way [a song] sounds by itself. Like I said René has more of a song approach. Usually when he writes he writes a bunch of songs before the project and [then] adapts them to the show."

"I write specifically for the acts but often the songs don't stand up as well outside of the show. [For example] if I'm talking about Quidam the banquine music is not even on the CD, there was never any talk to put it on the CD. Yet for me the Banquine act is one of the tightest and nicest music/act [combinations] that I did because I feel there is a union, a link that is strong." (We did remind him that the banquine music did make it into the soundtrack for the "Journey of Man" film (since the act does appear there). He was unaware, however, of the music's appearance as a bonus track on the Canadian "expanded edition" of the Quidam Soundtrack (2002, BMG Canada 91493).)

How would he define "Benoit Jutras" music? "It's really funny. When I left university in '87 I started working with Cirque, and Cirque-related projects were the main things I did. And when [I'm asked] to do music people have often said that's what they have in mind. I'm not sure actually, I will definitely think about it.

I should be able to answer that, this is something I should have thought of. It's a big question, it's an important question, but I have a hard time [coming up with an answer]."

All of his show CD's to date have taken care to include the creation musicians, which Mr. Jutras considers, "very important, enormously important. For me it's really important that with every CD I produce that I use the musicians from the show. Even for The House of Dancing Water, [which] was quite complicated. We couldn't do the CD while I was in Macao because I had to come back to Montréal for personal reasons. But I didn't want to use other musicians. Luckily they agreed to come to Montréal during their break to be in the studio. But if not I would have flown back to Macao to record them."

"I feel it's respectful to the musicians that helped create the show, because they give a bit of themselves in [the creation of] the show. Even though, like I said, I'm really hands-on in my scores - I'm writing quite detailed arrangements most of the time - so it's not like they're rewriting a major part of the show. But at the same time they always bring something in the way they play that makes it what it is. And because they play that certain way you [go in] that direction. So it's quite important, they add a really important contribution."

Another vital part of the mix is producing partner and engineer Rob Heaney who has been involved in all of Mr. Jutras' CDs from *Mystère* onward. "He's a genius, I respect him so much. We worked together for the first time on the *Mystère Live* CD, and later on the *Quidam* CD. I wasn't producing those CDs but I had contact with him and we started to connect. After the last sessions for the *Quidam* album I asked if he wanted to try and create a producing team with me. At first he said no, it took him a year to say yes. And since '97 I haven't produced anything without him. We have a definite connection. I'm not that well versed in sound and studio producing, and he's amazing at driving musicians, particularly rhythm sections. My part is more the details of the arrangements. The two of us together are more complete than by ourselves."

/// MAKING SENSE OF THE FUTURE

In addition to upcoming CD releases (and that possible future collaboration with Franco Dragone), there are other exciting plans on the horizon. "I'm in negotiations to do a musical. [It's] a big-scale Broadway musical-type show. It would be really nice [to do]. It's a project that I've had in mind for a long time and Warner Brothers seems quite interested, so we'll see. I'm flying to San Francisco in a month to have meetings for that. I would love to have a musical either on the West End or on Broadway."

"At [one] point it seemed [like it was going] to be difficult because of rights that were owned by two different groups, and negotiations for musicals [can] stretch for years and years. But finally everything came together. They asked me to keep it a bit of a secret; I'm not allowed to speak too much about it."

His website also mentions a project called "S-Trip" "'S-Trip' is a small personal multimedia project I've been working on for a while now that I should finish this year. It's going to be quite underground, a production with a live band and one dancer, an erotic project. I'm working with a friend of mine who's doing video production, and we're working with a dancer. Technically it should be done this year, but there are always new projects arriving that push personal projects to the side. But hopefully I'm going to have the time to finish that one."

What music does he himself enjoy? "When I'm composing, when I'm on a project I nearly never listen to music. I finished *The House of Dancing Water* two and a half months ago and then went right to working on the CD, so I didn't listen to a lot of music. My personal tastes in music are often more edgy than when I'm writing. I love Ray LaMontagne, I love Arcade Fire, I love Radiohead, that type of music. I'm also trying to listen to a bit of classical. At one point in my life I was listening only to classical music, [later] I became a bit less serious."

We also were interested in how he commits his compositions to written form. "It's a synthesizer with a computer. I have a degree in music, and when I started in '87 it was by [sitting at a] piano and writing by hand. But it's been so long I don't know if I can even write music by hand anymore. If I [have to] write in more detail, if there's a string quartet part or something like that, then I would pick up the pen and paper."

“But you don’t write the same way with pen and paper [as you do] with computers. But I would say that 90-95% of the time it’s simply with my synthesizer and computer.”

It’s that time spent sitting at a keyboard and composing that provides him his greatest satisfaction. “[I love] that moment where, at some point after the first hour or two hours where you struggle to find a way to get in contact, at some point you just get lost in the process of composing where time stops. Without being too corny, it’s where everything actually makes sense. It’s exactly like making love, the same type of energy, where suddenly you feel connected to the universe and everything makes sense. So for me it’s the creation, when I’m sitting at the keyboard and composing. That’s definitely what brings me the most pleasure.”

And, as our interview was drawing to a close, we asked him for words of inspiration to aspiring artists. “To persevere no matter what. And to follow your passion – if the passion is there anyway. Everything after that comes naturally. Even if it’s hard - I remember until I was 27 I had a hard time eating three meals a day. But there was one thing for sure, when I was sitting at my piano I was happy and there was no way I would do anything else.”

My sincere thanks go to: Mr. Jutras for so graciously spending time with us, Chantal Côte, Corporate PR Manager, And my wife LouAnna for putting up with my sometimes obsessive hobby.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



MARK WARD

Dancer, Character (John) – Quidam

« A Career Backwards »

Keith Johnson, 2011

When the arena tour of Quidam recently visited Everett, Washington, my wife and I had the opportunity to revisit a show we first saw during the first CirqueCon in 2004. One of the pleasant surprises was to find that Mark Ward, who was kind enough to be part of the first CirqueCon post-show Q&A years ago, was still performing the role of John.

With the increasing number of older big top shows being converted to the arena format we have often wondered what was involved in the process of conversion. And who better to ask than someone who has been on both sides – the big top and the arena. Mr. Ward fills that role perfectly!

Mark Ward (Ward with the “a” as in “ha,” not Wahrd with the “a” as in “war”) was born December 11, 1965. In his youth he trained in ballet, all types of dance, gymnastics, and classical piano. He joined Cirque du Soleil in June of 1993 at the age of 27; this month marks his 18th anniversary with the company.

It wasn't his first thought to go for the role of John, though, he explains. “[In 1998] I'd just finished working for five years in Mystère as an original member [Ed. Being with the show since its premiere on December 25, 1994]. I did bungee, the Red, White & Blue Bird, ball walking, Japanese taiko drums, dancing, fast track, a little bit of everything - I had seven characters. Because it's a large company what I've found over the years is that if you would like to learn something, if you have the gumption, they're more than willing to teach you another art, which is fabulous, I think that's fantastic. They hired me as a dancer with acrobatic capabilities and I've learned so many other things.”

“I had aspirations to be an acrobat in Saltimbanco. But at the time I was approached by Gilles Ste-Croix who thought I would be a good candidate for the role of John in Quidam. So I took his advice and accepted the part and now I've been in the role for 12 years.” Mark is the only other person to have played John, following on after role creator John Gilkey, who performed the role for three years in North America and [the first] two months of the European tour.

How does his “John” differ from Mr. Gilkey’s “John?” “I just say we’re two different people! (laughs) Some things that John did worked for him but didn’t work for me. He was able to be a lot more stern in his character and still get laughs. I found when I did that it didn’t work so well. I don’t know why it didn’t work but I didn’t feel comfortable and I just didn’t feel I was getting the same reactions. So I treat John more as a kid trapped inside of a man’s body.”

“As a principle character you have to be open and flexible and be ready to change and sensitive to what the audience is giving you. Because what worked in Japan may not work in the United States or in South America and vice versa. There are just different things that you learn along the way and you have to be flexible.”

/// DIFFERENT, YET THE SAME

Having been part of Quidam for a large portion of its big top life, we wanted to find out from Mr. Ward about converting a Cirque show from big top to arena format. They first found out, “a little over a year ago [Ed. While on tour in South America] that they were thinking about it; they tried to give people a heads up. Everyone knows that the plan now is that the older shows that have been in existence longer will at some point go to arenas. So we knew that after Alegría [went to arena format] that we would go at some point. Dralion [Ed. which was created after Quidam] went before us so we were prepared for it.”

But that didn’t mean this would be a totally new experience for the artists and crew. “We had done a small arena tour in the UK [Ed. For 8 weeks in Feb-April of 2009, visiting Liverpool, Belfast, Newcastle, Birmingham, Manchester, Dublin, Sheffield and Glasgow], and performed in the Royal Albert Hall [Ed. In Jan-Feb of 2009]. So we had some experience with Quidam in arenas, but [now] it was going into arenas full-time.”

They plunged right into the conversion process immediately after drawing the curtain on Quidam’s big top life. “We really didn’t have a break because [after closing in Bogotá, Columbia on Nov 21, 2010] we did a six-week arena tour in Canada at the end of last year [Ed. From Dec 11, 2010 – Jan 16, 2011] with the cast we had for the South America tour. We played Kingston, Montréal, Québec City and Chicoutimi. Then in January we stopped because we had a 60% new cast of artists. So we went to training in Montréal for two weeks where we met new members of the show. Then the whole group went to Nashville and trained there for six weeks, to get everything together. We just basically [rehearsed] the full show from beginning to end for everybody - technical, artists, and everybody - to get an idea of how it runs and put things together from top to bottom. For us it was like being in a theater built for us because they set up a stage in Nashville and we used that space every day for over a month.”

“Then we immediately started on the arena tour leg that we’re on now. The first city was Vancouver, Canada [Ed. On March 9, 2011], this full leg is ten cities [Ed. Essentially going from north to south along the West Coast of the US, ending in Sacramento on May 15.]”

It came as a surprise to us that none of the original creative team were involved in the conversion process, given what Cirque has previously said about consistent checkbacks by the creators to ensure artistic integrity. “Franco (Dragone, show director) did a revamp in 1999 but hasn’t been back since. [Ed. The revamp was done in May ‘99 while the show was in Amsterdam preparing for its video recording, three years after its premiere in Montréal on April 23, 1996.] Benoit (Jutras, musical composer) comes in periodically to check on things. [But] we have our own team of directors who work in Montréal full-time. We have our stage managers, we have our show director, we have our artistic director, and we have all those people that are working with us 24-7.”

A few press reviews of the arena-format version of Quidam have suggested that the tone and underlying drama have been massaged (one used the word “lightened”) to work for a larger audience. Not so, Mr. Ward responds, “It’s still the same Quidam; it’s still the exact same show that was created by Franco Dragone.” But there have been changes to address some of the challenges presented by this style of touring. “For instance, we don’t have a school traveling with us anymore so we don’t have underage children. We used to have four little girls doing the diabolo act, and now they’re adults from 18 to 20-something.”

“It’s the same with Zoé. She’s really really small and from the stage people think she’s a little girl. She’s like 20-21 but she’s actually a small girl. A lot of people meet her and they’re like, “Oh my gosh, I thought you were 15 years old!”“

“The only thing with the diabolos is [they’re adults with] more sophisticated costumes, more sultry if you will, and the movement is different. But all the other acts are the same, the costumes are the same, the tempo, the story and ending are the same. It isn’t “lighter.” For me it’s the most human show. There’s a darker side to it, but we still have the comedy elements we’ve always had.”

Does the larger theater space mean he has to approach the role of John differently? “I had a full career in musical theater, ballet, acrobatics and music before I joined Cirque du Soleil so I know this kind of thing. Of course they give everyone notes on how you have to reach everyone in the arena. But for me my job, my main purpose, is connecting with the people. So that doesn’t change, it’s just now there are more of them. I remind myself all the time that there are more people. So there are some things that I would have done more intimately that I make bigger, or I allow more time to register far away. But it still reads.”

/// LIFE ON THE ROAD

The arena touring model brings its own new set of challenges and opportunities for not only the company but the artists and crew as well. “One thing we don’t have is the intimacy of the big top. But what you gain in arenas is the ability to have more people see the show at one time. And [visit] smaller markets. But it could also be a large city that doesn’t have the capability of supporting a big top.

It could be a big international city [such as] Prague where you have all these ancient buildings, where are you going to put a big top? However, if they have [arenas], you can introduce a whole new set of people to the world of Cirque du Soleil. And that's what the arena tours are doing which is actually very exciting."

Having performed in each Mr. Ward has an informed perspective on the different type of show models. "If you [work for] a permanent show you can more easily have a family life. You can go to school, you can have your kids there, you can do whatever and it's more of a "normal" life. You can do things during the day with your family and you have your two shows a night from 7 to 12 like a regular days work, and you have two days off. So for people who are more family oriented or want to stay in one place it might be beneficial for them to consider a permanent show."

"With a [big top] touring show you're hitting more countries, but you still have a chance to have a family and kids with you. But you don't have the privilege of being home as you would at a permanent show."

"The arena tours are just faster than all those put together. You have a day of travel, Sunday night. I have my days off and I see the city on Monday and Tuesday. I usually work out in the gym on Tuesday, in my hotel or in my room or onsite. [I work out] four times a week. And I do 8 shows a week. However, we usually do 8-10 weeks then have two weeks off. So I have several two-week vacations in between the legs."

"It just depends on the person, how old you are, where you are in your life at that moment. I've done my whole career backwards, I started with a permanent show, then I went on a big top tour, and now I'm with an arena tour. I actually love the schedule and the quick pace of it."

What does he see as the greatest challenge in arena touring? "I guess the switching [from one touring style to another]. Because with the big top you're in a city for [from] six weeks to sometimes three months depending on the size of the city. But [with arenas] I guess the most is sometimes three weeks in a city. Normally you have five days in a city, you do eight shows, and you leave Sunday night on a plane or by bus for the next city. For the first couple of weeks it takes a bit of getting used to but after a while you like it and enjoy it because of the fast pace."

