

# circus spectacular

cirque du soleil  
has revived a fading  
tradition with a  
universal sense  
of drama, passion  
and death-defying  
hard work. in the  
process, it has built an  
impressive global empire

Like the sirens' melodies that lured Odysseus toward the perilous rocks, Las Vegas' songs of seduction are powerful and far-reaching. They draw those seeking the promise of a magic roll at the craps table. Others arrive in pairs, glowing with the promise of a marriage made quickly, if not in heaven. And then there are those — audience members and performers alike — lured by a Cirque du Soleil spectacle of acrobatics, theater and wonder.

Backstage, minutes before the death-defying dazzle begins, Chinese acrobats calmly mix with fellow performers from around the globe, everywhere from Russia and Poland to England and the United States. Among them is Frenchman Sébastien Coin, who has dreamt of nothing else since he was a boy walking on his hands in his backyard, then balancing on one arm, hundreds of feet in the air with no net beneath him, playing to an awestruck audience. That he does so dressed in a bright yellow chicken costume festooned with feathers, his face painted with Rothko-like bands of color, makes him all the luckier: As a performer in Cirque du Soleil's Las Vegas show *Mystère*, Coin is one of the few acrobats who have parlayed their athletic backgrounds into a career as part of a monumentally successful company.

With lions and tigers no longer packing a thrill for video game-playing children (or animal activists, for that matter), and adults exposed to hundreds of cable channels on a daily basis, the circus tradition has been in decline in recent decades. Where once a traveling troupe



Conjuring zebras with their black and white swirls, these performers in Cirque du Soleil's *O* canter about, nuzzle one another affectionately and gaze inquisitively at the world around them. Sometimes, their energy explodes and they dance wildly.

stopped in nearly every town, it's estimated that now a mere 1,000 traditional circuses dot the world. The forecast is bleak enough that British circus entrepreneur Gerry Cottle recently announced that he's starting a training school to help keep the tradition alive.

Cirque du Soleil, in contrast, is defying the odds as surely as are its performers, who fly fearlessly above stages from poles, cords and trapezes and live to tell about it. The shows mounted by Cirque du Soleil, which originated as a sidewalk show in Canada two decades ago, are now as sleek and sophisticated as any grand theater event, aimed at adults — and with ticket prices to match. As led by founder Guy Laliberté, the company has become a global empire: Close to 1,000 artists perform in eight internationally touring shows, one permanent show in Orlando and five in Las Vegas. Since *Mystère* opened 14 years ago at Treasure Island, Cirque has added the family-friendly *Kà* at the MGM Grand, the water-based *O* (a twist on “eau,” the French word for water) at the Bellagio, the sexy adult show *Zumanity* at New York New York, and, most recently, *Love*, which is set to the music of the Beatles, at the Mirage. A sixth, planned as a collaboration with illusionist Criss Angel, opens next year at the Luxor, and a seventh Vegas show is in the works. Next year Cirque will also expand into Asia, with the installation of permanent shows in Macau and Tokyo.

#### DREAMS ARE MADE OF THIS

If there's little danger of hitting a saturation point, that's thanks to the directors and performers whose imaginations seem limitless, whether envisioning characters who walk on stilts and soar on wings or scenes that move audiences to tears as quickly as others leave them breathless with excitement.

“I think people respond to the shows because they can see the capacity for dreaming in them, and because what these human bodies can achieve on stage is extraordinary,” says Pierre Parisien, who, as general artistic director of resident shows, oversees all of Cirque's permanent productions. But become swept up in the fantasy of Cirque shows, set to world music with lyrics in an imaginary language; or succumb to the moments that seem like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* gone mad and, warns Parisien, one misses the heart of Cirque's matter: “What makes the experience universal is that all of our shows are grounded in and based on real life,” he explains. “And real life isn't always easy. There are great moments of joy and beauty, to be sure, but there are also difficult times.”

The creators and performers behind the scenes — or “Cirquesters,” as they refer to themselves — know plenty about both. A show can take up to two years to mount from the time of inception, and it's not because the directors are sitting around drinking lattes and swapping family photos. Jack Kenn, now the company manager of *Kà*, first worked with the company on launching *O*. He estimates that he and his crew spent three to four months on “load in,” or construction and installation of



This page: Le Vieux is both the guide and the guardian of the theater. Strong, yet vulnerable, this aging theater manager knows all and provokes us to see the dark side of Cirque's *O*.

Opposite page: Just as water is essential to life, the synchronized swimmers' graceful presence is central to *O*. At the heart of the production are 17 world-class swimmers, providing the link between the elements of fire, earth, air and water.



