

“FLOWERS IN THE DESERT”:
CIRQUE DU SOLEIL IN LAS VEGAS, 1993-2012

by

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A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Theatre & Dance

2013

This thesis entitled:
"Flowers in the Desert": Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas 1993 – 2012
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Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
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“Flowers in the Desert”: Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas 1993 – 2012

Dissertation directed by Professor Oliver Gerland

This dissertation examines Cirque du Soleil from its inception as a small band of street performers to the global entertainment machine it is today. The study focuses most closely on the years 1993 – 2012 and the shows that Cirque has produced in Las Vegas. Driven by Las Vegas’s culture of spectacle, Cirque uses elaborate stage technology to support the wordless acrobatics for which it is renowned. By so doing, the company has raised the bar for spectacular entertainment in Las Vegas

I explore the beginning of Cirque du Soleil in Québec and the development of its world-tours. I also discuss the history of entertainment in Las Vegas from the early years when it was regarded as a wild frontier town to the internationally recognized tourist destination of today. I then detail the seven Cirque du Soleil shows currently in residence in Las Vegas: *Mystère*, “*O*”, *Kà*, *Zumanity*, *Love*, *Criss Angel Believe*, and *Viva Elvis/Zarkana*.

The work concludes with an exploration of the future of Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas and the future of Las Vegas entertainment as a result of Cirque’s presence there. It has been stated that Cirque plans to have a show in every Las Vegas strip venue. I discuss the feasibility of this plan while considering the notion that Cirque has saturated not only the Las Vegas market, but the world market as well. Finally, I consider how the works presented by Cirque have changed Las Vegas entertainment.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated, with unwavering gratitude and admiration, to the following people:

Dr. Oliver Gerland, who has worked tirelessly with me on this study topic since I began my doctoral work at the University of Colorado at Boulder. He has kept me focused and guided me further and deeper than I ever thought this study would go.

The members of my committee: Dr. Bud Coleman, Dr. Amma Y. Ghartey-Tagoe Kootin, Markas Henry and Zak Keller.

Both the current and the retired members of the University of Colorado at Boulder Theatre Department faculty and staff who have been a source of encouragement throughout my entire studies at CU. Most especially Dr. Merrill Lessley and Dr. Jim Symons who helped early in my studies to find and cultivate the scholar in me, even at times when I doubted her very existence. Also a special thank you to both Cass Marshall and Wendy Franz who helped to make sure I was on track and got all the “t”s crossed and the “I”s dotted.

My fellow students at the CU, especially Dr. Andrea Moon, Dr. Elizabeth Jochum, Dr. Amanda Giguere, and Dr. Emily Harrison who were there throughout the journey and especially at the end when I most needed my hand held.

My colleagues and students in the School of Theatre Arts and Dance at the University of Northern Colorado, especially Gillian McNally, Patty Cleary, and David Grapes II, who supported me every step of the way and tirelessly listened to my trials and

tribulations of being both a student and a professor. You three have been a constant for me in a very stormy sea.

My family who has always supported my endeavors, especially those of the most scholarly nature. Most especially, my mother and my father, who have always seen the potential in me, even when I did not. I dedicate this work to my father for whom my achievement of this would have been another point of pride, and I am pleased to join the ranks of the doctor/scholars on both sides of my family by becoming the third generation Dr. Toewe.

And to Steven Watson, who has been at my side from the second semester of my studies through to the end. He has been unerring in his support of my studies and has never tired of hearing about the next revision of this and all of my most scholarly work. Thank you for your faith in me, even when I lost the faith in myself.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the staff at the University of Northern Colorado Libraries for their assistance in the research of this work. Most especially Colleen Stewart and Jennifer Leffler who assisted me in acquiring much needed materials essential to my research.