"Actually it hasn't been a challenge for me. I find that I see more of the cities now that I have two free days of doing nothing. And I find that I've been able to research and really get into these cities and get to know them. Whereas when I was in a city for longer I'd say, "Oh, I'll get around to doing it," and then I was leaving before I get to know it."

"With the arenas you have to take advantage of what it is, but I like it a lot. Just the opportunity to travel to more countries and visit more cities. I love it." Any favorite places? "It's hard to say, I like so many places. I loved Europe. I loved Spain, Denmark, Switzerland. London was great. I loved Argentina, I live in Buenos Aires.

There are so many great cities in the States. They all have their own special things, it depends on what happens there.”

/// PREPARED AND CHALLENGED

His role as a principle character in a Cirque du Soleil show means Mr. Ward is often on the short list of people asked to meet the public and participate in such things as Meet & Greets and Question and Answer sessions. It’s an aspect he relishes. “We know that we’re touching people, we get that feedback and it’s our life’s blood. But sometimes when we do [one-on-one] things it gets us a little bit closer to people. In South America we were able to get to know [groups like] Cirque Nation [Ed. A South American Cirque du Soleil fan group]. It’s very overwhelming to say the least, it’s a beautiful thing.”

In fact, Mr. Ward was a part of the genesis of CirqueCon! While attending a performance of Quidam in Vancouver back in 2004, our 31 first-ever Passionates were treated to a post-show Q&A with several artists, including Mr. Ward. It was that experience in Vancouver that spurred our imaginations to consider other trips to other (in some cases exotic) locales (check us out at www.cirquecon.com).

When we mentioned this to Mr. Ward we had our most surprising moment of our talk – he remembered! “There was a question and answer for that I remember. And I remember a question from one of the guys there, he asked, “Isn’t it true that you were Quidam?” I thought it was very surprising, really sweet [that someone would remember].”

And it was true! “I said that [the character of] Quidam is not a prison sentence (laughs). When I joined Quidam in 1999, John Gilkey went across with us to Europe. During the time John was working I did all kinds of stuff in the show. I did animation, I did the ballerina but they didn’t want me to point my toes and I said I couldn’t do bad dancing. So they kicked me out [of the part], they said I looked too much like a real ballerina!” (laughs)

“One tidbit of information that a lot of people don’t know is that during the show you can have up to three people playing Quidam, including girls. People think it’s the same person, but we have three different times he appears and most times it’s three different people! [When] they were going to do the live filming of the Quidam DVD John [Gilkey] was still there and I wasn’t going to start [playing John] until two and a half months later. But Franco was working with everyone and I said, “You know what, Franco? I would really love to help out and be a part of the DVD. Let me be Quidam!” So I’m Quidam on the DVD.”

Finally, as our time was winding down, we wondered what words Mr. Ward might have for aspiring artists. “It’s almost cliché to say “dream your dream.” Know what you want to do and make sure you give yourself the steps to get there. Give yourself goals, a far off goal but also goals you can reach easily. If someone says no, go to the next person that’s going to say yes.”

“If you want to be in Cirque du Soleil come to impress, have your stuff ready and be flexible. Come not only with what you think you want to do but be open to other things. Come prepared but also be ready to be challenged and to meet that challenge.”

“But I also like to say - you know what, the reality is that we forget who we are in life. I’ve been around long enough to know that I survived before Cirque du Soleil and I will survive after Cirque du Soleil no matter what I’m doing. I just happen to be lucky enough to be in this company and it’s been amazing to me and it’s changed my life. But I also know that if I weren’t in Cirque du Soleil I would be doing something else that would make me happy as well. But I’ve been privileged enough to be in Cirque du Soleil.”

“That’s what you need to be true to yourself as an artist. Whether it’s with Cirque du Soleil or anyone, you have to find those things that get you out there, get yourself noticed and make yourself happy.”

“Because in the long run it has to be you.”

My sincere thanks go to: Mr. Ward for spending time with us, Chantal Côte, Corporate PR Manager, “Our” Jessica Leboeuf, Quidam publicist, And my wife LouAnna for putting up with my sometimes obsessive hobby.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



ERIC CHALIFOUR & MARIO TOMASSINI
Grand Chapiteau Site Analysts

« Before the Circus Comes to Town »

Keith Johnson, 2012

Upon strolling onto a Cirque show site one is impressed by the grandeur of it all – from the fences that corral ticket holders, to the imposing spires of the tent and the bright blue and yellow colors of the canvas, not to mention the anticipation at the wonders within. But not as obvious upon first glance is the workhorse power behind the grandeur – not just the electrical cables snaking their way through the site like veins, or the water or sewer digestive tract, but the hiding-in-plain-sight network of beams, masts, supports, and cables – the bones and muscle - that hold the tent skin taut and upright.

Bringing a Cirque show to a city involves much more than just setting up the big top. It takes months, often several months of planning. Numerous departments and many people are involved. They are what you might consider the pioneers, the leading edge, of Cirque's visit to a city.

If you've ever watched Cirque prepare a site, set up their tent, perform and then leave, you might have observed the transformation a site goes through. Parking lots become barren blacktop pads, park fields get massively terra-formed. The results of the efforts of the pre and post-visit crews were first made clear to my wife and me when Alegria visited Seattle in the summer of 2003. Before Cirque moved to its current Marymoor Park site Cirque set up in an expansive parking lot in the city of Renton, easily visible from the freeway. The parking lot was normally used as overflow parking for a Boeing aircraft manufacturing facility. Though the area was flat it had any number of curbs, streetlights, and markings. We were impressed when we visited the show how completely the lot had been restructured to accommodate Cirque's small city. All of those offending obstructions had been completely removed, to the point it was hard to tell they had been there at all. And when we returned three weeks after the show had left, we found the site had been returned to almost exactly how it looked before – the curbs were in their proper place, landscaping and beauty bark had been placed and the area had been restriped. You could hardly tell Cirque had ever been there.

What we saw with Alegria fascinated us, so we decided to investigate further the next time Cirque came to town. We thought visiting a tent site prior to the arrival of the big top would be a good place to start. But beforehand we wanted to get some background information on what is actually involved before the circus arrives.

Back in April 2006, several weeks before Varekai arrived in Seattle, we spoke with Eric Chalifour, Analysis Manager for Cirque du Soleil, from his office in Montreal. Mr. Chalifour had been with Cirque du Soleil for four years at the time of our conversation. “I’m a land surveyor. I was working at my own company doing road surveys and locating buildings. But now instead of locating buildings I’m locating big tops!”

While it might seem like any number of sites might be able to host a Grand Chapiteau, it isn’t that simple. Long before the big top arrives, a small army of people have visited – measuring, analyzing, preparing. Mr. Chalifour started by explaining the process and his responsibilities.

“Site survey analysis is really important. We have six tours around the world with many site surveys being done at the same time. When the tour plan says we need to go to a particular city we have a department that seeks sites. So they visit a city and look for possibilities. Once possibilities are [identified] they ask me to visit the sites and measure them to see if there are any obstacles according to our tolerances. [We have to identify] parking facilities, visibility, sewer connections, availability of phone lines - many issues that need to be covered before saying that a site is correct for us. And we have [to create] a lot of drawings for permits such as evacuation & fire [prevention]. As a manager I supervise those activities and I’m in charge of drawings as well.”

Their measurements can tell a lot about the suitability of a site, but it’s only one ingredient in the mixture of factors Cirque considers. “Sometimes because of our recommendation they don’t go [to a site] because we tell them not to go because it’s a mistake. And sometimes they don’t listen. (Laughs) [...] But there are other issues than ours. Visibility and availability of sites are sometimes a problem. The best sites logistically and construction-wise and cost-wise may not be available, but another site that might cost more might be available within our timeframe. There are many issues that determine which sites we will use. But when the Site Selection Committee meets they take our recommendations into account.”

What size makes for an ideal site? “We ask for 100 x 180 meters (around 300 x 600 feet). It can’t be flat because of rainwater, which is usually an issue for our patrons, so we always try to avoid water accumulation. When we do site construction and we have to start from scratch, say in a soccer field, we usually do a crown shape to let water flow down each side of the site. Under the big top we try to have as flat a surface as possible, because our stage and sets and backstage have close tolerances and there is no rain accumulation since we have a roof. But in the grandstand area we can have a little bit of slope.”

It is interesting to note that, though they will occasionally set up in parks, they never set up on bare grass. “Not the patron area [or] the big top area, those two areas will be paved. The back of the site and the rest of the area will be [well-compacted] gravel filling material. Because if we don't compact it well our trailers will sink. We have to have a strong surface but not necessarily entirely paved; it's costly to pave everything. The main issue for us is the patron. So we always try to figure out where the patrons will go and pave those areas.” For Seattle, the size that has hosted Cirque du Soleil tents for several shows has been a specially-constructed pad of asphalt about 15 miles east of Seattle in Marymoor Park in the city of Redmond. (It can be seen as “Recreation and Event Area” in the top center of this map, between the cricket fields and the Velodrome just above Lot I.

Mr. Chalifour discussed how the Marymoor Park site is different from many of the other types of sites they use, and how the site was created. “I was there personally at Marymoor Park. At the time it was a soccer field and they decided to develop the area into a park event area. They told us we were the biggest event they would have so if they build their [site] according to our specs they would be able to receive any other event. So we gave them our recommendations and they did the job according to our specs. They filled the place with gravel and added asphalt over a huge area to allow us to install our stuff. It has several fire hydrants, a sewer connection to catch our wastewater - the whole system is there. And after the work had been done we sent a guy to survey the site and it was perfectly done, so we are keen to go there. It's already perfect for us. So we will do a week of marking without any site construction needed. And they can also use it for other events.”

/// GETTING THE SITE READY

We asked Mr. Chalifour what happens after the site has been decided upon. “If we look at the preparation of the site (before the tent arrives) and its restoration (after the tent leaves), we have two departments that work together: my department, Site Analysis and Marking, and Site Construction. We have a civil engineer in Site Construction who is the manager of several supervisors who go on-site and assist the contractor during site construction to make sure that their work is according to our specs. And we work together with them.”

“We first locate obstacles and analyze the situation and recommend any construction. We do a topographic survey where we do a drawing to read the surface. And when a slope is too high we know we need to correct it. So we calculate the amount of filling material we need, give the drawings to the civil engineer (in Site Construction) and he'll hire someone to do the job.”

Sometimes quite a bit of work is needed to make a site suitable. “Depending upon the amount of work that needs to be done they might start one week or one month before or maybe two months if it's a huge parcel with lots of obstacles. And we keep in touch with them during the construction process. And then we arrive one week before the first day of the setup.”

They are on a strict timetable, because the circus is on its way. “The last show occurs on Sunday and we remove everything by Tuesday, they travel on Tuesday night and start to set up in the new city on Wednesday. But all the markings have been done and the anchors and plates have been put in place ready for them, because we have two plate and stake kits. Then it takes nine days of set up before the premiere.”

“We use one supervisor with six temporary staff. My people do the locating of everything and the marking and stake driving. We rent a Bobcat and put a hydraulic hammer on it and [use it to] drive the stakes properly. I am the manager, I usually stay in Montréal, but we have a supervisor on-site.”

While the supervisor on-site is a Cirque employee, the rest of the crew are temporary Cirque staff. “They travel from one site to another. We call them fly-ins because they fly everywhere. We have a long list of fly-ins that we ask to travel from one site to another.” One crew travels the West Coast while another travels the East Coast. “Usually some stay in Europe and some in America because we have demands everywhere, but sometimes we don’t have a choice and we must call [Europeans] to help in the United States.”

/// MAKING THEIR MARK

After major site construction has been completed, and about a week prior to the arrival of the tent, Mr. Chalifour’s crew arrives. “We [first] need to prepare the site with markings. What we mean by markings is we note all the [site] infrastructure. We have to mark the location of the main tent, the main anchor, all the other tents and containers. It’s like a little city; it’s a lot of stuff. So we have to mark every single thing precisely because we don’t usually have lots of space. We take as little space as possible because the more space we take the more rent we have to pay. So we always take as little as we can.”

“We have the usual survey equipment, not just a single measuring tape. We need a theodolite or Total Station to measure everything. This operation takes a few days to a whole week - a few days to localize things and a few days to drive the stakes into place.” (A Total Station is an instrument (otherwise called a theodolite) used in modern surveying, which incorporates the traditional transit with a distance meter to read distances from the instrument to a specific point. “The marking operation is to place our equipment as well as locate any underground utilities. We usually set up in parking lots, and usually there are electrical cables that feed lampposts and occasionally water lines. When a water line is crossing the site we don’t want to hit that, so we localize the utility and see if we can avoid it. If we can’t we have a lot of tricks, we can weld wider metal plates under our usual plates and drive the stakes a bit wider than usual to avoid the line.”

Ah yes, the stakes. These are the unsung and overlooked workhorses of any Cirque site. Look carefully around the perimeter of a tent and you will see a series of these stakes hammered into the ground and holding supporting wires. The amount of stakes varies from 300 to 1200 depending on the tour. The stakes are 5 feet long and 2 inches in diameter and weigh 20-25 pounds each, and, as Mr. Chalifour mentioned, are hammered into the ground by a hydraulic hammer placed onto the end of a Bobcat small bulldozer.

/// PULLING UP STAKES (AND TREES)

Each site presents its own challenges, some more severe than others. “Sometimes we've had to remove a number of major trees. Those are the kinds of issues we don't like to deal with because we don't like to remove trees. Sometimes it's a nice park, a nice landscape, and we have to remove everything and put it back later. Sometimes we can keep [the trees alive] and put them back afterward. And sometimes the landowner says they want the area clear for major events anyway, so they ask us to prepare the site the way we want and leave it as-is afterwards. But the reason the trees are removed is the circus.”

“[But] removing a wall or a fence is not a major issue for us. Sometimes there's a slope on the site where we'll need to put in a lot of fill material that can cost a lot. But the environmental side of site preparation can be a challenge. We don't like to remove things.”

“So that's about it,” he summarized. “Localize any underground utilities or infrastructure, drive the stakes, put the utilities and anchor system in, and then the tent crew arrives to put up the tent.”