Right: The Korean Plank, or teeter-board, originated in Korea and is a popular traditional circus act. But Cirque du Soleil's *Mystère* reinvented the Korean Plank in its own style by creating the seesaw effect, where the performers remain on the board throughout the various stunts. With a rotating stage adding to the danger, the Korean Plank act requires extreme precision, timing, courage and trust. Opposite page: Abandoning their innocence, two sweet and pure contortionists in the show *Humanity* wash away their inhibitions and taste love for the first time as they fluidly glide through the water.





Mesmerizing “comets” such as this lead the main character of Cirque’s *O* through a magical world in which they soar through the air and fall from the heavens. *O*, a derivation of the French word for water, “eau,” is Cirque’s only aquatic show.



street-performer mentality running through the company. Explains Parisien, “Our family is expanding, and we have more brothers and sisters than we did in the past, but the original feeling is still the same.” That means in lieu of a staff of makeup artists, performers are responsible for applying their own before each show, a process so complicated it can take even the most seasoned members up to 45 minutes. (Nor can they risk slacking off; makeup artists occasionally drop in to make surprise checks.) *Mystère*’s lone prop master, Annie Wilkins, has worked 6,611 straight shows, taking her first day off only this year.

#### **RISING TO THE CHALLENGE**

Like most of the people who work in the company, Wilkins takes her job very personally, and she hates the idea of not being there to offer support to her “kids,” whether it’s making sure their balloons are filled with helium or they don’t trip exiting the stage in unwieldy stilts. But Wilkins’ most important job may be voluntary: keeping the popular performers’ hangout, a tiny table nestled behind the curtain and known as “Annie’s Buffet,” stocked with almonds, gummy bears and other snacks.

Wilkins estimates she spends about \$3,000 a year at Costco to keep the performers pumped up on sugar and protein, but it’s a wise investment. For all the crew’s hard work, the most grueling Cirque jobs are unquestionably those filled by the performers, for whom a childhood of athletic competition is the mere beginning of their training. Once they are selected to join the company, either by scouts at competitions or through auditions, the select few are then flown to Montréal to undergo four months of “formation,” a kind of artistic boot camp with classes in acting, mime and dance.

Below: Seen in *Zumanity*, artist Wassa Coulibaly awakens an unbridled passion. Exploding into a vigorous African dance, her arms, legs and torso take on a primal energy of their own, moving in time to a tribal rhythm. Below right: A favorite among *Mystère* audiences, the Bungee act is a combination of strength and agility. Cirque du Soleil first turned the popular stunt of bungee into an art form in a 1992 production. This aerial ballet features six performers who spring and spin high above the crowd.

“You have to remember that most of these athletes have no artistic background, so we really need to develop that side of them,” explains James Hadley, a senior artistic creator. The process also allows the casting department a chance to evaluate the new talent. “The artists don’t know which show they’re going to join when they arrive in Montréal,” Hadley explains, “but the casting people will watch them, and after years of experience, be able to quickly assess their strengths. If I call and say, ‘We need someone for the trapeze,’ they’ll look for a guy who did high bar in the Olympics.”

Jamar Young, a former competitive gymnast and trampolinist, flew directly from his last competition to Montréal for formation after being scouted by the company two years earlier. For him, immersion in the Cirque culture was crucial to developing a character he would go on to play in one of the traveling shows before joining *Mystère*. “I used to have a big problem with stage fright,” he says. “When I competed, I could just zone out, but you can’t do that here. The first day was acting class, and I stood up there saying, ‘What?!’ Let’s just say that four months later, my stage fright was gone.” Adds his colleague Derek Stangel, “At first, I was so worried because I didn’t want to embarrass myself. Months later, you just don’t care. No matter what, nothing could be more embarrassing than the things you’ve had to do.”

#### **USING THEIR HEAD — AND THINKING AHEAD**

The artists need no additional training for muscling through the pain that comes along with participating in two shows a night, five nights a week, 48 weeks a year. The average age of the

the sets, before Franco Dragone, the director of *O* and *Kà*, arrived with the artists to begin the creation process. For the next several months, Kenn and his crew would begin work at 4 a.m.; Dragone and his performers would arrive at 1 p.m. to start their daily workshop. Everyone worked into the night.