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CHAPTER I

"SEVEN WORLDS, ONE CITY"
USING CIRQUE DU SOLEIL TO DEFINE A CITY'S ENTERTAINMENT DREAM

We're a creative entertainment company; we develop shows built around the dreams, talents, and passions of our artists and creators. (Bacon 7)

The Las Vegas entertainment industry rose from humble beginnings: a few headliners in a few casinos scattered along a desolate stretch of Highway 91. These beginnings are humble when compared to being "The Entertainment Capital of the World," as Vegas has been named on more than one occasion (Macy 3). The town eventually evolved into an "adult playground" that offered legalized gambling, scantily clad showgirls, and big name headliners. Fast-forward from the Rat Pack and Elvis of the 1960s and 1970s to the 1980s. It was during the late 1980s that Las Vegas and its entertainment industry began a new marketing plan. The early 1980s had boasted a booming economy in the United States, and Las Vegas drew in those dollars. Unfortunately, as with any highs, there must be lows, and the "bubble" burst when the American economy took a downturn in the latter years of the decade. The city needed a way to regain the prosperity it had previously seen. The local population was not spending, and the tourists were not coming. Gambling was no longer unique to Las Vegas. New gambling statutes throughout the United States changed the availability of gambling to the average American. The statutes allowed places

like Deadwood, South Dakota, and Central City, Colorado, to offer limited legalized gambling. Additionally, the states bordering the Mississippi River launched riverboat cruises, which included gambling once the cruise was underway. Gambling cruises began along the American coastlines on luxury ships that merely had to get into international waters in order to open the onboard casinos. Lastly, the Federal government allowed gambling on lands owned by American Indians. With gambling in nearly everyone's backyard, and a struggling economy, the Las Vegas casinos and the accompanying entertainment industry needed revitalization. They needed something to bring the money back to town and to their economy. A new marketing target was identified: the international traveller. Vegas had always been an interesting stop on the "American tour" taken by visitors from Europe and Asia, but the city now needed to be marketed as a destination; from this need came a "new Vegas" with a more international feel. It became imperative to sell the city to people who spoke little to no English. The solution lay in visual communication as opposed to written and oral dialogue. Through lights, animations, colors, symbols, and images, the entertainment gurus of the Las Vegas strip created an environment of non-verbal spectacle, which could draw international tourists because it provided visual stimulation without relying on a common spoken language. If visual stimulation was the draw, it followed that spoken language would no longer be a barrier. Spectacle, non-verbal communication, and a more cosmopolitan, even European, feel became the heart of this new Las Vegas incarnation.

Additionally, Las Vegas tourism specialists realized that in this weaker American economy the days of multiple vacations per year for a single family were gone. No longer would parents take one vacation alone and later in the year take another vacation

with their children. The family vacation was de rigueur and Las Vegas' "adult only" reputation was hurting the American tourist appeal. Geared primarily toward the adult tourist, themed casinos were already opening on the Las Vegas strip. Caesar's Palace had scantily clad women offering themselves as "slaves" to the patrons, while Aladdin's Palace had "harem girls" to "serve" their guests, neither of which seemed suitable for children. The more family themed Circus, Circus Casino only provided a limited option, as the casino did not have attached lodging for its patrons. Now the question posed by the Las Vegas tourism counsel was, could Las Vegas be family friendly? Hotel entrepreneur Steve Wynn stepped to the forefront of this Las Vegas change. He created resorts with more family oriented attractions, such as the wildlife habitat at the Mirage and the pirate themed Treasure Island. Other hotels saw the market he was targeting and followed suit.

As the tourist industry in Las Vegas was looking to give itself an international and/or a family-friendly draw, the Montreal-based touring circus company Cirque du Soleil was also looking for a new market in which to perform. Having travelled and performed throughout North America by this time, the company wanted to find another venue, another chance for change. Unsure of what form this change might take; Cirque du Soleil explored their options. One was the creation of a resident venue in which to showcase their craft, but where? Las Vegas' needs and Cirque's desire for something new intersected. The two seemed a perfect match and in 1993, after a long and sometimes acrimonious journey, Cirque du Soleil finally opened *Mystère*, its first resident show in Las Vegas at Steve Wynn's Mirage Resort and Casino.