Occasionally, despite the best planning, things can go completely awry. Such as in August 2005 when Hurricane Emily swept through the Gulf Coast wreaking havoc on Monterrey, Mexico, where Saltimbanco was just about to open. “They had a flat area for sporting events with a [nearby] parking lot that was right above the Rio Grande River. But because of a hurricane the water level raised and the flow rate of the river raised a lot as well. And part of the site was removed by the river. We were about to lose too much space so we decided to remove all the stakes and all the plates and get out of there. And in 24 hours we had to find another site, survey it and sign contracts with the owner. In the end, 48 hours later we had a new site and we were able to drive the stakes.”

“The tour manager and tour crew were already there so my team, the construction team and the tour staff had to work together to [evacuate] and find another place, and do all the marking and stake driving (at the new site) as quickly as possible. So [while] we were removing anchor plates and stakes we were driving those same plates a few hours later in the new site. It was heroic but we had help from the local people there and we made it happen.”

There are, of course, two parts to a city visit. We've talked at length about what happens to a site before the circus comes to town, but what about after the circus leaves? How long it takes to return a site to its former condition varies. “Once the last stake has been removed (from the old site), it takes a few days to fill the holes. If we just had to remove a fence and fill holes it takes a few days. If we have to landscape and reinstall lamps and such it can take up to two or maybe three weeks. Sometimes we import a lot of filling material, and sometimes they tell us we can leave it because they now have a level area they can use for other events. Sometimes they ask us to remove everything. But a usual restoration takes three weeks. We do asphalt repairs, reinstall fencing, and remove all the trash. And usually that's about it.”

But hearing about what's involved in preparing a site for a Cirque show is only half the story. And so we scheduled a visit to a site in process, to check it out.

/// "ARE YOU STARTING A NEW CIRCUS?"

April 2006. An overcast Friday in the great Pacific Northwest. My wife LouAnna and I are heading across Washington state to visit her father. But before we venture across the Cascade Mountains we drive to Marymoor Park in Redmond, where we have an appointment with the pre-set-up crew for Varekai. We have both arranged to work in the tents for the run of the show, so we will learn the route by heart in the next few weeks. When we arrive it's about 11 o'clock. The park is quiet today; most of the soccer and baseball fields won't be busy until tomorrow. We eventually reach the site about $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way into the park. But there is none of the excitement we would normally feel, as there is no tent here. Yet.



There are a few flatbed trucks parked outside the perimeter fence, but other than that the area feels – lonely. We walk up to the gate. The site looks huge, a grand expanse of level black asphalt, newly laid, with no marks or holes. The opposite end seems far away. Meanwhile, geese honk as they fly overhead, heading north into Canada for the spring breeding season. On the site are a few men, dwarfed by the expanse of blackness on which they stand. As we scan the blacktop we can see occasional marks,

painted lines, an occasional metal bracket. Construction supplies lie here and there. A Bobcat (a small mini-bulldozer) putters around in the background.

Announcing our presence, we are introduced to Mario Tomassini, Site Analysis Supervisor, Touring Shows Division, Cirque du Soleil. It is he who greets us with, "Are you starting a new circus?" One of his co-workers is Serge Savard. Both are from Montréal. (Mario-left, Serge-right) Mario has been here for two days, Serge flew in yesterday. Another person, Daniel, is the site construction manager in charge of finding a local contractor to make any major structural changes to the site.



Mario started with Cirque as a Site Supervisor eight years ago, coming from the construction industry. "At first I spent all of my time on the road because I was on tour. Now it's like a third of the time.

It's really nice, two thirds of my time is in Montréal getting a real life. (Laughs) But it's a fun life. When we travel we travel to beautiful cities; sometimes in the winter you leave from Montréal where it's -28 Celsius (18 degrees below zero Fahrenheit) and you're going to Miami or Los Angeles."

Serge has been with Cirque for four years. He worked the Saltimbanco and Alegria tours, a jack of all trades. He stands in the center of the site with a machine called **Total Station** and directs the markings that appear on the asphalt. Mario tells us about his crew. "Four of us came from Montréal. And we have two guys who came from Quidam which is currently tearing down in Long Beach; they were available so they flew in. Sometimes our entire crew does not come from Montréal. We have Americans working for us who fly from their hometown. We have some Australians, some from New Zealand, Europe, Germans, a lot of Spanish."

"The first part of our job is to find a site we will accept," Mario explains. "Sometimes it's hard to find a site. Topographically Seattle is very hard; we need a flat area so it's not that easy. We need about 600' x 300'. But it could be an odd shape and we can design the site around it."

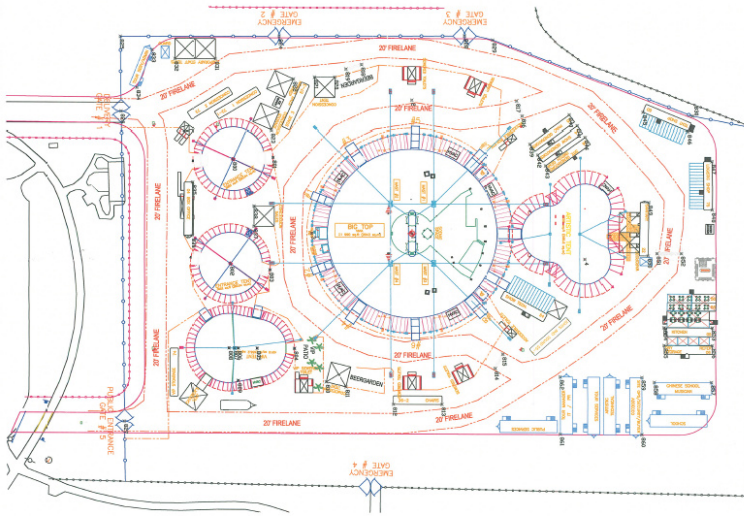


"This asphalt is brand new and it's the first time we are using it. We did a survey [of the site] before when the blacktop was not here. Once the blacktop was laid we did another reading and sent it to the [Varekai] technical department. Some of the equipment [we use] can be adjusted before it [arrives]. Sometimes the grade is not up to our standard, such as when it's too steep, so they ask us to correct it. Then when the guy with the asphalt is here we ask him to fill in a bit before the tour shows up."

"Once we find the site we do a reading with a special machine, that's over there." He gestures at the Total Station in the center of the asphalt. "It takes readings like a photograph of every obstacle on the landscape. We take topographic measurements that we bring into AutoCAD. And then we try to lay out the circus village on the measurements of the site. We try to stay away from obstacles, [or] things we have to move, such as lamp posts. [Because] everything needs to be removed and put back."

"Once we design the site we send it to the shows Tour Manager who distributes the plan to everybody on tour, so if anybody's concerned about anything they can comment. For example, if the box office didn't think that their operation would be possible in that setting, it would be changed. So it's a process."

/// X MARKS THE STAKE



Once the layout has been approved they then come up with a marking plan. Mario shows us a layout on a color 8.5" x 11" piece of paper. It is a CAD drawing of the entire "city." It shows the location of the support trailers and kitchen (in blue). Blue lines also identify the cables that will hold the tent masts in place. The huge stomach of the main tent sits like a Buddha in the center. The artistic,

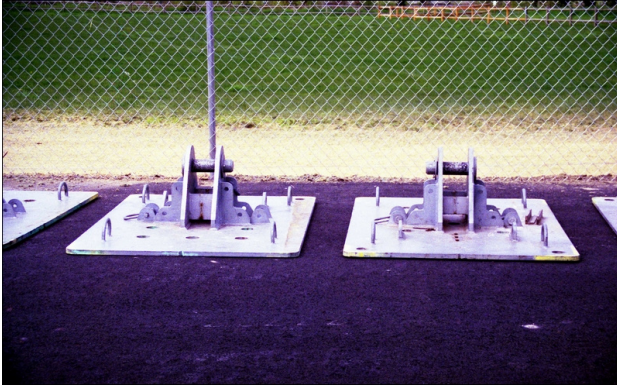
concessions and VIP tent are outlined in red. Everything is marked here – the box office, toilets, even the fake palm trees in the VIP Patio. And it is all positioned very, very precisely.

Mario points to the drawing. "We have so much information in CAD. This is just one layer and is simplified and is very precise. We know the position of each stake and we know if it's going to conflict with anything underground - telecom, water, electricity, anything".

"We redraw [this] in full-scale, exactly what you see on the map, on asphalt. We use the Total Station." He again gestures to the center of the site, as Serge peers through one end of the instrument on the tripod as the marking process continues. "There are several models but we use this one when we are scouting sites. For marking it gives us the angles. Yesterday I came and located the center of the big top which is also the center of the site. This line here (pointing to a line on the asphalt) is the main axis of the site. Stage right is 0° for us and for all the markings."

"We set up in the center (of the site) and record a zero angle." He pokes at a line on the drawing. "Then we go with our list. All we need to locate anything is an angle. Let's say we need to put a stake at 10 degrees 20 minutes 54 seconds. We use the angle relative to the main axis and we go clockwise. Then we need a distance. When you have a degree and a distance you have a very precise position. And this is very very precise, we're talking about millimeters."

He points again at markings on the ground indicating where the concessions tents and the main tent will be placed. A smaller white circle is circumferenced by a blue line. "The blue line is the stake line. The white line is the outline of the tent."



Today they will lay down marks for the front of house, which includes the concessions tents. Tomorrow they will continue, marking the artistic tent, kitchen and most of the other onsite trailers. “The point of marking everything is to give everybody a reference. A lot of points that you see here are not [necessarily] for one person, it could be for several people.”

Mario introduces us to various configurations of the heavy metal plates that will be fastened to the asphalt. The plates don’t look that heavy just sitting there, but considering the metal used is one inch thick it’s no surprise they weigh several hundred pounds each. They all have holes through which stakes are pounded to fasten the plate to the asphalt. Some are used for the big top, others for the concession, artistic and VIP tents. He also shows us small metal plates that are only one-quarter inch thick, these are used as shims underneath the mast poles to help meet its 10cm (about four inches) tolerance.

We walk across the site, as he shows us how the plates are placed. “Each position is located by an angle and distance according to the center of the big top and [the zero degree] axis. Each position has a nail which has a name on a tag. And the tag has all the coordinates, because we need to double-check, sometimes it’s wrong. So this one for example, it’s called the “45 plate.” You see on the tag it’s got the angle and the distance. If this one’s off by even just a bit it throws the rest of the plate off. So if we suspect that one of the nails is off we get a tape and check the distance to make sure it is the same as the distance written on the tag. It’s a way of double-checking everything we do. And it’s idiot proof, because sometimes we’re idiots. (Laughs) Everybody has a chance to check so they don’t call me and say, ‘Hey Mario what’s happening?’ They know, and the job gets done easily.”



He points to other lines on the ground. “These point out underground utilities. We marked those yesterday. We imported them into our drawing and we know right away where it’s going to conflict.” As if on cue to illustrate his point, the Bobcat driver approaches and speaks to Mario in French. They have a short conversation and Mario walks behind the Bobcat as it putters to a location on the site. There is an underground utility near where one of the stakes is to be pounded. Mario discusses the situation with the crew.

“So we know in this case there is a conflict.” He points to a place on the ground where one color of lines overlaps another. “What you see is he is about to mark one stake. It's very close to the line. We have this in CAD, so we can see that we might have a problem with this utility here. So before the guy starts to pound the stake in we know we're close to this problem area. We've put a little buffer in, but the stake seems to conflict with the bumper so we are going to put [the stake] in at an angle so that it will avoid the pipe. So with this stake we might cheat, there are plenty of stakes that we can cheat with. Some, [like] tent plates, we cannot cheat.”



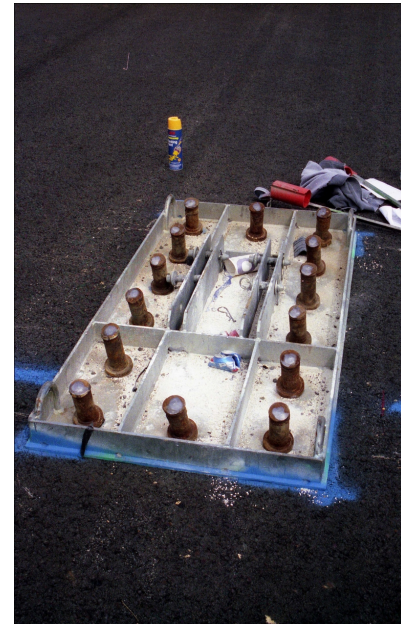
Nearby we spy a set of stakes resting in a case. The number of stakes used on a site varies from 300 to 1200 depending on the tour and setup conditions. The stakes are 5 feet long, 2 inches in diameter and weigh 20-25 pounds each. Even though they are sitting quietly they look substantial and heavy. I ask to lift one and LouAnna laughs. “Can you?” It takes most of my palm to wrap around it. It has a sizable heft, feeling like 40 pounds but actually just 25. “At the beginning of the day it feels like 40 pounds,” Mario quips, “but by the end of the day it feels more like 150!”

We stand in front of one of the plates that will hold a wire that connects to one of the masts. There are 14 stakes bolting this one into the ground. “Each stake is designed to hold one ton,” says Mario. “But that’s a conservative estimate. In reality it holds much more, but for easy calculation it's one to 1 1/2 tons.” He points to a nearby wire, about 2 inches thick, several smaller metal strands wrapped together. “This is the big top guy wire, it goes (in the center of the plate) and connects to the mast and helps hold up the tent.”

The mast plates are designed to hold 16 tons but are tested to 20. “We have eight of these, they'll be tested tomorrow. For Washington State we have an engineer coming from California with a big truck that will pull 17 to 20 tons against it. We have some blocks that will sit on top of it and the truck will try and rip it off. We [measure] any displacement of the plate, and it needs to pass. The main anchors are always tested. Because if there is ever a tornado or severe weather we know that it will hold.”

At first glance that might seem overrated. But the tent has lots of surface area and odd shapes, and they want to make sure it will stand up to a big storm or wind (up to 150km). Does it ever not hold? "Never. No chance. When we put 5000 pounds of blocks on top, with the capacity of the stakes, plus the weight on top - forget it. Sometimes we break the towing machine!" LouAnna says, "I feel so much better now."

