

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL

A Canadian Product?

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By “reinventing” the circus, *Cirque du Soleil* has given dignity to a kind of performance which has sometimes been associated with the grotesque. This article will attempt to analyze *Cirque du Soleil* as a cultural product of Quebec and deal with the way it is identified as a Canadian cultural symbol in the eyes of the world, quite specifically by Mexican audiences. I will also try to discover the ways in which it has changed our way of perceiving circuses with a Canadian identity, meaning, for example, that they are multicultural, Quebecois and avant-garde.

When I was a child nothing was more terrifying than the promise of visiting the circus. The floor covered with sawdust, the intense animal smell, the loud, distorted voices, all those people who seemed so very sad, but tried very hard to be funny and look happy. And then, too, those skinny fox terriers in skirts, elephants whipped until they stand on two feet or horses crowned with feathers forced to run in circles and carry a mountain of men and women. This is not just my story; for many people in my country the idea of the circus is associated with poor performances, sometimes so bad that they are ridiculous and farcical.

One day, I saw a video called *Saltimbanco* on HBO Olé. Like many others, I was surprised to learn that what I was seeing was *Cirque du Soleil* and that it was

Canadian. Dignity and an artistic nuance had been brought to a form of popular entertainment sometimes considered grotesque.

Cirque du Soleil is a cultural product of Quebec. Based in Montreal (though it also has a European base in Amsterdam), the company’s history starts at the Baie St-Paul, where a group of street performers —stilt-walkers, fire-eaters, jugglers and trampoline acrobats— created a summer festival in 1982, *La fête foraine*. There, under the aurora borealis, Gilles St-Croix and Guy Laliberté conceived the idea for the *Cirque du Soleil*, in a country with no previous circus tradition. Perhaps beginning from scratch made what they call the “reinvention” possible, a “reinvention” which is really the restating of the concept of what happens inside the magic circle.

They named themselves after the sun, the symbol of the power of life, and started the company in 1984 with provincial government support and 75 employees. Today, they have a troupe touring in Canada and the U.S., another in Europe and still another in Asia, besides the one permanently based in Las Vegas, which means that they are simultaneously staging four shows on three continents.

Their statistics are very impressive: in 13 years, over 10 million spectators have seen their shows; they employ 1,300 people, including 220 performers, whose median age is 28; they have performed in more than 118 cities, from Los Angeles to Osaka, Vienna and Berlin.

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Personnages (*Quidam*, 1996-1998).

Their plans for expansion are also impressive. For example, Walt Disney World, Co. and *Cirque du Soleil* have reached a long-term agreement for a new circus style theatrical show produced by *Cirque*, which will be housed in a theatre with a 1,650-seat capacity to be constructed at Florida's Disney World. It will be a new production, with a 12-year contract, premiering in November 1998, with a cast of around 70 performers.

They were also the creative consultants for the Atlanta Olympic Games and participated in the creation and production of the opening and closing ceremonies.

Besides that, Admission Network, one of Canada's major ticketing services, marked its entry to the U.S. market, making its debut with *Quidam* in 1996; Admission Networks USA will be the exclusive ticketing service for the show during its entire three-year tour. They have a 1-800 number and 20 outlets in Southern California.

They are also planning a new show and theatre in Las Vegas, an aquatic circus. By August 1998, there will be two shows running there.

But the United States is not their only target. They will also be presenting a permanent show in Berlin,



Character, John Coilkey (*Quidam*, 1996-1998).



Nymphs (*Alegria*, 1994-1995).

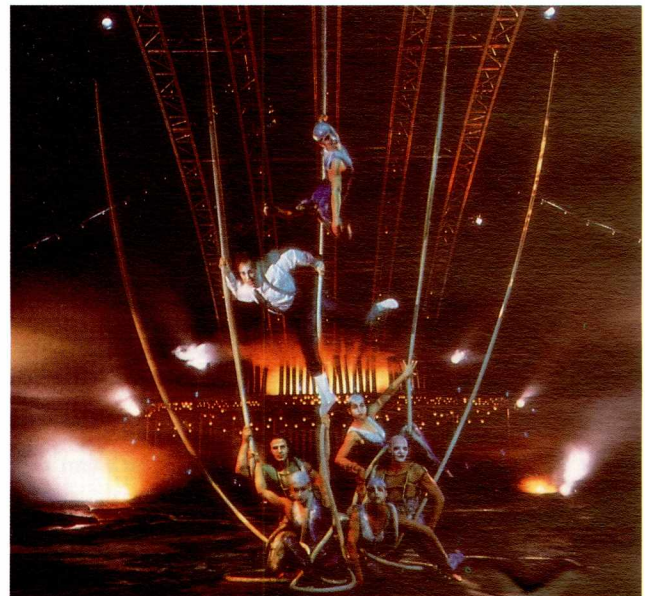
scheduled to premiere in the year 2000; the project will ensure their activities there until 2015.

So, obviously, *Cirque* has developed into a major business over the years. At the same time, the various companies that make up the *Cirque du Soleil* group have developed audiovisual, recording, merchandising and box office activities and have been involved in building theatres and performing arts complexes; it has become one of the largest cultural businesses in North America. And it has a Quebecois label.