In his article, "*Mystère* Still a Wonderland at Treasure Island," journalist Jerry Fink identifies the reason for the shows instant popularity: "it has universal appeal – there are

very few spoken words. An international audience doesn't need to understand English to appreciate what takes place. It is an evening of awe-inspiring action" (n. pag.).

Mystère was a hit, not just for the tourists, but for the local population as well. The local population loved the family friendly entertainment choice that Cirque du Soleil provided. This show, *Mystère*, established Cirque du Soleil on the Las Vegas strip and helped to change the style of entertainment in Sin City. Fifteen years after *Mystère's* initial splash, Joe Brown of the *Las Vegas Sun* says,

When it opened . . . in 1993, *Mystère* established a new standard for Las Vegas – and anywhere – for an all-enveloping theatrical experience. A quantum leap for circus artistry and production shows in general, the surround sound and spectacle unfurls with an elegant indoor interpretation of a classic Big Top tent. (n. pag.)

Cirque founder Guy Laliberté says, "it really opened up things in terms of the type of show you could see in Las Vegas . . . That feels really good" (Babinski 163). The timing was fortuitous; the desire for more spectacle in the city of Las Vegas and the desire for a home for Cirque intersected. At this intersection of needs, Cirque du Soleil found a home in the desert and, from this home came the change of the standard for Las Vegas entertainment.

In this dissertation, I will explore the nature of the spectacle in Cirque du Soleil's wordless nouvelle-style circus with an eye toward the current marketing of Las Vegas as an international tourist destination. The major questions I address are: How did Cirque du Soleil come to Las Vegas? What shows have they produced since then, specifically, in Las Vegas? What themes or ideas do each of these productions explore? Do any of these productions tell a story in a linear or even a non-linear fashion? Who created these

productions and what is Cirque's production process? Is the production process the same for Cirque touring productions as for their resident shows? What do each of the productions look and sound like? What technical innovations in production has Cirque made in Las Vegas that are now being seen in their touring shows?

Additionally, it is important to create a context for Cirque du Soleil's Las Vegas productions by looking at the history of Las Vegas entertainment styles. In considering this history, I address the following questions: What about Las Vegas made it the perfect home for a band of travelling acrobats to settle in and astound audiences beginning in the early 1990s? What makes Cirque du Soleil's style so right for Vegas right now? At this time, there are seven different Cirque shows in residence on the Las Vegas Strip, and those involved with Cirque du Soleil believe that a new Cirque show will be opened in every property owned by MGM Resorts International and perhaps properties beyond. As close examination of the seven resident shows makes clear, desire for increasingly elaborate spectacle has driven Cirque du Soleil beyond its origins in virtuoso acrobatics. Cirque shows in Las Vegas involve cutting-edge production technologies. I describe these technologies and suggest that they are one way in which Cirque du Soleil has been affected by and helps to shape Las Vegas's culture of spectacle.

I believe that the reason Cirque has had such enormous success in the 21st century in Las Vegas lies in the convergence of four defining features: international appeal, wordless presentation, family appropriate style shows (with Cirque du Soleil's *Zumanity* being an exception), and most significantly, spectacle. These features allowed Las Vegas and Cirque du Soleil to intersect and then to grow together.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although much has been written about the history of Las Vegas entertainment, there are few sources that target the period of my interest—the early 1990s to the present—and none, that I have found, focus specifically on Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas. A vast number of “coffee table” books do exist that are dedicated to the history of Las Vegas entertainment, but most of these concentrate their efforts on the big name headliners of the 1960s-1970s, such as Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack, Elvis Presley, and Liberace. Additionally, there exist a few first hand accounts of Las Vegas and its entertainment roots, such as Susan Berman’s *Lady Las Vegas*. These sources are important because the dissertation will begin with a study of the history of Las Vegas entertainment. I intend to distill from them and from broader, more scholarly histories a description of each of the entertainment genres that Las Vegas promoted from its earliest casinos through today. In the first chapter of this dissertation, I discuss Las Vegas’ entertainment genres, categorizing them in the following four categories: “booze and gambling,” “the nightclub act,” “the visual extravaganza,” and “fantasy hotels.”