When they're putting in the first stake for a plate how do they keep the plate from moving with all the movement from the hydraulic jackhammering? "It will move a bit, but the other person working with the Bobcat will kick the plate back into place. How critical the plate is, such as for a mast or other critical component or something somebody else will use as a reference will determine how critical we must be."



"So they just hammer the stakes into the ground?" LouAnna asks. "Yes with this machine," Mario replies, pointing to the Bobcat. "That would be really hard to do the old-fashioned way," LouAnna suggests. "Sometimes we do it that way," Mario responds. "Sometimes if we forget to put nails in a spot and we no longer have access to the Bobcat we hammer them in by hand."



He points to the hydraulic hammer on the end of the Bobcat, on which is fitted a special head that looks like a large inverted metal golf tee. "This is the hammer and we have a special mold which you cannot buy or rent." The head of the stake fits in the mold and then is pounded by the hydraulics of the hammer attached to the Bobcat. "We have two of them. Sometimes the ground can be very hard and it might take 15 minutes to pound a stake in. With 1200 stakes to pound in you can't spend 15 minutes on each one so we use the second." He takes us to the back of the site, where there sits a huge metal industrial toolbox situated on the back end of a flatbed. We carefully walk up the narrow ramp and peer in. The toolbox contains everything they will need to do the job while they are here.

Lying on the flatbed is a stake mold broken in two by a lightning bolt of a cut. It will cost \$500 to replace.

The Bobcat begins to hammer another stake. Even from where we stand at the other end of the site it makes a raucous deafening jackhammer sound. But as we watch the stake is swiftly driven into the asphalt. We imagine that sound multiplied by 1200 over the course of a few days and it makes us shiver. "I have the ears of an old man," Mario laments.

/// TODAY AND TOMORROW

The amount of activity and number of people on the site vary day by day. “Yesterday we were just two people marking the site. Today there are six of us doing more marking and pounding of the stakes. We’ll continue pounding stakes until almost the end [of the job]. But today we’re a bit ahead.”

Mario shows us a schedule of deliveries to the site by vendors of supplies and materials. “It’s not very elaborate,” he says. “A utility locator marked everything yesterday. And we marked the big top center and did a show level. We are supposed to receive cement blocks today.” Other deliveries noted on the list are for trailers, electricity and water connections. “Tomorrow we have load tests. Usually we do our own tests but because we’re in Washington (or Oregon or California) we have to have someone else do the testing.”



“The asphalt guys will also be here tomorrow and will build troughs and ramps. We have wire bridges to protect the wires that must be done before the tour comes in.” To avoid patrons or forklifts walking over or damaging the web of power cables that snake across the site they build small ramps through which the cables pass. Asphalt curbs are also built around the perimeter of the tents to keep out rainwater.

He shows us another checklist of all the things that must be done while they are on the site. “It’s not a schedule; it’s just a checklist to make sure that everything has been done. Did we forget the asphalt curb? No we got the asphalt curb.” He picks off selected others from the list, his voice trailing off. “Bleacher lines, center line... [We’ll be finished] around Monday the 24th. Today is Friday the 21st. So we’ll be working through the weekend. Varekai will be here from Portland on Wednesday the 26th.”

As we wrapped up our visit to the blacktop on which the Varekai tent would settle just one week later, Mario reflected on how his job has changed. “I started eight years ago and it wasn’t like this [back then], it was more by eye. We had gentlemen from the old school. They were very good; they had the eye to do the job. But we started to have more shows and those guys were not available for all the shows. So we [had] to find a new way. Now we have a folder that I can give to the person onsite. I could give it to you, I could explain the system in one or two hours and you could mark the site.”

Now that we have witnessed the otherwise unseen time and effort that goes into developing a site for a Cirque big top it gives us greater appreciation for all the preparation that must take place before the show can premiere in a new town, or before the audience sets foot onto the site on the way to their seats, or before the artists step foot onto the stage.

Meanwhile the Bobcat's stuttering thud reminds us of the work still to be done as it pounds another stake into the ground like butter.

My sincere thanks go to: Mr. Chalifour, Mr's Tomassini and Savard for so graciously spending time with us, especially in the midst of such a busy day, Chantal Côte, Corporate PR Manager, and my wife LouAnna for putting up with my sometimes obsessive hobby.



From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



BILL ROSEMANN & MARIE-HELENE GAGNON
KÀ Comic Book Editor & KÀ Artistic Director

« A KÀ-smic KÀ-mic KÀ-nversation »

Keith Johnson, 2012

BILL ROSEMANN

The KÀ by Cirque du Soleil #1 comic book is a new creative endeavor for Cirque, an attempt to expand its show properties into different mediums. Following on their appearance at the 2011 San Diego Comic Con (where they performed the show's vertigo-inducing battle scene on a local building wall), the comic takes the cinematic story and puts it into graphic form for 20 full-color pages.

KÀ by Cirque du Soleil #1 comes from the Custom Edition division of Marvel Comics (now owned by Disney). Rather than just developing ideas generated inside Marvel, Custom Editions allows outside companies who wish to develop (and pay for) comic book projects that feature their products to contract with Marvel Custom Editions, which creates comic book content specific to the client company's needs, sometimes including Marvel characters in the storylines.



“Since the House of Ideas, like Wolverine, is the best there is at what we do, we often work with other companies to create stories and art in the Mighty Marvel Manner to help them connect in new and exciting ways with their audience. ... For Marvel, not only is custom publishing a strong revenue stream, but it also helps us introduce our characters and creators to a gigantic audience. The print and online exposure for many custom projects is often higher than the combined print runs of our top ten titles, while the distribution opportunities deliver them far outside traditional channels. Many readers' first Marvel experience is through custom comics, which is why — in addition to wanting to provide great stories for our partners — we're dedicated to making every custom comic as impressive and entertaining as our best books.”

In this instance Marvel was paid by Cirque to create a 20-page comic book depicting the first 10 minutes of the show, with Cirque handling publicity and distribution.. The talented artists includes writer Bryan J.L. Glass, artist Wellinton Alves, colorist Jean-Francois Beaulieu and cover artist Michael Del Mundo.

Fascination! Newsletter had the exclusive opportunity to have an email conversation with Bill Rosemann, editor of the KÀ Comic, about its development. Mr. Rosemann first started working for Marvel in 1993 at Marvel Age magazine, and later became known online as “Your Man @ Marvel.” He has been an editor at Marvel for the past six years.

Q. How did the KÀ comic project come about?

For a number of years now, our friends at Cirque du Soleil have aimed at extending their creative talent to other spheres of activity. It is within that context that Cirque approached Marvel for the creation of an all-new KÀ comic book. From there the creative excitement ignited, and months later we had our first comic! Our adaptation is of the actual performance as seen on the KÀ stage in Las Vegas. In fact, it’s an adaptation of a specific performance that I was lucky enough to attend earlier in the year. Aside from the narration, we cannot add elements, but hopefully we can capture the essence of the passion and energy that the performers unleashed on that specific night. The great people at Cirque worked hand-in-hand with us on every detail of every stage of the creative process. In fact, our wonderful friends at Cirque supplied an amazing amount of reference so that our creators could capture every nuance of the current artists, from their faces to their make-up to their costumes. From outline to page layouts to pencils to colors to lettering, we all scrutinized and discussed every line on every page.

Q. What qualities of the comic artists made them a good fit for this project?

Writer Bryan J.L. Glass, artist Wellinton Alves, colorist Jean-Francois Beaulieu and cover artist Michael Del Mundo each have theatrical instincts mixed with that Mighty Marvel Magic. They each deliver that perfect combination of drama, humor, passion and action that allow them to bring KÀ so perfectly to this new medium.

Q. How long does it take to create an issue? Can you describe the steps in the process?

A traditional comic book takes approximately 6 to 8 weeks to go from idea to printed or digital form, but in this case we took the extra time we needed to get everything perfect. The steps in the process are: Discussing the story, casting the creators, writing the outline, writing the script, penciling the story and then inking, coloring and lettering each page. Also there was a similar process to create our beautiful cover by Michael Del Mundo. Throw in numerous stages of reviewing the content, requesting updates, then approving the final stages and—presto!—you have a comic book!

Q. What does a comic book “script” look like? Is it like a movie script?

Yes, very much so. A comic book script breaks the action down page-by-page, describing the single moment of action that occurs in each panel on the page. A comic book script also supplies the text (for example, dialogue or captions), so the artist knows both how much room to leave for this and also the emotions of the characters at that moment.

Q. The issue has no character dialog, only narration. Can you talk about that as an artistic direction?

It was all part of our efforts to best adapt the actual performance. Since there was no dialogue spoken by the artists, we felt narrative captions would best supply the needed information and remain most true to the performance.

Q. How did the storm scene come to be chosen as the end of Issue One?

A determined Prince swept off to uncertainty...a valiant Princess clinging for her life to a sinking ship in storm-tossed waters...can you think of a better cliff-hanger?

Q. What has been the feedback you've received about the first issue?

So far, the reaction has been very positive, which I attribute to the great work of our creators!

Q. This comic is available for viewing online. It's how I read it, since the distribution of physical copies is pretty limited. That's like giving the content away for free, though you can't print it. How has the digital age affected comic book production and distribution? Has it had a creative impact?

Not only has digital distribution added to comic book readership--bringing our stories to those without easy access to a library, bookstore or direct market comic shop--but it has also inspired us all to rethink how we tell comic book stories.

* * *

KÀ by Cirque du Soleil #1 is Cirque's first foray into the comic book world. We don't know how successful it's been, but this might be telling - It has not yet been decided whether it was successful enough to merit paying for production of issue #2. Or how many issues it will take to tell the complete KÀ story.

MARIE-HELENE GAGNON

In addition to chatting with Bill Rosemann of Marvel about the creation of the KÀ by Cirque du Soleil #1 Comic Book, we also reached out to the staff of KÀ involved in providing Marvel with reference materials for insight into how the comic was created. In the process we learned more about the comic, its purpose, and the future of our heroes left clinging to life on the storm-tossed page.

We were put in touch with Marie-Helene Gagnon (Mah-RIE – el-ENN gan-YON) who had previously worked for Cirque du Soleil with Saltimbanco in 2000 and Quidam in 2002 as Artistic Coordinator, and has been KÀ's Artistic Director for the past six years. In her French-Canadian accent, this Montréal native explained how she first heard about the comic book project. "The first I knew about it was because of a joke.

We went to ComicCon (in July of 2011) and did the battlefield [scene] on the stadium wall (at PETCO Park in San Diego). When we came back I was talking to the cast [and somebody said], "So, when do we get the comic book?" (Laughs) And I said well, I don't know, though it would be great. But the PR person said we were looking into it."

"It was last spring 2012 when we started discussing it and it seemed that it was going to happen. On Valentine's Day the people from Marvel came to see the show. We had dinner and spoke about the show and about them. We talked about how many books [we would be creating], so we could pace it so it remained interesting and you don't get out of breath before you're done." It was determined the story could best be told over a total of four comic books. "That was just the first visit, at that time the deal was not yet made, there were probably a series of talks before that between [Cirque du Soleil] Marketing and Marvel that I'm not aware of."

But a deal was struck soon afterward. "We started working very shortly after they came. One of the things we did was give them a DVD copy of the show they saw (from the static camera that records each show nightly, not the multi-camera version of the show that appeared as a special on the German cable network ARTS). [I also] had to send them close-ups of makeups and costumes when we got closer to doing the coloring, so that it would be more accurate. [But mostly] what they had to work with was the DVD."

"We did an [outline] of what would appear in Books One, Two, Three and Four. Then we [discussed] the details of what would be in Book One. We got the suggested names of artists [to do the book] before the end of February. A writer from Marvel then sent us a script [describing] what would happen on [each page]. In March we started getting drawings, including the cover which was done by a different artist, and the inside pages. And from there we discussed some of the characters [who needed to be] tweaked a bit."

Marie-Helen's responsibility was to ensure the comic book properly represented the show. But it caused her a bit of concern. "This was the translation of the show into a comic book, and I'd never done a comic book [before]. I like comic books but was just a little worried about the translation; [going] from taking care of a show to seeing it on a comic book page and seeing if it's accurate, if it's representative, if it's still in line with the integrity [of the show]. I had a little bit of stage fright - how could I support and help them? Do I have a sharp eye for that? But they're specialists and knowledgeable in what they do."

"But you [start the process] and when you get page one, and then page two, you see the action really does [translate]. And the art we got from them was really beautiful, they're intelligent artists. You don't often have to tell them when something isn't working. I

might say to them that I was a bit surprised at this or that character, and bang – you’d quickly get another suggestion, and then [be able to] talk about what you meant. I’d say it was a really easy partnership because of their skill and knowledge.”

While there could be no changes to the storyline or characters as it was adapted to the page, so as to keep to the integrity of the show, they occasionally found a moment that needed enhancement. “At one point we were discussing how to have a “to be continued” moment in Book One, so that before we get to the last page we could have a teaser of what’s going to come later. And in the show we have this nanny [character] reading the twins fans. She’s telling them what she sees for them saying, “This is your future”. And so we did a page with fragments of the fans and images of upcoming combats or difficulties or situations, so that readers know after they read Book One what’s upcoming.”

Cirque and Marvel have made the comic available online at www.kacomicbook.com (the site also includes behind-the-scenes material). But it isn’t for sale. “We don’t sell it, it’s a marketing tool, we just gave it away. It is a diffusion tool. (A mechanism by which an idea or product can be accepted by the market.) It was [available] in some select comic book stores for comic book fans and all that, [but] it was given [away] with a purchase. [And] the cast got one comic book each as a present.”