But, what is the concept behind all this?

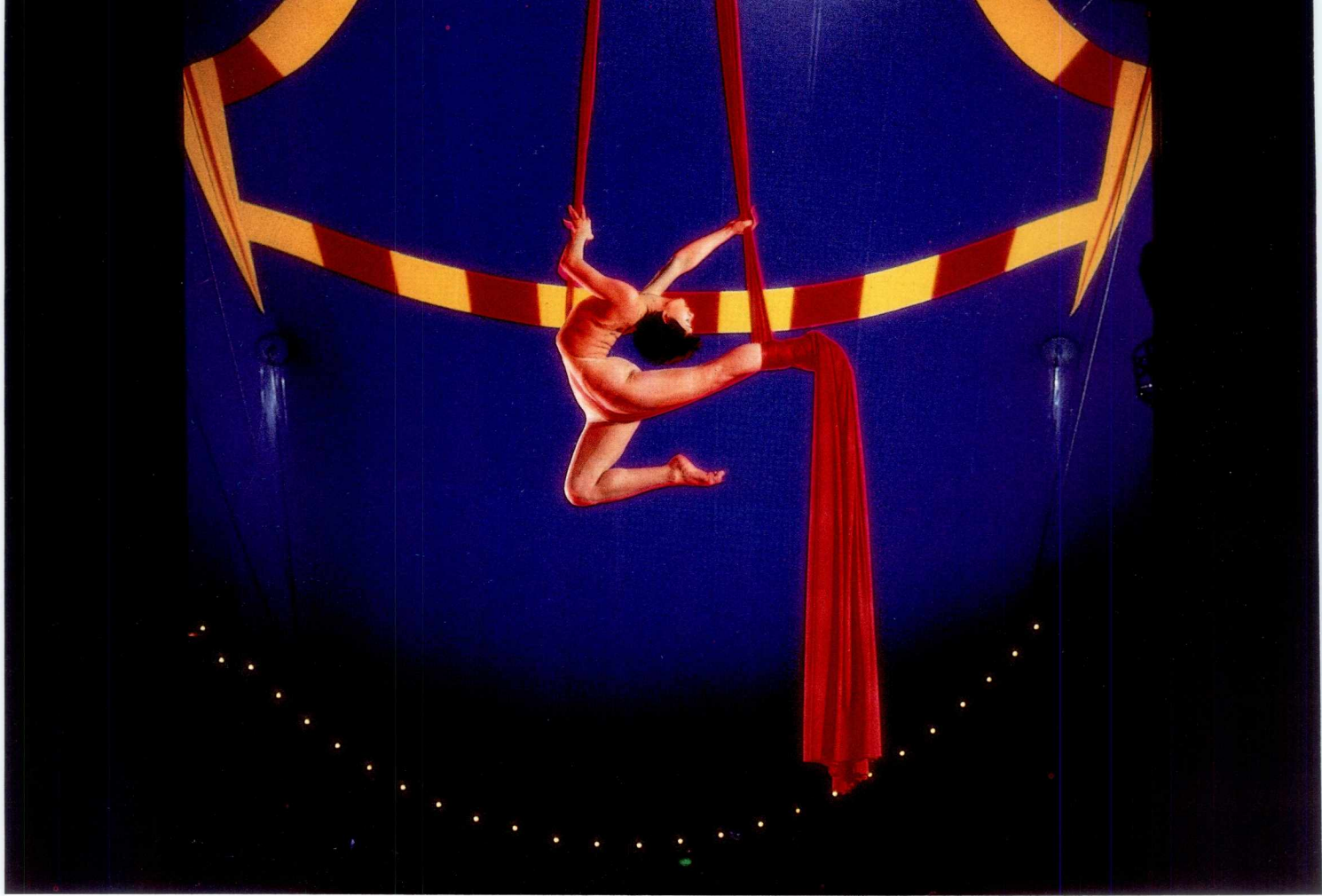
Cirque du Soleil produces entertainment; they say they have a message to deliver: they are merchants of happiness. When they first went abroad, they had a five-year plan to conquer North America, starting in Los Angeles and ending in New York. That's how it began growing. The company became more structured, less personal, but tried to keep the same spirit that fired its beginnings: to be creative and audacious; to be a provocation and a celebration.

Cirque du Soleil has created and produced nine shows: *Cirque du Soleil* (1984-1985), *La Magie Continue* (1986), *We Reinvent the Circus* (1987-1988), *Nouvelle Expérience* (1990-1991), *Fascination* (1992), *Saltimbanco* (1992-1996), *Mystère* (playing in Las Vegas continuously since 1993), *Alegria* (1994-1998) and *Quidam* (1996-2002).



Spanish webs (*Quidam*, 1996-1998).

In all of them, the establishment of a stage language is very important; the ritual circle of the circus ring is the place where the breakdown of old ideas and preconceptions has to be achieved by defying the limits of physical reality and projecting the spectator into the intense realm of the imagination. Their energy and the absence of words seem to be able to elicit just about anything from the bodies of the performers.