The last thirty years of entertainment, from the 1980s-2000s, are particularly important in this work, of course. During this time, led by real estate entrepreneurs like Steve Wynn and Kirk Kerkorian, the city reinvented itself several times over. It worked the family friendly destination market, touting itself as an “adult Disney World,” before achieving its current status as a family-friendly international destination city. Las Vegas’ tagline might be “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas,” but promotions often include images of the “kid” in the adult as well as glitz and sex. Unfortunately, most of the existing treatments of Las Vegas entertainment end at the 1980s, although a few go so far as to

mention the first Cirque show, *Mystère*. Only Cirque du Soleil itself has published any texts which include Cirque's more recent openings and not even Cirque Du Soleil discusses, in this form, their Las Vegas nightclubs.

Well documented is the history (often expressed in terms of statistics) of the city of Las Vegas and the state of Nevada. Cultural studies of Las Vegas tend to concentrate on the mob years. While the histories of Las Vegas address spectacle, the mob-centered cultural studies tend toward the sensational and perhaps marginally truthful. The histories and the sensational studies have proved useful in creating my brief account of the entertainment history of Las Vegas. Statistics provided by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority board provide empirical data regarding the number and nationality of tourists each year to Las Vegas; they also provide information about the nature of visitors' trips and their spending while in the city.

It is important to note here that the bulk of my dissertation focuses upon the area on and around the stretch of Highway 91 now commonly known as the Las Vegas Strip. Laws regarding entertainment and nudity beyond the Strip differ, as do the patrons of the entertainment establishments. It would be incorrect to say that my dissertation addresses entertainment in the entire city of Las Vegas, Nevada

In addition to traditional books written on the subject of Las Vegas, both doctoral dissertations and master's theses on the topic of the city's entertainment are available but a very limited number address Cirque du Soleil specifically. Jaime Lee Rana Koran's MA thesis, "Lights, Audience, Profit: The Evolution of the Las Vegas Spectacle" provides a rather superficial analysis of Las Vegas entertainment trends from their earliest incarnation through 2000. She defines the "community of entertainment" as one in constant motion; an

idea with which I agree, but she also defines Las Vegas entertainment in three categories: "the Showroom, the Lounge, and the Incidental/Visual" (3), a grouping of styles that I find limiting. Her work treats all Las Vegas entertainment as entirely for profit and never considers the influence that some Las Vegas style entertainment has had on the larger world entertainment picture. Neither does she consider Las Vegas entertainment as a reason for a Las Vegas trip; she considers entertainment in Las Vegas merely a footnote to the other happenings of the city. She states that the tourists to Las Vegas are travelling there for what she terms the "Las Vegas experience" (2), an idea she bases on Hal Rothman's statement in his book, *Neon Metropolis*, "Today people visit Las Vegas to visit Las Vegas" (27), which is not entirely untrue but, in my view, is too general for my purposes.

In 2002, Eunju Suh wrote a doctoral dissertation entitled "Estimating the Impact of Entertainment on the Gaming Volume of Las Vegas Hotel Casinos" as a submission for his degree in Hotel Administration at the University of Las Vegas, Nevada. He addresses entertainment as a revenue generator for the gambling industry. He states that bringing interesting entertainment to the mega resorts of the Las Vegas strip increases the casino's revenue "at least an extra \$30 to \$50 during [a typical visitor's] trip...which would lead to a 20% return on additional business from the show patrons" (1). He mentions Steve Wynn's involvement in bringing entertainment to his properties, but shies away from directly crediting Wynn for transforming Las Vegas entertainment by creating a home for Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas. Overall, Suh's work addresses most closely the effect of entertainment on gaming, and not the importance of the entertainment industry as an aspect of the

culture of the Las Vegas Strip. Suh's work does not provide any insight into the defining features of Las Vegas entertainment or into the reason for the success of Cirque du Soleil.