Now that the first issue has been released, and sales aren’t a priority since it was created to be given away for free, are there any plans for Books Two, Three and Four? “It’s a discussion we are having. Ideally, the goal is to try to get Book Two [out] at ComicCon 2013. We’re having fun thinking of ideas, pacing our brains and minds for [the] structure of four books. The idea would be to have four books, and then have a book that combines the four. But I’ll probably be 276 years old when it happens!” (Laughs)

Providing input and references for the comic book was in addition to Marie-Helene’s other duties as KÀ artistic director, which already make for a busy day. “An average day is from around 2pm to 11:30-ish. I come to work and check all the emails from Montréal, either for casting or for changes or for meetings, and respond to those. We have trainings in the afternoon, and I usually go and watch a part of those or discuss with the head coach some of the things I would like to see worked on. Technical setup starts around 4:30, and I see some of the artistic people who have questions and we talk about the line-up for that day. In the evening I watch a show, do some paperwork, or have one-on-one discussions about things we’re working on.”

Cirque describes the position of Artistic Director in part as being responsible for nudging the show forward by leveraging the individual qualities of each artist, a description Marie-Helene agrees with. “There’s a responsibility to help the show grow. The job for us is to keep working on it, as much as we can we’re there to help it evolve and change. That being said, the original conceptors remain the ones who signed the show, and if we make changes they’re told, they’re shown, and they can always say yes they agree with [a change] or no they don’t.”

“The show department I work for is called “Show Quality and Integrity,” which means that I need to not change the show into what it is not. But it’s a collective work, and we have leeway. We’ve changed almost all the choreography in the show and put some new elements in.

We do a bunch of stuff but we know that the director Robert Lepage will always be aware of what we’re doing. He comes once every year or year and a half to look at the show and lets us know if he’s pleased, if he likes it or if there’s something he doesn’t like.”

Part of the attempt to help the show grow is in the changes both major and minor made as the years go by. Change on an individual level might come when, “You have a new casting and the new person’s makeup [needs to be] adjusted because it doesn’t look as good or [the costume] doesn’t fit as well. So we will work on it and make suggestions - request a costume change, request a makeup change. And sometimes the creator will say, ‘The next time I come and visit we’ll look into it.’ [On another show I worked on] the person I wanted to take one of the major roles was absolutely not in the profile. And we had a lot of discussion but finally it was agreed upon, because it was a good idea for the character.”

One “major” change that was announced by Cirque when it was implemented was changing the choreography of the battle scene. “It was a big change, yes. It’s not a major change – yes it ends up being that because of the choreography – but it’s in line with the original thought. Originally the choreography was very geometric, like figures. [We wanted] to find a way to put [new choreography] in while still having a battle. And if you remember from the early days [of the show] the Firefly character was doing the beginning of the attack. We wanted to have it be more the fight of the two twins, so we gave them their partners, twin brother with his jester and twin sister with the Firefly. But it’s in line with the idea of the show.”

“Is it a major change? It’s still KÀ. This is the one thing that is absolutely necessary. The idea is not necessarily to make it different. When you have a big deck to put up and the show to create it takes time to get to the fine tuning. But then later you can consider - hey, we could do it this way or we could add that character.” But sometimes just making it different makes it better. “For a team that does so many shows per year, a change that is just a change can be very good for the atmosphere. Everybody gets excited because we’re working on something. But we’re not going to do anything that’s different from the original creation of the piece.”

“The backup act is a very good example of things you can discover. You have your house troupe working on stuff and you can find a backup act within your own team that wasn’t [originally] in the show, and then you work on its integration. KÀ doesn’t have that because it has its full story and its acts, and does not have a backup act [as] on other shows.”

Reflecting on the growth of the show, Marie-Helene commented, “It’s funny because I’ve been with KÀ for six years now and I don’t see an act I haven’t worked on. And I think I’ve changed two-thirds of the cast.”

Despite all the challenges, it’s the variety (like occasionally being called upon to work on a comic book) that keeps her interested. “[My day] can go in all directions. The multiple facets of this type of work are so much fun. I can spend all afternoon in wardrobe [for example] when we’re discussing costumes or makeup. It’s a little bit of everything all the time but it’s great, I love it.”

NOTE: As part of CirqueWeek 2012, on December 6, KÀ will be presenting a discussion and overview of how the KÀ comic book was created and the thought process behind it, digging a little deeper, offering a closer look at some of the sketches and more.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



BOB & BILL
Composers – Amaluna

« Third Time's the Charm »

Keith Johnson, 2013

The release of the CD for the latest Cirque du Soleil touring tent show Amaluna (2012, Cirque du Soleil Musique CDSMCD-10046) marks the third time the production team of Bob & Bill (Guy Dubuc and Marc Lessard, www.bobandbill.net) have shepherded a Cirque du Soleil soundtrack. From production duties on Kooza (2008, CDS Musique CDSMCD-10028), they graduated to composing the music and producing the CD for Totem (2010, CDS Musique CDSMC-10034). And with Amaluna they again compose and produce. We had the chance to check back in with them around the time of the CDs release late last year.

The call to compose the music came, Marc explained, in the usual way. "As usual, we received a call to write the music for the show. This was more of a challenge this time, because Guy (Laliberté) had very specific demands for the music, he wanted us to go somewhere else and push our barriers. So that was a big challenge for us." Guy added, "And the timing was very good for us, in that we have been composing in a more rock direction lately. So we were already there creatively." That they were already composing in a "rock place" was fortuitous, as they were only given four months notice.

From other conversations with Cirque composers we know that René Dupéré comes to a project with several melodies already in his head while Benoit Jutras won't write a note of music until he sees the act. When it comes to composing for Bob & Bill, "Sometimes we start from scratch," says Guy. Marc followed on, "We had different approaches, because sometimes we would write the number first. Sometimes we would start from a picture or just an idea, of course after that we have to put music to the number. We have different ways of writing music. Sometimes it's just a color we find that we show to the producers. And when we know we're going in the right direction then we start putting music to the number." And composing involves consistent input from the director and production team. "If we have an idea, whether it's for (Amaluna director) Diane (Paulus) or (Totem director) Robert (Lepage), we can take it to them for feedback. We are very close to the producers - you have to be when you write music." "And we use feedback from them as well," Guy said. "They were here a lot in our studio to listen to music. They would give their input and we would go back and rework it."

The directive for the show was to showcase women, and use a more rock-influenced style of music. It also involved finding and auditioning an all-women band, which fortunately wasn't much of a challenge. "During the casting they showed us so many good musicians from all over the world," Marc commented. "There were a lot of really good musicians we were able to find." The assembled band was immediately able to have an effect, according to Guy. "Without taking it in a completely different direction, they took ownership of the music. They added their energy to it. They really respected the writing, adding their energy. [It] really turned out to be a blessing."

The band that appears on the CD (and in the show) includes:

- Jenifer Aubry – Vocals
- Marie-Michelle Faber – Hoops performer, vocals on "Hope"
- Mireille Marchal – Percussion
- Julie McInnes – Prospera, vocals, cello, sax
- Teresa Morini – Bass
- Didi Negron – Drums
- Angie Swan – Guitars
- Rachael Wood – Guitars
-



/// MAKING PROGRESS(IVE)

According to Marc, they found out they would be producing the CD soon after getting the composing assignment, in January or February, which meant they could be more prepared. "With Amaluna we knew we were going to do the CD early on and were more organized in our sessions [this time]. [With] Totem we'd composed the music, but we also had a number of [instrumental] tracks [already pre-recorded]."

Once again, Cirque's Musical Director Alain Vinet would prove to be a close collaborator, co-producing the album with the pair. "Since we are producers we [believed] that Alain would give us the chance to produce the album again, so we worked as if we were going to do [the CD]. We produced [the CD] with Alain Vinet again, and we knew that Alain would do certain stuff and we would do certain stuff. So it was a bit easier, more organized." Added Guy, "[We were] more prepared because while we were [creating] the show we knew we were going to do the CD afterward."

The Amaluna CD follows the Totem formula, taking the sound and arrangements from the show and using the creation musicians, a conscious decision according to Guy. "Actually the CD is really close to the show, like Totem. We used the creation musicians like we did with Totem. And it's an all-girl band and we wanted that to shine through on the CD. We took the same approach because for us it was really important that the artists like their music and the CD. And Alain Vinet did some remixing and rearranging of the songs as well. He has another point of view, that's why we really enjoyed working with him."

One distinction to this CD is the use of English lyrics on the songs “All Come Together,” “Hope,” “Run,” and “Burn Me Up.” In an interesting twist, the version of “All Come Together” on the Alain Vinet-produced Cirque Musique Compilation CD “Le Best of, Volume Two” (2012, CDS Musique CDSMCD-10045), where the track is titled, “Magic Ceremony One,” is a Cirquish-language version of “All Come Together.” “The idea was to have both versions,” Guy explained. “Alain wanted the Cirquish version, like it is in the show, for his Le Best of Two album. For the [Amaluna] CD the idea was to try and do some English lyrics. It doesn't make a huge difference; it's only a few songs. But the show is only [sung in] the Cirquish language.”

When complimented on the rock-ish direction of the CD (a direction they are justly proud of), Guy is quick to point out, “That was the approach we took, that was the idea. It was [important to] Guy Laliberté, too. He pushed us a lot to go in that direction.” Alain Vinet also notes in the album liner that the album was, “created in the spirit of a musical voyage from start to finish, the same approach as some of the great progressive rock albums.” “[Sometimes] we were switching, going from a progressive style of music to changing the mood, or changing tempo from one song to another,” Marc elaborated. “[But] not doing 8-minute songs like Pink Floyd or Genesis though.” “It's a way of working on things more than thinking of a specific style,” added Guy. “[And] Alain was a big part of it, assembling everything to make the voyage happen.”

Marc talked about when the CD was recorded. “It was done right away after the premiere of the show, with the band in the studio. It took about two weeks. We couldn't do it every day - the girls had the show going on - so we were doing a few days a week for two or three weeks in May and June.” They used Studio Fast Forward for some of the sessions, with others recorded at Studio Bob & Bill, all in Montréal. All of the musicians played together on all of the tracks. “We wanted the band to all play together, like a real band, a good jam. [And] Everything we recorded is there this time. The clown act is also there as part of the ending of two songs; at the end of “Run” there is one part, and at the end of “Running On The Edge” there is a sax part of the clown act.”

The sessions also involved a man(!), Sebastien Laurendeau, as bandleader. He had been called in to play in the show when original bandleader & keyboard player Janine de Lorenzo (who has since returned) was out with an injury occurring outside of the performances. “He was the leader,” said Marc. “On the album he directed all the sessions in the studio. During the show the girls are always following his call.”

The CD features several appearances on their acts songs from the artists who perform the manipulation, juggling, and uneven bars acts. This was quite intentional, per Marc. “[These] are so much their songs that we wanted them to be part of the CD. Which is a really cool thing for them too, it's really nice for them to have their voices on the CD.” Another of the guests is Aerial Hoop artist Marie-Michelle Faber who sings background vocals on several tracks, has a part at the end of the opening track, “All Come Together,” and sings the main vocal on her acts song, “Hope,” as she also does in the show.

We were curious as to what “Additional Recordings” Productions Pierre De Lune, Jean-François Côté and Yves Drolet supplied. It turns out they produced various sounds, tracks, and some sequencing for the show. And we also had to ask if the duo appeared anywhere on the Amaluna CD (they are present throughout the Totem & Kooza CDs). “Not at all,” Guy initially claimed. “Because it was a [requirement] from Guy to only utilize the women of the show.” It was when we asked about the sources of the male yelling on the track, “Fly Around,” that the truth came out. “The men are us, and the girls are from the show.” Ah-ha – so they are there! “Oh my God - you caught us! (Laughter) But in that context it's like a sound effect from the show.”

/// THE FUTURE, VISIBLE

When not involved in composing for Cirque tent shows, the duo is also involved in another Cirque-related project, Les Chemins Invisibles, the one-hour summer show produced by Cirque for Québec City. Marc was happy to announce, “As a matter of fact we’re doing the next chapter of Les Chemins Invisibles for this year. We just started yesterday, that's what we're working on right now. It's the same concept as a Cirque show, we have a producer and we need to write one hour of music. It's a nice show, too.” “It's a nice challenge, too,” added Guy.

All this composing for hire has left little time to work on Bob & Bill-specific projects, including the follow-up to their first album, “Crime Report”. “We're still working on it!” laughed Guy. “We haven't had much time. When you have a big show like Amaluna there isn't much time to work on much else. So we had to put it on ice for a while, but it's still there.”

As we concluded our time together, we asked the duo what they would like people to know about them. Marc answered, “We'd like people to know about us and what we are doing,” which this article certainly hopes to do! With their flexibility, willingness to compose quickly and to deadline, and experience with a variety of styles this won't be the last you hear from Bob & Bill!

Our Amaluna-focus continues next issue, when we have a follow-up interview with Cirque Musical Director and Amaluna CD co-producer Alain Vinet. Several interesting revelations to be had – next month!

My sincere thanks go to: Mr's. Dubuc and Lessard for so graciously spending time with us, Chantal Côte, Corporate PR Manager, And my wife LouAnna for putting up with my sometimes obsessive hobby.

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Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



ALAIN VINET
Director of Cirque Musique

« Facilitating the Journey »

Keith Johnson, 2013

At the conclusion of our interview with the Amaluna CD composing/production team of Bob & Bill (Guy Dubuk and Marc Lessard), they suggested a conversation with Cirque du Soleil Musical Director Alain Vinet would shed more light on the production of the Amaluna CD, since he co-produced with the team. What a great idea! So in December, 2012, we contacted him and talked again. What started as a conversation about the Amaluna CD and the recent compilation, "Le Best of 2," that he also produced, also delved into many other topics in a wide-ranging discussion.

Devoted Cirque music fans might have noticed that the Amaluna CD, as well as the CD for Totem, appeared for sale very quickly, a span of about 7 months from premiere date. This is a change from previous Cirque CD's, which have appeared approximately a year after premiere. The thinking behind this was that shows had to go through the "fixation" process during the first few months of its life – where music might change, some pieces might be discarded or new pieces written – before the CD could properly reflect the music of the show going forward. But the speed with which the team worked and satisfaction with the music meant this didn't apply to Amaluna. "I credit that to Bob and Bill, they work really, really fast," explained Mr. Vinet. "For Amaluna they only had 4 1/2 months to compose the whole show. And by [premiere] the band was already playing everything; the numbers, the transitions, everything. So they work incredibly fast. In this case we were able to get a "GO" to record the CD early on because Guy was so happy with the music. That's why we got it out in a little under a year."