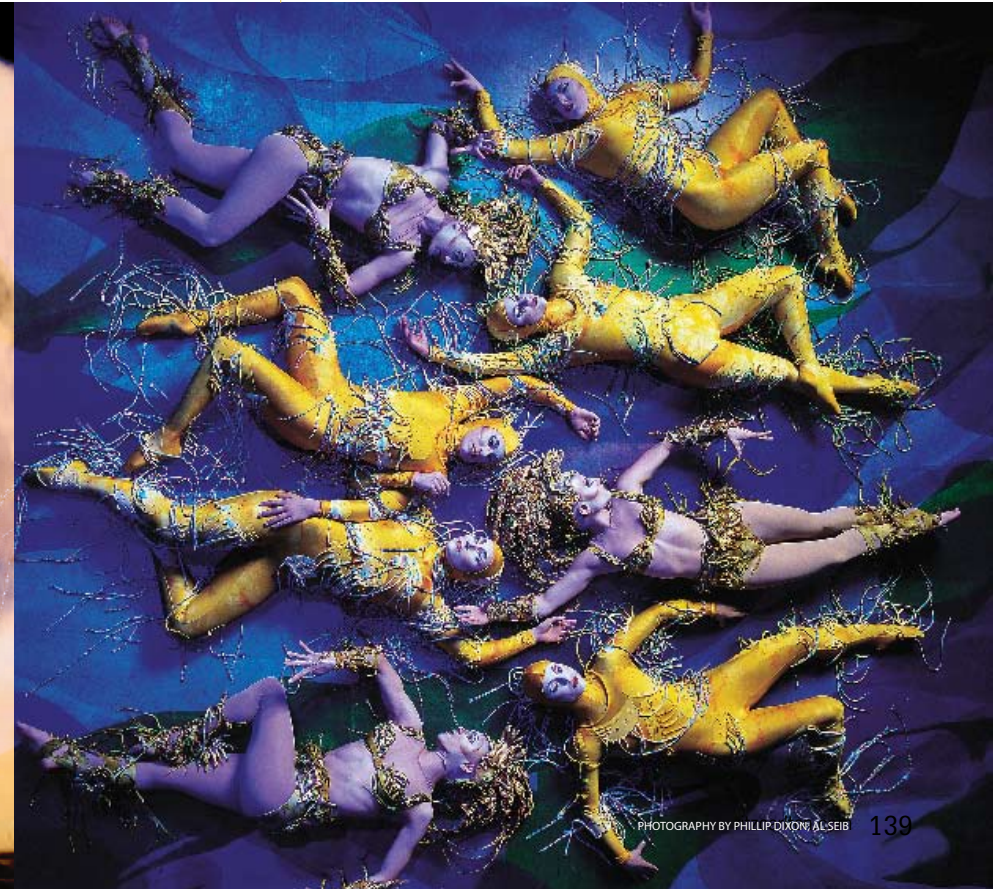
While Dragone had a vision for the show, as is always the case with Cirque productions, performers were encouraged to create their own characters and acts. “Before they got here, Franco told them, ‘You need to come up with something to show me who you are,’” Kenn remembers. “The first day, there was silence in the theater as Franco sat in the audience and, one by one, the artists would come out and show him what they’d been working on for the last four months. If he liked it,” Kenn continues, “Franco would say, ‘OK, you take those 10 people to the rehearsal room and teach them how to do that,’ and it would become part of the show.”

Having more than six months to mount a production on-site would seem like a luxury to most in the film, television or theater communities, but few companies

are dealing with such complicated logistics, from the technically daunting sets to the acrobatics themselves. With *O*, the generous lead time was barely enough before the beginning of the eight-week preview period. “Our first run-through — and remember, this is a 90-minute show — clocked in at four hours and 20 minutes,” Kenn says with a laugh. “And it was a really *long* four hours and 20 minutes.”

Even once the shows are successfully launched and the director, costume designer, makeup artist and choreographer have returned home to Cirque’s Montréal headquarters, keeping a production up and running remains a brutal enterprise for those who stay on. Just the maintenance of the costumes means that *Mystère*’s 25-person wardrobe department logs 17-hour days: With 50 house troupe members performing up to seven roles, an additional 25 acrobats performing individual acts, and three costumes per performer for each role, the wardrobe department finishes the laundry from the last show at midnight and returns the next morning to begin repairs at 7 a.m.

They’re not alone. Despite the multimillion-dollar sets and sleek productions, there’s still a glimmer of the pull-up-your-bootstraps





Sarah Harding as one of the Forest People have adapted harmoniously to their lush environment with their luminescence and dexterity. They are skillful gravity-defying jumpers who offer shelter and protection to the Twin Sister when she descends into their world.



cast of 14-year-old *Mystère* is 35, while the three year-old *Kà*'s performers average about 23. Almost all sustained previous multiple injuries long before they arrived at Cirque du Soleil, and the grueling acts that require pounding, swinging and literal heavy lifting aren't exactly physical therapy. Still, there's rarely a whimper to be heard.

Years of balancing and spinning an aerial cube four times his size with his feet while hanging in the air from a ring with one arm ultimately dislocated *Mystère* performer Paul Bowler's shoulder. But instead of catching the next plane to Boca Raton and enjoying early retirement, Bowler spent seven months retraining to do the act with his other arm. And *O's* Madeleine Perk, a former Olympic synchronized swimmer from Switzerland, performs her over-and-under water acrobatics despite three herniated discs. "I've been able to make my living doing the thing I love the most in the world," she explains of her ability to ignore the discomfort. "That's the luckiest thing that could happen to anyone." But she acknowledges when pressed, "If the injuries come back, I'm not sure how much longer I can do this."