Jane Walsh wrote a thesis in 2006 that addresses the move from New York City to Las Vegas of the Broadway musical. She mentions Cirque du Soleil but does not consider it a part of the landscape of the "Entertainment Capital of the World" (1). Instead, she focuses on the evolution of the existing Broadway musical to the newer, hipper, shorter Las Vegas musical, addressing specifically *Avenue Q*, *Hairspray*, and *Phantom- The Las Vegas Spectacular*, all of which have closed as of this writing. She discusses how these shows were adapted to fit the needs of the Vegas vacation crowd. Although she provides an interesting and well-researched introduction to the entertainment industry of the Las Vegas Strip, her work does not address any of the entertainment offerings brought by the Cirque du Soleil Corporation. Aside from these works, there is little published material that addresses the connection between Las Vegas and Cirque du Soleil, the connection I explore in this dissertation.

With respect to Cirque du Soleil's history and its current undertakings, the company is very tight lipped. The company, making it difficult to gather information that is unbiased, must authorize all writing. The most notable Cirque-specific sources are Tony Babinski's 2004 book, *Cirque du Soleil: 20 Years Under the Sun*, and Cirque du Soleil's own website. Babinski's beautiful "coffee table" book is filled with beautiful illustrations and clearly, is a Cirque-slanted text: indeed, the book is written for the glory of Cirque du Soleil. Babinski addresses only twelve of the thirty-one shows that Cirque has created since its formation in Montréal. Of the Las Vegas productions, the text only discusses three. Furthermore, Babinski has omitted some of Cirque's more notable failures and the failures that he does

mention are heavily glossed over in pursuit of discussing the next Cirque success. Additionally, Cirque du Soleil has an extensive website which contains information about all of their current productions and information about the company itself, but provides little more than snippets about each show. The website is designed to sell tickets rather than to analyze the productions. Furthermore, both Babinski and the website, not to mention the numerous, glossy, tourist-g geared brochures and production programs, address only the most famous and memorable of Cirque's productions. Very little is said about their less successful offerings such as *Pomp Duck and Circumstance* and *Banana Shpeel*, and more recently, the first Las Vegas failure, *Viva Elvis*. In addition to the Babinski text, there is a slim volume addressing creativity as it applies to the Cirque du Soleil company. *The Spark* by John Bacon includes ideas about creativity that come from interviews with Cirque du Soleil executive insider Lyn Heward, but does not actually address any production specifics.

This dissertation provides an overview of all of Cirque du Soleil's productions, both closed and still in performance, but focuses upon the Las Vegas shows. I address theme, production process, performance highlights, and audience and critical responses. In the conclusion, I discuss the future of Cirque du Soleil as an entertainment machine, especially in light of its many new interests, such as the recent James Cameron 3-D film, *World's Away*, a fantasy fiction about a pair of young acrobatic lovers who visit the varied worlds created by the Las Vegas Cirque productions. Furthermore, I consider how Cirque has impacted entertainment spectacle and specifically that on the Las Vegas strip.

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

This dissertation focuses on the conjunction of two topics: the history of Las Vegas entertainment and current resident production by Cirque du Soleil. I begin with a discussion of the history of the Las Vegas casino entertainment scene with ideas presented about theme hotels and production styles. This information will help readers understand the roots from which Cirque du Soleil's "Flowers in the Desert" grew.

I should explain the phrase "Flowers in the Desert" as Cirque has applied it to their productions. Cirque's founder Guy Laliberté first coined the term when his company opened their first show in Las Vegas. He said, "I believed you could grow a flower in the desert" (Weatherford, "Show by Show" 33A). Laliberté views *Mystère* as the first flower he planted in the Las Vegas desert. Upon its arrival, *Mystère* was bright and different; much like a flower would be as it blooms in the desert, and the name stuck. Cirque du Soleil has since applied this term to each of their resident shows in Las Vegas. The implication is that Las Vegas was a dry, desolate wasteland of entertainment until the company arrived bringing their productions, which they view as bright and beautiful flowers. Since the first flower, a small bouquet is now blooming and, according to Daniel Lamarre, President and CEO (chief operating officer) of Cirque du Soleil, "the flower [*Mystère*] in the desert has bloomed beautifully and will bloom forever" ("*Mystère* by Cirque du Soleil Celebrates" n. pag.).