Only 4 1/2 months to compose the show, why so short a time? "Originally it was a woman composer, but at one point she was not getting where Guy wanted her to be. And we only had 4 1/2 months to go and we knew Mark and Guy could make the deadline. And to start [over] with somebody that doesn't know us four months before premiere, it would not have worked."

That there was originally a female composer for Amaluna was previously unknown to us, though it makes sense since it is a female-centric show and a female composer would be a natural choice.

But it isn't the first time a composer has been replaced during creation, especially late in the process. Cirque fans might be aware that long-time Cirque composer Benoit Jutras (who discussed his replacement in our previous interview) was replaced during the creation process for KÀ by another long-time Cirque composer René Dupéré (who discussed his assignment on KÀ in our interview). When we commented to Mr. Vinet that Amaluna faced a similar situation he laughed and said, "Yes, definitely!"

Creation of any CD starts not in the recording studio but in an Executive Producers office, in this case the offices of Executive Producers Jacque Methe and Francois Bergeron. "They are basically [in charge] of the production of CDs. They are the ones that "produce" it in the typical sense of the word, which means they control the money so we can produce the CD. In French "produceur" means exactly that, the person that handles the budget and all that. Stephan is Jacque's assistant, his right-hand man. If Jacque's too busy on too many projects Stephan takes over and gives him an account."

"In the case of the Amaluna CD I'm not only Cirque's Musical Director but I'm also a Co-Producer." And his role included deep involvement in the arrangement of the music on the CD. "In the show there are some themes that are recurrent. What I decided to do was combine those themes together so that we could have the same scene but go through different moods, kind of like a progressive rock album. [So] you can have a song that first starts in a certain tempo and goes up and goes down, like a journey."

Though the three work together as a team, was it mostly Bob & Bill handling the recording and Alain Vinet handling the mixing? "Kind of," replies Mr. Vinet. "Because they took a break in early July. That's when I took over, [when] we were mixing. But I did spend quite a few sessions with them combining the songs and doing the editing work. And sitting down with them and discussing - okay, this goes here, that goes there. And once they did the re-work I [would come] back and listen and chop a couple of bars here and there just to make it more coherent, because in some cases they were big pieces. We were joining two or three pieces together from different parts of the show that each last 5-6-8 minutes apiece. So we had to make something shorter [that] still made sense."

"So I spent quite a bit of time with Mark and Guy (Bob and Bill) [early on]. Then when they left I spent two weeks with Rob Heaney, our mixing engineer in the mixing studio. And then I left and they came back and put the finishing touches on. And I was able to give comments on the mixes. We did the mastering and then had to go back and make some corrections to the mix. But we had a short time to produce it, because we wanted to get the CD ready for the Vancouver premiere which was in late November, 2012. So I spent a lot of time and put a lot of myself into production of the record."

The production had to be quick to meet the deadline of having the CD available for sale when Amaluna opened in Vancouver, BC on November 22nd. "Since they saw that we could actually do it and pull it off, they said let's do it for Vancouver. So right after the show premiered Mark and Guy started work on the album, doing all the recordings while the band was in Montréal, so we saved a lot of money right there."

It was fresh in their minds and we just basically recorded the same structure as the show. And then we edited [based on] that.”

Bob & Bills’ previous production of the Totem CD involved recording themselves as well as the show musicians and then choosing which version or track worked best. That wasn’t the case this time. “Guy (Laliberté) had insisted that the musicians be part of the CD. Because you know how Mark is a drummer and Guy plays the keyboards, they had a lot of stuff recorded that we could have used. But since Guy insisted that he really wanted to have the feel of the band, we recorded the band all together so we could get that feel of everyone in the same room playing - a band feeling - and did overdubs over that. The takes are amazing, the basic tracks already sounded good after recording.”

And the CD really rocks, with a musical landscape far different from the one the same composers created for Totem. But this was by design. “It was Guy’s wish for Totem to have more of a world feel, but for Amaluna he wanted something that rocked. The fact that it’s an all-girl band, I really wanted to get the raunchiness out of the band. We were lucky because the band, all the girls, were seasoned musicians. They knew their stuff right away. We could have asked them to wait and let them digest the show a little bit more but the groove was already there so we just went for it.”

Recording the show band early in the show’s run, in Montréal, saved money as well as time. But with them also committed to the show (and its 7-to-10-shows-a-week schedule), was it difficult to schedule them for recording? “It’s not hard to get them; it’s difficult to work around their schedules. More and more when they have dark days they want to take a break. So [we recorded for] one or two sessions on days when they only had one show. When they have to play two or three shows it’s tough to get them into sessions, so in that sense it’s a little bit harder. But we have somebody that schedules it and in the end it all works.”

One of the nice touches to the CD are the cameo appearances by Cirque show artists on the tracks that feature their acts music. But it’s not surprising. “If you look at our track record, especially with Mark and Guy, remember they produced the Kooza CD and had one of the clowns come in and do some bits. We can’t do it with everybody, but (for example, juggler) Victor (Kee) being such a prominent character in the show and one of us for a while, it was fun to have him do the “Ouch!” thing (on “Mutation”) – it was funny.”

The CD also features four songs sung in English, including the lead-off track, “All Come Together,” which appears in a shortened Cirquish-language version as “Magic Ceremony 1” on the Le Best of 2 CD. “The idea behind that was that Guy [wanted] a couple of singles since Amaluna is a rock-influenced soundtrack. He asked [if we could] do a couple of songs in English so we did that. But since I had to produce the Le Best of 2 CD before we had the English vocal takes (for “All Come Together”), we used the Cirquish. And it’s not the same arrangement as the album – the intro is shorter. I would call it the “radio edit.” The Cirquish version is the version used in all the ads, because the show is in Cirquish.”

What are his favorites from the Amaluna CD? ““Enchanted Reunion” is one I like a lot because it goes through so many different phases but keeps the same theme. The title song, “All Come Together,” has always been one of my favorites; I like both the English and the Cirquish versions. I [also] really like “Hope,” it's [sung by] the actual artist that does the Cerceaux act (Marie-Michelle Faber).”

We had heard rumors that Amaluna was videotaped for DVD, which Mr. Vinet confirmed. “We are producing it right now. What happened, especially with Ovo, [was] the Cirque 3-D movie (“World’s Away”), [which] is an attempt to expand the marketplace. That whole deal happened at about the same time as Ovo was going to be filmed. Everybody was really excited with the 3-D aspect of it. So we wanted to do a test, [and that] became “World’s Away.”

“There was an attempt to look into filming both Ovo and Totem. But one of them had conflicts with the amount of space needed to put in the mobile recording equipment, and then it became difficult to schedule. So we don't know what the future of that will be because there has been a lot of structural change [going on] at Cirque right now. We're facing a new economic reality like everyone else, although we are doing it a few years late. At this point I couldn't tell you what's going to happen with Totem and Ovo. All I know is right now we have finally decided to make [the DVD of] Amaluna. Then we are going to see if they decide to go back and do Totem and Ovo.”

(ED. Note: To bring us up to date, we asked friend of Fascination!, Chantal Côte, Cirque Corporate PR Manager, about the current state of the Amaluna video. “The Amaluna DVD is not intended for home distribution yet. It is a TV special (one-hour show) that is starting to air on some networks in Canada, South America and Europe but not in the USA since we are still touring there. Eventually (no date yet) this TV special will be available on DVD under the big top only.” So we will be seeing the show on DVD at some point, but only in a truncated one-hour version. We had hoped it would be a record of the entirety of this beautiful show, but it sounds like that is not to be.)

However, the flirtation with 3-D does not carry over to the Amaluna DVD. “Yes, a standard DVD production – it’s really a budget consideration. A DVD, the way we used to make them, can cost about \$1 million to produce. But then we sell them for \$25. (ED: At that price point a Cirque DVD would require sales of more than 40,000 copies to recoup its budget). A CD may be budgeted at between \$100,000-\$200,000 and we will sell them for \$15. (ED: At that price point a CD would only need sales of a bit more than 13,300 copies to recoup its budget). Even with the \$10 difference [in purchase price] between those two products there is 5 to 10 times the expense. For me as a music guy it's cool because we only have the CD available for both (Ovo and Totem), so they sell well because we don't have competition from the DVD. And in both cases they are very representative of the shows. We tried to stay as close as possible to the shows.”

/// MORE OF THE BEST

The “Le Best of 2” compilation of Cirque music assembled by Mr. Vinet, is his second Cirque-music compilation after the “25” 2-CD set celebrating 25 years of Cirque du Soleil. We commented that it’s programmed almost like a waltz; a quick song followed by two slow songs, then a quick one followed by two more slow songs, etc. “When you produce a compilation like that you have to have some sort of trip, going up and down and up and down. My first idea for the CD was to follow in the footsteps of what had been done with the first one, keeping it more poetic. But then I got constrained because of the fan contest to pick one of the tracks, so we ended up with the KÀ song (“Pageant”) which was really intense. So I just couldn’t use all poetic songs while also having this one song that was very dynamic. So I remodeled it, trying to have at least one song per show. The first CD was not made with that in mind, and I thought that we missed out on some songs that should have been there that didn’t make the cut. So I tried to spread it out but keep the poetic feeling of the first one in mind. But 10 years later it’s a different product. The circumstances and the shows are different than what we had when we did the first one. I arrived [at] the Cirque organization around that time, [though] I’d been affiliated with them longer if you look at the parties (where he DJ’d) and all of that. So I [watched] it happen but I didn’t know as much about Cirque music as I know today.”

“I did maybe three passes at it. Because the first idea was trying to make it more of a chill poetic CD. And then they came to me with the contest idea so I had to change it. But this one I did pretty much on my own. It’s more of a compilation than a product that reflected a benchmark. “25” was about 25 years of Cirque so obviously I had to consult more with Guy and Gilles. On this one I just proposed a couple of things and was pretty much left on my own. The idea behind it [was] that you could press play and listen to the whole thing and it takes you on a journey.”

The “contest” Mr. Vinet refers to involved having fans vote on one song that would be included in the “Le Best of 2” CD. After all the votes were counted, the top five vote getters were as follows - note they were all “dynamic” selections except for “Pearl”:

“Omé Yo Kanoubé” from Totem – 187 votes – 3.6%

“Pearl” from Kooza – 287 votes – 6.1%

“Banquete” from Ovo – 886 votes – 18.8%

“Omé Kayo” from Totem - 1,354 votes – 28.8%

WINNER: “Pageant” from KÀ – 1,975 votes – 42.1%

Total votes 4,689 for the top five entries.

With KÀ’s “Pageant,” a faster, energetic, “dynamic” song needing to appear on the CD, that meant Mr. Vinet had to change his original plan to make it more of a “poetic” CD in the vein of “Le Best of 1.” “It was give and take. The rest of the compilation I was pretty much able to do what I wanted. Regardless that I wasn’t able to just do a strictly poetic CD, I still picked tracks that were melodic even if they were a little bit more dynamic than I originally intended, so there’s a nice balance.

I've been a DJ all my life, and I'm a strong believer in flow - peaks and valleys. And if you listen to a CD from one end to the other you [can feel] those peaks and those rests."

Two tracks here also appeared on the "25" compilation, "Piece of Heaven" from Zumanity and "Beyond the Clouds" from Wintuk. Other than that there are no repeats between "25" and Le Best of 1 or 2. The usage of the same songs, he explains, was out of necessity. "[With] Zumanity it's hard to pick a track because they either have screaming women or it's talking and not really a song. There are only so many nice melodies on the CD. Wintuk is the same thing; the songs were created to go with the action. I was trying to find something that suited the groove that I had already, so I landed on the same two songs."

We also noticed, in addition to the "radio edit" of "All Come Together" from Amaluna (appearing as "Magic Ceremony 1") that the Zaia track, "Noi," has a different intro than on the original CD. "That was because I wanted to eliminate the guy talking on the album [intro]. And I fixed the fade in, because if you listen to the album version the piano just fades in. So I used a piece of the piano that appeared on the original demo and pasted it in so that I have it as the intro."

Four songs, nearly a third of the album, are from shows that are now closed: Zaia, Zed, Wintuk and Iris. But this didn't enter into his thinking. "When I look at the way I did this, it's not necessarily promo material for shows; this is more like a musical look into the world of our shows. Because even though the shows don't exist anymore those songs still exist. And I use them for special events and other stuff. And it is a recap of what has been done since the first Le Best Of 1, so I didn't concern myself too much with the shows that were stopping. Plus I couldn't put anything from The Beatles Love or Viva Elvis or Michael Jackson Immortal on there since this was really a Cirque[-focused] thing. And since Zed and Zaia both have so many beautiful melodies it made sense to have songs from those shows on this CD."

Fortunately, while the closed shows physical CD's may go out of print, they may well live on forever on iTunes and other digital platforms. "I would believe so, because I don't believe Cirque would say no to money. Because we've paid for the show's production and that's another way we can recoup our money, because the show only lasted for three years instead of 15. So I imagine they would keep them up there."

/// OTHER WORLDS

While we had him on the line, we had to ask about other possible Cirque CD projects. Our first question was whether the film, "World's Away," might see a CD release? "No I don't think so; it's not in the plans. I suggested it, but it's so much money to do it [properly]. Cirque has to do things [properly], so every time we create a new master we have to pay everybody, which in this case is an orchestra. So 80 musicians would have to be paid. So it would cost an arm and a leg to produce that record."

The music to the film, as those who have seen it can attest, is beautifully arranged full-orchestra versions of several songs from the Cirque canon, as well as some original connecting material composed by Benoit Jutras. This is more than just using CD versions. “We went a little bit further actually. We used the old cues but with a full orchestra to replace the plastic strings. [Those] sounded really bad because they were made in the 90’s. And all the KÀ stuff is full orchestra.”

And what about Zarkana, which recently found its new permanent home at Aria in Las Vegas? “The album will be in Cirquish. Maybe some songs will be in English because that’s how they were originally created. Nick Littlemore, the composer, is producing the album right now. That CD should be out sometime in the spring.” (ED Note: The current plan is to release the CD towards the end of July.)

