

A Circus For Kids Of All Ages

There is a uniquely Canadian variation on an age-old tradition. The 30-member Cirque du Soleil (Circus of the Sun) combines acrobatic skill, high-tech props and an awesome theatrical performance to produce a suspense-filled alternative to the traditional three-ring circus.

When the show was first launched in 1983, "We became very popular, mostly because there was no precedent for it," explains the Cirque's 31-year-old general manager, Normand Latourelle. "The show is self-contained and very modern. But it's also close to the circus of the 1920s, because discovery is all. We want to spread colourful thought, young thought."

The Cirque originally grew out of a quintessentially Canadian reality: the short Quebec City summers limit street performers to a three-month season. "A whole community of street performers had been thinking of starting a circus for 15 years, but nobody decided to make it happen. That's what I did," says artistic director Guy LaLiberté.

Le Cirque du Soleil's big break came in 1984, when the group received a government grant to put together a special show commemorating the French explorer Jacques Cartier's arrival in America 300 years earlier.

"What we're doing in Canada and Quebec is building our own history, because there is no circus tradition," LaLiberté says. The search for a lively, high-quality production led LaLiberté and his colleagues to borrow the best from the American, Chinese, and Soviet circus traditions, to draw from state-of-the-art technology, and to put all of this into a framework that captures the theatrical effervescence particular to Montreal theatre.

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During a recent three-and-a-half week performance at the 1987 Los Angeles Festival, the Pasadena *Star-News* described Le Cirque as "a sophisticated, intelligent theatrical circus whose acts are a cut far above the shallow stunts and pageantry of most three-ring circuses. From the moment the troupe entered the ring. . . you knew this was not going to be your garden-variety show."

The main challenge in establishing a new North American circus has been to get past the standard image of tired elephants, unamusing clowns, dull trapeze acts and morbid sideshows. Le Cirque du Soleil has successfully met the challenge by using a solid combination of lights, music, and top-notch talent to earn respect and praise from kids of all ages.

"The most thrilling emotion you will have will be the poetic, the magical," says conductor Denis Lacombe, who brings the house down with his parody of a musical director fastened to a podium with ski boots. "You'll be scared, you'll laugh, you'll pass through many emotions."

Adults too, fall prey to Le Cirque's irresistible charms. "It happens all the time," notes publicist Jean Héon. "Parents come in with a kid on each side. . . . The kids are sitting there with their eyes wide open. Suddenly, the father and mother are as amazed as the kids. Sometimes more so."

In keeping with its modern approach to the circus tradition, Le Cirque du Soleil has stayed away from animal acts. "We're strictly a theatrical and acrobatic circus," LaLiberté explains. "We're more inspired by the Chinese acrobats. We always say we prefer giving jobs to two people, rather than feeding an elephant."

Inspired by the Chinese circus tradition, Cirque du Soleil marries acrobatic skills and theatrical performance.