After a discussion of Las Vegas' entertainment history, I provide an analysis of Cirque du Soleil as it grew from street performance to the global entertainment machine it is today. In presenting Cirque's history, I discuss the thirty-one productions Cirque has created since their founding in 1984. I also describe the staffing structure of the company

and the key players today. These three chapters provide the groundwork for my in-depth discussions of each of the seven “flowers in the desert.” The work concludes with my analysis of Cirque’s success in Las Vegas and my projections about the future flowers that Cirque will plant there. Additionally, I have included an appendix, which lists the live production chronology in a table format for ease of reference while reading this document.

CHAPTER II

A CULTURAL ENTERTAINMENT HISTORY OF LAS VEGAS: IDENTIFYING THE ROOTS FOR THE “FLOWERS IN THE DESERT”

*The biggest draw was the shows. Inspired by the Sands, which had been the first to hire a top-flight entertainment director, the new resorts poached managers from the hottest nightclubs on both coasts, and charged them with booking the brightest stars in the country. By the mid-fifties, the Strip marquees boasted what one reporter called "a wider choice of top-banana talent" than could be found even on Broadway. Suddenly, for the price of a cup of coffee, visitors to Las Vegas could catch the kind of act that they had only seen on the silver screen. (Ives, *Las Vegas: an Unconventional History* n. pag.)*

Middle America thinks of Las Vegas as “Sin City.” To some, there is nothing more in the Nevada desert than the “Las Vegas Strip” which is home to prostitution, gambling, performing has-beens, and general debauchery. In fact, there is more to the Strip than this; the entertainment offerings in Las Vegas are varied, including showgirls, lounge acts, headliners, the resorts themselves and, now, Cirque du Soleil. To consider the niche that Cirque du Soleil has carved for itself from the perceived wasteland of neon lights and scantily clad women, the history of entertainment in Las Vegas that precedes Cirque’s first

Las Vegas resident show must be reviewed. In *Neon Metropolis*, Hal Rothman says, “today people visit Las Vegas to visit Las Vegas. It’s the Las Vegas experience. But before Las Vegas was ‘Las Vegas’ it was a road stop on the way to Hollywood” (31). Rather than consider the entertainment that predated Cirque du Soleil’s first Las Vegas show, *Mystère*, in a historically linear manner, I propose to examine it from a categorical perspective. In the following chapter, I group the kinds of entertainment available on the Las Vegas Strip into the following general categories: booze and gambling, the nightclub act, the visual extravaganza, and fantasy hotels. Looking at what has preceded Cirque makes it possible to see that Cirque is part of a long entertainment history and that Cirque combines the best, and even the worst at times, of what that history contains, making it an excellent way to preserve traditions while reaching out to a new clientele, the international visitor

MISTER LAS VEGAS

Of all the entertainers who have graced the stages on and around the Las Vegas Strip, there is only one self-proclaimed “Mister Las Vegas,” Liberace. He is so much a part of the Las Vegas entertainment landscape that a museum opened there to celebrate his life as a performer. From his flamboyant costumes, to his elaborate production style, to his outlandish persona, he is the complete Las Vegas package. Liberace, or Wladziu Valentino Liberace, as he was christened, first came to Las Vegas in 1944 when he was hired by Maxine Lewis, the entertainment director for the Last Frontier Hotel, to perform in the hotel’s Ramona Room for \$750 per week. During his tenure at the Last Frontier, he was courted to perform at other venues, but Liberace hated change. He remained loyal to his Las Vegas home at the Last Frontier, so much so, that when Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel

opened the Flamingo Hotel in 1946, Liberace declined the offer to become the headliner at the new venue. Siegel wanted an entertainer with Liberace's style and draw. Unwilling to take "no" for an answer, he repeatedly tried to entice Liberace to the Flamingo, but the pianist/singer continued to perform exclusively at the Last Frontier. In 1947, Siegel invited Liberace to his Los Angeles home with the hopes of swaying the young performer's decision. Liberace declined the invitation by saying, "everybody told me not to get too chummy with the guy" (Macy and Macy 27). It is fortunate that Liberace made this choice as Bugsy Siegel was shot and killed on that particular trip to Los Angeles.