Zarkana has an interesting musical history, from the music produced to promote it to the language it was sung in. “When Zarkana started in New York we produced one [song as a] single (“Whenever”). We even did remixes that kind of got lost. First [the show] was in English, now that it’s in Las Vegas it’s in Cirquish. Right after it left New York the first year we changed it, bringing it back to more of a Cirque show and not a Broadway show. Because it first played at Radio City Music Hall on Broadway, that’s why we first did it in English. When it left New York we changed it to Cirquish.”

Cirque also released the Eric Serra-composed music to Criss Angel Believe, albeit with a red warning band on the cover specifying the music was from September 2008 through September 2009 (the “Believe 1.0” production). With the significant revamping Believe has undergone, essentially creating “Believe 2.0,” is any of the music on that CD in the show now? “Believe is a tricky one. Criss Angel is quite a peculiar character. From the beginning Criss wanted to work with his team, his music team and all that. Cirque came in with a composer, Eric Serra, who is the guy that does all the Luc Besson movies, more of a cinema-oriented composer. And [initially] the show was more of a cinematic show, but Criss wanted to do his TV show on stage. The new version works better for him, but it isn’t a Cirque show. Right now what I believe is happening is that he changed whatever music he wanted but [according to his contract] Eric Serra still gets paid for the music that he composed. Eric worked on it for a long time, to tell you the truth. But I know who Criss worked with on the new music, because Criss wanted to work with them in the first place. That’s pretty much what happened. The label that was on the CD – normally I don’t really touch that – was at Criss’s request, so people don’t mistake the music that’s on the CD, which is all Eric Serra’s compositions, with what’s in the show. He didn’t want to confuse people that see the show.”

The current trend of a quicker release of a CD show soundtrack was also followed by Epic for their release of Michael Jackson Immortal, and by RCA for their release of Viva Elvis. “Those I didn’t really handle. With Viva Elvis I was a little bit involved. But for Michael Jackson Immortal I didn’t touch anything; Sony has the rights to everything so it was easy to get it out quickly, because basically they were using the arrangements that Michael Antunes did for the show. All they had to do was a final mix and that was it.

It's not like they re-recorded all the musicians; everything was already there. I was surprised actually; it's a cool CD but like I said I didn't touch it at all."

"With Viva Elvis I was at least involved in the process, but then again the arrangements were already done. There was a little bit of editing as far as the length of some of the songs were concerned; since we don't have the images we don't need 8 min. songs."

/// FACING REALITY

The current economic climate, especially the deep recession of 2008, has finally been felt by Cirque du Soleil and has brought about several changes to Cirque's operations. Las Vegas was hit especially hard though some touring shows were able to weather the downturn better than others. We've heard about layoffs, shortening of shows by cutting acts, and other steps the company has taken to reduce costs. In addition, the closing of 6 shows during that period were keenly felt. When we talked back in December, Mr. Vinet discussed what was on the horizon for Cirque. "We will be [restructuring] a little bit starting in January. Since the middle of last year there's been a real hold on budgets. Because shows closed, we had a rough year. The last two or three years have been pretty rough. The higher you are the farther you fall."

"We wanted to see how hard we were going to get hit," explains Mr. Vinet when asked about Cirque's slow reaction to new economic realities. "And that's why we're a little bit late compared to everybody else. The rest of the company was able to swing it and we didn't want to rush. But then with six shows closing, all for different reasons - that's the worst. And now we are also closing Saltimbanco on December 30, and that's one less income coming in."

But Cirque continues to create and innovate, even in an atmosphere of belt-tightening. "You will see some announcements soon that Cirque is looking at other aspects, other media as well because we have such a big bank of creations and creators. And we're limited by the number of shows we can produce, especially with the world economy the way it is right now."

And Mr. Vinet himself continues to create and innovate, moving into greater job responsibilities within the Cirque organization. "[I have] kept on progressing as far as being involved in new and bigger projects for the core of the company. Rather than just special events we do production etc. So now I'm moving with one foot in each - one foot in special events, production, artistic direction, etc., and the other foot in everything else, new shows, new ventures. We're opening up a nightclub in Las Vegas ("Light" at Mandalay Bay) with some partners, and some other stuff that is not a Cirque show that will be announced later on." This allows him to express himself creatively at the company in new and different ways. "It has to be like that. Because otherwise it would get boring, it would get stale. And for an artist you can't do machine-like things for too long."

/// A SHORT EGO BOOSTING EPILOGUE

While we here at Fascination! produce our 'zine out of our interest and respect for Cirque du Soleil, it is always nice to get feedback, both complimentary and constructive. It is rare that we get feedback of either kind, so to be recognized in a positive way is always a pleasant surprise. It is in that vein, then, that in a wholesale example of rampant ego-boosting, we present this quote from Mr. Vinet. "Your interviews are always really in-depth, you know your subject, obviously you spend time studying it. It's cool for me because I know that at least one person did the exercise."

Okay, enough ego-boo. Time to get back on the Nautilus.

Cirque CD's mentioned in this article: Amaluna (2012, CDS Musique CDSMCD-10046), Le Best of Volume Two (2012, CDS Musique CDSMCD-10045), Iris (2011, CDS Musique CDSMCD-10042), Michael Jackson Immortal (2011, Epic 88697-93394), Viva Elvis (2010, RCA 88697-77582), Totem (2010, CDS Musique CDSMC-10034), Zed (2009, CDS Musique CDSMCD-10031), "25" (2009, CDS Musique CDSMCD-10030), Zaia (2009, CDS Musique CDSMCD-10029), Kooza (2008, CDS Musique CDSMCD-10028), Wintuk (2007, CDS Musique CDSMCD-10027), The Beatles LOVE (2006, Capitol 09463-79808), Zumanity (2004, CDS Musique CDSMCD-10023), Le Best Of Volume One (2004, CDS Musique CDSMCD-10022)

My sincere thanks go to: Mr. Vinet for so graciously spending time with us, Marie-Noëlle Caron – Cirque Publicist, Chantal Côte, Corporate PR Manager, And my wife LouAnna for putting up with my sometimes obsessive hobby.

From the Annals of Fascination!

Volume 1: "In Their Own Words"



ANDREW LEVEY
Social Media Director

« Getting Social »

Keith Johnson, 2013

How companies find and market to their audience has changed drastically in the almost 30 years since Le Cirque du Soleil's first performances. It used to be that marketing was limited to print, radio and television. Now it has completely changed, with the Internet becoming a vital tool in reaching out and touching the fan and customer base. When we were researching iTunes podcasts concerning Cirque for our review article, two most interesting had to do with how Cirque uses Social Marketing:

Comet Branding Radio - Hosts Al Krieger and Sara Meaney
Jess Berlin - Manager of Social Media, CDS Las Vegas
30 minutes - 3/24/10

Jess talks about originally advocating for bloggers, bringing them the same recognition within the company as print journalists. She talks about maintaining the magic or how to not let too much backstage info out in the coverage they get. Responding on Twitter, the demographics of the shows Facebook sites and what kinds of content are popular on them are also mentioned. Really interesting.

Ideafactory podcast - Episode 4: Social Strategies
Adam Levey - Social Media Director, CDS
Host Steve Faktor (ideafactory.com)
20 minutes - 12/18/12

Host Faktor talks more than any of the other hosts, but his comments make this more of a conversation and less of an interview. This is the most interesting podcast of the bunch, as Levey addresses each topic intelligently. The roles of Facebook and Twitter in establishing a brand and speaking to an audience of followers, the reach of Facebook, brand ambassadors and what they mean to a company, and perceptions of success are all touched on.

After listening to both podcasts, we were curious as to how a brand with such a unique emotional visual product as Cirque du Soleil works with social media, and how they interface with their more dedicated fans. So we contacted one of the podcast interviewees, Mr. Andrew Levey (LEE-vey), 33, who took time out to speak with us.

Mr. Levey didn't originally start out in Social Marketing. "My background is in investment banking and finance where I spent two years, but I didn't enjoy it. And I consequently figured out what I wanted to do with my career and got to a point where I found I really enjoyed [working with social marketing]." His first job in his new profession was working for a nightclub hospitality company. "It was really at the advent of MySpace. We started developing a lot of promotion and word-of-mouth through MySpace and Facebook. This was in 2005-2006 and that was really my first experience with it. And it was cool, it was science and it was social, it was fun and a unique experience. And it was like being a pioneer in a field that hadn't existed at the time."

His responsibilities within Cirque are easily stated but large in scope, and involved a relocation. "I've transitioned from Resident Shows Division (in Las Vegas) to the mothership - the International Headquarters (in Montréal) – so it's been fun."

"Within my role we oversee Cirque Club and all of our Cirque media channels. And as people say, news doesn't break it tweets. So we're always making sure that we have ourselves on the pulse of anything that happens so we can work with Chantal (Côté – Cirque Corporate PR Manager) and RC's (Renée-Claude Ménard, Senior PR Director) team to make sure we convey the proper messaging for the brand. Or we convey messaging that we receive from fans or celebrities or whomever to the appropriate parties to say; this is what people are saying, and this is something that either needs to be addressed or is something that is going on in the world of Cirque."

In the ongoing tradition of Cirque job titles, his is a mouthful. "I actually have a new Cirque title that I've only held for three months - Director of Customer Relationship Marketing. Before that I was Senior Manager of New Media and Analytics for the Residential Shows Division. Long titles and no one knows what they mean." (Laughs) "My current responsibilities are redeveloping our consumer program, and when I say "consumer program" I mean Cirque Club, what it is and what it needs to become."

With so many different social channels to monitor, no workday is typical. "Honestly for me at Cirque, and I think it's like this for many other departments, is that there really isn't a typical day. We are at a point right now where we are launching a lot of projects, it's a great opportunity and a perfect storm of a lot of cool new and exciting things happening at once. So it just depends on the day, on what's due, what the deadline is, what's planned versus what's not planned and how we should react to things that aren't planned."

How many Cirque shows has he seen, we wanted to know? "That's a tough question. I saw my first Cirque show, Mystere, when I was 13 years old. In 1995 I saw Alegria. And then I saw Quidam in 96-97. So I was a fan and had no idea that I would ever work here. And since then I've seen every resident show, open or closed, probably about seven or eight times each. And then I've seen a few of the newer touring shows; Amaluna, Michael Jackson Immortal. That's really it for touring shows, I haven't seen too many new ones, I'm missing Kooza, Varekai, and Totem."

/// EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE

Social Marketing has become a vital way for Cirque to communicate and market to its fans and potential ticket buyers. But it hasn't always had a united coherent strategy for doing so, which presented an opportunity for Mr. Levey. "For us [Social Marketing] is a way to have a one-on-one relationship with our consumer. Cirque Club is a good tool for doing that, e-mail marketing is a great tool for doing that. But nowadays people really trust and feel more close to a brand's Facebook or Twitter account than they do getting an e-mail, which is rather impersonal."

"So through social media our goal is to get you closer to the brand and extend your Cirque experience. When you go to a Cirque show, whether it's in a big top, arena, or a resident show, [when you add up] the commute, dinner, and post-show time you're looking at a four-hour experience. We want to figure out how we can extend that experience for you. How do we get you excited in advance? How do we get you talking about it during intermission? And how do we extend it from the show? We've found that platforms like Facebook, Twitter and even YouTube are the most efficient and fastest ways to reach our consumer and interact with them."

Part of Mr. Levey's purview is to apply science and analysis to Cirque's social media, creating actionable data that can be digested and acted upon. He also sees it as a way to target specific audience groups. "That's really the beauty of social media. You need traditional channels like television and print, etc, but [with social media] we can really talk to a specific person."

"[So we can say,] okay, we're going to place this billboard that's going to target everyone that drives frequently in the area. But through social media channels we can have a campaign that's [much more targeted]. We could target messaging more towards (and I'll just throw out a hypothetical here) married couples who live in this region that are also interested in these types of arts. And we can test it; we sent this message towards single men 25 to 35 who live in this area, did it resonate (garner interest)? So for us it's a really interesting way of testing messaging and getting messaging out there in very cost-efficient ways."

"And you can change it in real time. As opposed to something where you spend a lot of money on it and you place it and it has to sit there for a month and you either don't know the results, or by the time you want to change it you have to start the process all over again. With social media we can run a campaign and know within an hour whether it performed, and we can change it."

We at Fascination have focused exclusively on the written word to communicate our interest and share our knowledge about Cirque. But as far as content that gets the most response, photos and videos convey what this very visual brand does best. It is print, for example, that are the dinosaurs – the future is visual. "What we see through our social media channels is that photos and video are what our fans love and really engage with."

And it could be a photo of the most minute piece of costume that people obsess over. Or it could be a video that shows, for example, how a head mold is made. There are things like that that just amaze people. You go to a show and you think, how did they do that, how did they make that piece? And those are the things that we find work the best, our fans love that.”

/// SPREADING THE NEWS AROUND

Cirque has spread its web presence over several platforms. There are a few YouTube channels for videos:

- <http://www.youtube.com/user/cirquedusoleil>
- <http://www.youtube.com/cirquelasvegas>
- <http://www.youtube.com/user/CirqueDuSoleilRus>

Some videos are also posted directly to Facebook where Cirque maintains a separate page for each show as well as a corporate Cirque du Soleil page and one for casting, desiring to establish each show as its own “brand” within the Cirque universe.

Pictures are also placed on Facebook, but sometimes they use

- Flickr - <http://www.flickr.com/photos/CirqueduSoleildotcom>
- Instagram - <http://web.stagram.com/n/cirquedusoleil/>

They’re also on Twitter in several places:

- @Cirque – the main corporate feed
- @CirqueClub – For Cirque Club
- @Dance_at_Cirque – Casting and audition notices
- @thelightvegas – the Light nightclub at Mandalay Bay
- @CDS_Russia – in Russian for Russians

And if that wasn’t enough, they’re also on:

- Google+: <https://plus.google.com/117560566693154728562/>
- Tumblr: <http://cirquedusoleil.tumblr.com/>

There are also pages on these as well, though they haven’t been updated in awhile.