Aerial contortion (*Quidam*, 1996-1998).

Franco Dragone, the stage director, says: "I have no artistic pretensions and I have no ideas, I try to observe and catch the moment when something happens; then if I've observed well and caught it right, then I can talk to the artists, tell them, 'this is what we'll do.' The source of my inspiration is the way I look at things."

And even though he denies artistic pretensions, the artistry is there. It was there in the beginning but it became more obvious with *Saltimbanco*, where the make-up and the clothing are more stylized and the audience has the impression it is seeing a sort of acrobatic ballet, not really circus acts. People dance while they bend, leap, tumble, fly; for them, gravity is just another law to be broken; they kiss danger very seductively. Everything is so plastic that these perfect bodies constantly remind us of sculptures. Their movements always seek symmetry, equilibrium; they tend to perfection by seeking height, by leaving the floor.

The shows are not acts with a beginning and an end followed by another act and so on. They try to do just the opposite. They unravel, destructure the acts to make a show with an integrated concept through colours, music, motion.

One constant in their staging under the tent in the sense of the street performer and the town square where people meet; there's always a character dressed in street clothes; there's also a child who participates; anyway, it has become so sophisticated that in that meeting place bizarre things always happen.

The spectator always has the sense of magic, of being inside a dream or a fantasy; live music, specially written for each show, influenced by various cultures, with synthesizers and female voices, and the lights enhance the feeling. There's a feeling, a concept, that you can grasp.

Dragone says about the performers, "My aim is that when people see you in the street I want them to feel



Dancers (*Mystère*, 1993-1997).

intimidated. One way to stand out is to create a myth. The circus is mythical in the minds of kids and grown-ups. We are seen as wanderers even though we travel differently from Gypsies, from traditional wanderers. So the myth lives on.”

And their success corroborates that they are on their way to becoming a myth: the one that reinvented the circus.

But, outside Quebec, how is this myth identified? Let us remember that for non-Canadians, Quebecois are still identified as French-Canadian; so, *Cirque du Soleil* is a Canadian cultural symbol in the eyes of the world, or at least for Mexican audiences.

I researched into how this Canadian product is introduced into the Mexican market. First, I went to Mix-up and Tower Records and found that you can buy *We Reinvent the Circus*, *Nouvelle Experience* and *Saltimbanco*

there on laser disc and video, imported directly from Miami. But a company called Grupo Barak bought a master in 1996 and today prints copyrighted copies specially for the Mexican market that are cheaper than the imports. They distribute between 800 and 1,000 copies to all the most important supermarket chains and retail stores, selling around 500 copies a month. The only information they have about the *Cirque* is what's printed on the back cover, and though they do no advertising, the three videos sell very well. They think their customers are upper middle class adults, mostly people who have seen or heard about the show in the United States. The videos are not distributed at Videocentros or Blockbusters, Mexico's main video rental chains.

In a second phase of the research, I contacted the *Cirque* marketing department in Montreal and sent them the following questionnaire:



Banquine (*Quidam*, 1996-1998).

1. Has Mexico been programmed for the future? If not, could you tell me why?
2. Do you have a distributor for your products in Mexico?
3. Has NAFTA facilitated the exports of your products (such as videos and laser discs) to Mexico?
4. Is Mexico a significant market for you? If not, do you think it could become one in the future?
5. When advertised, is the *Cirque* presented as a Canadian or a Quebecois product?

6. Is there an explicit will to be identified with a national or regional enterprise?
7. Is there an explicit will to be identified with Canadian multiculturalism since there are so many ethnic nuances in the design of every show?

The only answer I received was the following note:

Dear Graciela,

We wish to thank you so much for your interest in



birds (Alegria, 1994-1995).

Cirque du Soleil and extend our apologies for not responding sooner.

South American market potential is currently being evaluated by *Cirque du Soleil*. However, the project is still at a very early stage. More information will become available in the upcoming years as the project progresses.

Once again we wish to express our gratitude for your interest.

This only confirms many things we already know: for instance, despite NAFTA, for most people, Mexico is still not considered part of North America. NAFTA has not substantially changed the flows of visual and audio material from Canada to Mexico. And finally, since *Cirque du Soleil* is an important part of the cultural indus-

try, it emphasizes profitability, which the depressed Latin American markets do not guarantee.

Perhaps because it has become so huge, because it is on HBO *Olé* and the Discovery Channel in Spanish, even though it will not perform live for Latin American audiences, *Cirque du Soleil* has changed our way of perceiving the art of circus with a Canadian label (meaning, in this case, multicultural, Quebecois and avant-garde).

Last summer I was invited to see *Quidam* at the Vieux Port in Montreal. It was one of the most thrilling experiences of my life. Since I am addicted to everything Canadian, my friends may think that perhaps I'm not being objective, but let me tell you that after visiting the blue and yellow tent, the word circus has a different meaning for me: pure joy, expansion of the human body's limits, beauty. And it comes with a Quebecois label. ❧

READING AND VIEWING

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