"We're constantly telling them, 'Your career is not a long one, so think ahead,'" says Hadley. "What else will you do? What is your next career, and how can we help you find it?" The company provides a stipend for artists who choose to continue their education part-time, but some performers are already juggling two jobs. Bowler is a hugely successful real estate agent in Las Vegas, who jokes, "Cirque bought me my Porsche, but real estate bought me my Ferrari." Dancer Bernard Gaddis co-founded the Las Vegas Contemporary Dance Theater, and performer Zdzislaw Pelka and his wife own a Polish deli in town.

#### cirque's permanent shows, in short

Cirque du Soleil's global reach is expanding exponentially: In addition to 11 shows currently traveling the world, two permanent Asian productions are being planned for Macau and Tokyo. They will join six permanent shows in the U.S. — five of which call Las Vegas home.

***Mystère*** is a classic, non-narrative Cirque show that combines extraordinary acrobatics with dreamlike dance sequences; two clowns and an emcee outfitted in a pink suit and bowler and accompanied by a talking puppet add humor appropriate for all ages.

***Kà*** is equally family-friendly, with a fairy tale-like coming-of-age story involving royal twins, war and love. Many of the stunning acrobatics are infused with martial arts and take place on a stage that rotates 360 degrees.

***O*** unites acrobats, synchronized swimmers and divers in a water-based production that takes place in and out of a 1.5-million-gallon pool.

The Beatles are the inspiration for ***Love***, which celebrates the band's music in surround sound.

For audience members over the age of 18, ***Zumanity*** incorporates burlesque and cabaret. While the company's acrobats are generally clothed in revealing costumes, here they sometimes appear to eschew costumes entirely.

Meanwhile, in Orlando, ***La Nouba*** offers a fable about two conflicting groups of people, the Cirques (or circus people) and the Urbains (or urbanites). The show's title derives from the French phrase "faire la nouba," loosely translated as "Have a blast!"

While the artists remain with the company, the staff does everything it can to support them. "Rallying the performers is a huge part of what we do," says Hadley, who understands the additional stress for many who are foreigners living far from friends and family. Kenn says a regular part of his job overseeing *Kà* is helping artists with everything from learning their way around grocery stores to jury duty. The two Chinese acrobats on *Mystère* live and travel to work with a translator, paid for by the company.

On stage, the staff tries to keep things fresh for the performers as well as for the audience, overhauling sections of the show when they become stale. "Sometimes we'll make small changes in the show simply to keep the performers feeling alive," says Hadley. "We don't want them to feel like robots doing the same thing."

The system is clearly working; Cirque has a remarkably low turnover of about eight performers per show per year, many of whom leave to join another company production. Cirque is home for these artists, and there's nowhere else they want to be — as long as their bodies comply.

The familial atmosphere plays out nightly backstage at *Mystère*, where performers lounge on a crash mat between their cues, catching each other up on their days. The chatter is constant, and in several different languages, although Wilkins, as resident den mother, does her best to keep it all in English. "I tell them, 'When you get pulled over by the cops, and you will, Russian isn't going to cut it,'" she says. "The other day, someone said to me, 'It's amazing how you've taught them all English.'" Wilkins laughs. "I said, 'Nah, I've taught them sarcasm.'"

When their cues come, gossip momentarily halts and the performers trot toward the stage, zipping up each other's costumes and donning their wigs at the last possible second. Their nonchalance is striking given the risk they are running, but, Wilkins whispers, "Every single one of them is aware that one wrong move out there, and their career is over."

#### FINALLY, IT'S ALL ABOUT PASSION

But this is a tough lot, and what would be a career-ender for most athletes is, for these performers, sometimes just a really bad day. Ross Gibson, a British-born acrobat who has played the *Mystère* character Red Bird for three and a half years and is as close to a star as the ensemble allows, had one of those last June. After over-rotating during a tumbling pass, Gibson's knees smashed into his face, fracturing his jaw, cheekbones and eye sockets in 10 different places. The show indeed went on, but Gibson required emergency surgery, during which his facial structure was recreated using metal where bone had once done the job.

Amazingly, only six weeks later, he was back at work.

"I don't know how much longer my body can take it," Gibson admits of his grueling role, which demands he be on stage for the majority of the show, either dancing or tumbling. "And I do know there are other things I could do," he adds, adjusting his now sweat-bathed feathered headpiece in preparation for the evening's final applause. "But the thing is, this is what I'm *meant* to be doing. I was made for Red Bird. And Red Bird was made for me." ●