- FourSquare: <https://foursquare.com/cirque>
- MySpace: <http://www.myspace.com/cirquedusoleilmusicians>

In general, the audience Cirque is trying to reach (the “average” customer profile) are women between the ages of 25 and 45 who are college-educated and have a higher level of income. That isn’t to say that Cirque doesn’t also appeal to men, or people younger or older, just that the largest segment of their ticket buying public fit that profile. The audience they speak to depends on the platform. “Facebook is more regional depending on where we are and who’s responding. But we see within Facebook a lot of Latin American fans. We frequently see the comment - when are you coming to Mexico or Brazil or Argentina? They’re very passionate so we see a lot of those fans.”

“Twitter is different because it’s more real-time than Facebook. So we see a huge variety of fans. Especially people who tweet about the show at intermission or tweet [after the show]. And that is a huge opportunity for us to really talk to our fans.”

“Think about it - any product you buy, how often do you get to talk to the brand? That's a cool thing, it's a validating experience. If I went to a hockey game and I tweeted about the Canadians and they tweeted back to me I would think, wow, that's pretty cool! They care about me or they wanted to respond to me. To say [in response to a fan tweet], what you [said about] when you saw the show, we’re going to favorite it or we’re going to talk to about it, or we’re going to say that's great to hear, tell us more. Or that we’re going to take your input and will solicit it to the right people. And for us that is really the biggest opportunity within Twitter.”

“The part I enjoy most about what we do now is that there were situations in the finance world where I’d work on a project and it would go to 18 different levels and I never knew if it saw the light of day. Whereas where I'm working now we get to talk to the consumer about something that's amazing, that is an emotional product. We aren’t selling aspirin or deodorant, we’re providing them with an experience.”

/// FACEBOOK FRIENDS

Of all the platforms they use, “We've seen that Facebook is our most effective tool in terms of social marketing, it really drives ticket sales. Because you can get so granular and targeted.”

In the podcast interview, Mr. Levey stated that one could usually only reach 14-16% of your audience on Facebook. “What that means is when you post something on Facebook not everyone sees it; not 100% of your friends see it, not 100% of the people that follow you as a brand see it. That's based on Facebook's algorithm, on an affinity score of how often you engage with the person or with the brand, how “close” you are. It's also a way for [Facebook] to sell ad real estate. And they know that you’re going to need to bridge that gap. You don't want to reach just 10% of your audience, you want to reach as close to 100% as possible. So for Facebook they turn that into an opportunity for you to either target non-followers or target your own followers to boost that to 20%, or 30%, or 40%. That's where that opportunity is and that's the value proposition for their sales mechanism and their advertising revenues.”

Just as important as communicating to your audience is tracking how effective your efforts are. That helps determine whether the return (in ticket sales revenue) is greater than the expenditure (in effort and dollars). In the podcast, Mr. Levey said recent efforts yielded results from 6x to 16x return-on-investment. With today's analytical tools it is possible to analyse and parse your audience into smaller, highly focused segments. “But that's a little bit harder, and that's actually the project we’re working on now, really fleshing out that database and understanding who people are. Facebook elicits so many actions from you as a consumer we can target based on those actions - everything that you like, every activity that you have.

From the business facing standpoint, all those actions translate back into a model that someone can either target or advertise towards or use to figure out [who] the people are we want to talk to and [who] are the people we don't want to talk to. So we really use our social channels to figure out how we get the relevant messaging to the relevant people and how we send something that is relevant to [one person] but may not be relevant to [another]. Because we can't just message the same message to everybody anymore." This results in their ability to post or advertise directly to a person with a message that will be seen within their newsfeed.

But the response Cirque usually gets from its Facebook followers generally fall into two, more mundane, categories. Most of the comments are either variations of "I Love This Show," or "Please Come to my city," and isn't a very relevant discussion of what's posted. Mr. Levey agrees. "I think that's a very good point. I remember we canceled Zarkana in New York due to Hurricane Sandy. So we posted that due to inclement weather we were canceling [some performances of] Zarkana. And the first five responses were not, "I have tickets, I need to get a refund," but were more like, "We love this show! I've seen it five times! When are you coming here?"

"Facebook's good to engage with our fans. But when we actually want responses from them, or want feedback, it might not be the most appropriate tool. So we're trying to figure out what that tool is and how we reach out to our fans. What do you think about this? Or what is your favorite moment of this? Sometimes we do that on Facebook and we get some responses, but to filter through it is very challenging. So we're trying to figure out where the best spot for that is."

Maintaining more than 20 separate Facebook pages means challenges, one of which is the frequency of posting. In a quick analysis we at Fascination! pulled together (and will elaborate on in a future issue) we found that, on average, Big Top shows post twice as often as Resident shows, and Arena shows outpost Resident shows by an additional 20%. KÀ, La Nouba, Zumanity and Believe post on average less than twice per month, the Big Top shows mostly keep to the average of 5 (except Totem which overachieves at 12), and the Arena shows come in at an average of 8 (except Quidam which underperforms at an average of 3). Are some posting too much, or are some posting too little? "It's a tough balance and we don't think there's a perfect equilibrium. They're different situations. With the touring shows, if it's an arena show you're in a different city every week. So [in order] to be relevant you really have to post a lot. You want to tell people - hey you know what we're in Brazil now, or we're in Minnesota now. With the resident shows there isn't that traveling activity so sometimes there's not a lot of news. And honestly sometimes there's nothing to update."

"And sometimes there's content that is repurposed or we find that we just posted [something similar] a month ago and people are going to know. [It's] something that we're trying to figure out because we know that there's that discrepancy between shows that post 2 to 3 times a week versus some shows where you don't have any updates."

And some shows by their very nature are just difficult to create posts for. Zumanity for example; it has the most-tech savvy followers of any of Cirque's shows, yet posts near the least. But there's a reason for that. "That's a tough show to message within social media. The Facebook page is gated (age-restricted) because of the nature and topic of the show. It's very difficult because there's a lot of stuff from that show you can't really publish on Facebook, there's certain acts you can't publish. So it's a very fine line that we have to walk with certain shows in specific scenarios."

/// SOCIAL DISASTER

Social media is also an important tool when disaster strikes, as it did last summer with the death of an artist at KÀ. How much or how little to post can become a very serious question. The tendency can be to present too much information, allowing speculation and criticism to run free, as social medias focus can make small events larger than they are. In KÀ's case the Facebook page has been silent except for an announcement about the resumption of performances posted in mid-July. Since then, nothing. With the investigations now over and the final report issued, we hope the page will again see some life (though Cirque does plan an appeal). But Cirque's overall concern is to be respectful, both to the artists' family and with the KÀ family as a whole. When asked about it, the response focuses on "common sense."

"What happened was awful and it affected all of us," Mr. Levey explained. "And we want to respect that and have other people understand. You see a lot of brands who just don't use common sense. You look at the 9/11 anniversary and all these brands made very insensitive posts. Such as, "Always remember 9/11 – here's a special!" We live in a day and age where the minute you do that you're opening yourself to ridicule, and we're very cognizant of that and want to make sure that we protect our family as well."

Social Media, but its nature is, "sensationalized and moves very fast. For us the main thing that we wanted to do was work very closely with Chantal (Côté – Cirque Corporate PR Manager) and RC's (Renée-Claude Ménard, Senior PR Director) team, and the important thing was that we got our message out there. For us and for the people at KÀ it's still very fresh. We're in a position right now where we have to continue to respect them. We work very closely with the technical and artistic teams. And at some point in time we want to be able to go to them and say we would like to do something behind-the-scenes for Facebook or YouTube or whatever. We want to make sure that we keep that relationship with them. And we don't want to do something that would damage the relationship."

/// WHERE HAVE ALL THE FANS GONE?

Having so much data on a particular person's interest level and habits allows companies to slice up their fans into smaller and smaller groups. And Cirque has developed its own internal nomenclature for their fans.

“We have something internally that looks at different personas, but that's not something we share with the public. There are different strata of fans, which we're addressing right now. We definitely need to change the way we [reach out to different fan groups] and I think there's a lot of opportunity to work with you guys and the fans to help define the experience. Figure out how we can best work with you guys and reach out to you guys.”

One way to do that is through using “brand ambassadors.” “An ambassador is someone who is really projecting our values and telling more and more people about why Cirque is relevant to them and why Cirque du Soleil matters to them. They can be famous people, they can be celebrities, they can be influential on certain topics. They can be someone like you who's a huge fan. Someone who has an affinity or loves the brand and spreads the brand's message for us.”

The largest discussion forum for Cirque ambassadors (and fans), Cirque Tribune, imploded by choice early this year, leaving fans scrambling with no other viable place to gather. Cirque Spotlight has since come on the scene, but its activity is nowhere near what Cirque Tribune was during its time. This is something Cirque is sensitive to as well. They could give us no other clues as to where the fans have gone. “Between Fascination! and Cirque Spotlight (www.cirquespotlight.com) that's pretty much it. We see people talk to each other within Facebook, but it's tough for us to go in and pinpoint who they are. When you reach out individually you don't know who you're getting specifically, so it's really tough to validate. But those are the only two places, and that's something we're trying to figure out. Is there a community, and is there a place where we can work and speak with the fans and kind of cohabitate together?”

This is part of Mr. Levey's mandate in his new position, to re-imagine Cirque's social outreach through its in-house Cirque Club. This will involve a number of new initiatives that he couldn't talk about, but assured were thought out with the fan in mind. For now just know Cirque Club is in flux. “As far as the future we have some plans that I can't really get into further details on. But we think it's really exciting and it's something that everyone who is a fan of Cirque will want to be part of and will bring them even closer to us than before.”

The largest fan outreach initiative Mr. Levey was involved with in Resident Shows Division was the annual Cirque Week. A major experiment for him last year in his former position as Senior Manager of New Media and Analytics was a half-hour podcast which showed highlights from the various Cirque Week activities. Did the broadcast meet the goals for which it was produced? “Cirque Week is very specific and we know it's a specific audience, And we know [it occurs at] a specific time of year and that not everyone is going to be able to spend a whole week in Las Vegas seeing all of these shows. So we really wanted to give people a sneak preview of what it would be like. To say, ‘Hey, you could be a part of this, and if you don't know what Cirque Week is here's [something] to show you what it was like’. And we think it was successful, it created a lot of awareness. I think for fans like you we don't really need to explain the benefits of Cirque Week, I think you guys know that. But I think there are fans that might say, ‘That looks like something I should totally do, I never knew that existed.’”

/// BECOMING A SOCIAL BUSINESS

For the future Cirque du Soleil plans to be on all the social channels, more or less all the time. But each different channel requires a different approach. “For us every channel is a different strategy. Because every channel has different types of people on them.”

“We have what we call social stratification. The content that we post on Google Plus may be similar to Facebook, but Facebook is going to be more editorialized. Twitter is going to be more news. Instagram is going to be photos, but photos that either tell a story or that are quick and throwaway. Now that [Instagram can] do 15-second videos, we could have an artist taking off their shoes, things like that.”

“For us YouTube is emerging. We have a lot of videos on YouTube, but those videos weren’t made for YouTube they were made for something else and retrofitted to YouTube. What we’re looking to do in the future is really make YouTube-specific videos or videos from Cirque shows or behind-the-scenes [videos] that are specifically built for YouTube.”

In a recent Tweet from Mr. Levey’s feed he posted a reference to an article written by social media analyst Brian Solis. “This guy’s my mentor, my idol. Everything this guy publishes is brilliant; everything he tweets is really fascinating.” In the article, Mr. Solis writes about the qualities of a “Social Business,” where a business or brand is truly involved in social media. “When you begin with business objectives,” Mr. Solis writes, “Social technology and the communities they reach are evaluated against bona fide priorities that already have the buy-in of executives, such as sales, employee and customer satisfaction, and brand resonance.” Is Cirque on its way to becoming a Social Business, or is it already there? “We’re getting there, we really are,” replied Mr. Levey. “And that’s part of what my new role is and what our department does. We work very closely with Chantal and RC’s team in terms of PR; we also try and champion our cause to Marketing. We do a lot of cool things and we want our consumers to know about it.”

“[Social marketing] is the most efficient, effective way to reach people. But I could be biased because I work in it. For me the coolest thing about Twitter is I can go and talk to Brian Solis and he may tweet me back. I can talk to Conan O’Brien if I wanted to, and he might tweet me back. It’s a weird position because it brings you closer to people you might never have had the opportunity to talk to. But it’s also an anti-social tool because you’re on your phone or on your computer and you’re not talking face-to-face.”

/// GETTING MOTIVATED

Starting out in finance but ending up in Social Marketing, as Mr. Levey did, is quite a marked change of direction. But it was part of a process he values, which includes making mistakes. “For me it was a combination of honing what I really wanted to do with my career.

I think failure is something else as well. Obviously failure is the greatest motivator. We make mistakes all the time, and learning from those and figuring out how not to make those mistakes again and how to really improve upon them is what drives me.”

And his advice for those hoping to go into the field? “Read! Read a lot! And do research. By that I mean go to Facebook and [analyze] the brands and people you want to follow. Why do you want to follow them, what makes you engage with them? And the same with Twitter. I would also say dabble in the field. If you want to get into it get in and dabble. Don't just tell people that because you have a Facebook page or blog or Twitter account that you're good at social media. You have to practice it, it's a craft.”

Job satisfaction, for him, comes from communicating to Cirque's vast network of followers some of the exciting things Cirque is doing. But it also comes from the atmosphere of Cirque itself. “It's really cool when you go to a theater during the day and film something, or you have a meeting, and you think – tonight there are going to be 2,000 people here, and it will be their first Cirque show, or their last Cirque show, or their first with their grandma, or the first with their girlfriend or daughter or son, whomever. And they're always going to remember that. That's something that is really cool that you don't get with a lot of jobs.”

Though don't ask him how many hours he spends on the computer. “Too many. My wife will tell you too many.”

Of course Mr. Levey can be followed on his own social media accounts.

- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/andrewmlevey>
- Twitter: <https://twitter.com/andylevey>