Six years later, however, Liberace did consider a move. In 1953, the brand new Riviera Hotel offered him an "unheard-of fifty thousand dollars a week" (Land and Land 150) to break his contract with the Last Frontier. According to Frank Sennes, the entertainment director at both the Stardust and the Desert Inn during the 1950s, this outrageous salary "killed showbiz in the nightclubs all over the country" (Graham 34). The offer proved irresistible, and Liberace was there to cut the ribbon in 1955 on the first modern high-rise on the Las Vegas Strip (Papa 137). He brought with him a twenty-three-piece orchestra, an extravagant performance wardrobe, rhinestone jewelry and his irrepressible charm. His opening show featured actress Joan Crawford as the official hostess for the evening and was a sold out hit.

After seventeen years at the Riviera, another hotel wooed Liberace. In 1972, the Las Vegas Hilton offered him a salary of \$300,000 per week (Bob Thomas 197). This figure represented more than any other entertainer had ever been paid to perform in Las Vegas. Ten years later Liberace, who was loathe to move to another new venue, was forced to leave the Las Vegas Hilton due to changes in the entertainment policy at the resort (Bob

Thomas 216). He returned to an old home, the Riviera. He marked the return by “commission[ing] a \$300,000, twenty-five-foot cape of white fox pelts. “‘They’re *virgin* fox pelts,’ he told the audience, twinkling. ‘It took *forever* to find them’” (Bob Thomas 216). Breaking with his need to create a long-term home in a single hotel, Liberace became more nomadic in his later entertainment life. He starred at the Sahara, at the MGM Grand Hotel, and at Caesar’s Palace, while he actively maintained a tour and television career. He lived like a gypsy performer for the next four years, but his pace soon slowed. In August of 1986, Liberace played for two weeks at Caesar’s Palace; this would prove to be his last Las Vegas gig. After closing the Palace, he left Las Vegas for Palm Springs where he died the following year. His career spanned over forty years on the Las Vegas Strip; he was known as “Mister Las Vegas” when he performed there or in any other location throughout the world.

But the performer was so much more than the history. He was the complete showman. Liberace was a virtuoso pianist who could have played classical piano at any venue in the world but he chose Las Vegas. He combined his virtuosity with charming audience banter. He further combined classical pieces, which he had cut down to four or six minutes, with some Americana boogie-woogie and his engaging smile. According to Thomas Ainlay, Jr., “he developed a style unique even in a city filled with talent” (131). His show was presented in what *Time Magazine* called “glorious excess,” with his costumes covered in rhinestones, ostrich feathers, bugle bead and exotic furs. His signature stage piece was his rhinestone-studded piano and the iconic, ornate silver candelabrum that he always carried onstage at the top of the show and placed carefully on the piano. William Henry of *Time* magazine says, “He charted a path followed by the unlikeliest of protégés, from Elvis Presley to Elton John and Boy George: the sex idol as peacock androgyny” (82).

Thomas Ainlay, Jr. argues, “Liberace’s image was not about riches as much as it was about richness, a quality he managed to convey to fans” (131). He combined charm with wit and outrageousness. He never took himself or anyone else too seriously and he presented Las Vegas audience members with an evening of pure enchanting performance that was singular in goal: pure entertainment.

Even after his death, fans flocked to Las Vegas to “see” Liberace. Until its closing in 2010, the Liberace Museum drew crowds. Liberace opened the museum himself in a former strip mall on Tropicana Boulevard in 1979. The museum housed a bevy of his iconic belongings including several of his trademark candelabras, many of his stage costumes and some of his favorite cars. Also commemorating Mister Las Vegas are numerous Liberace impersonators still playing in shows on the strip. The most notable is Daryl Wagner, who portrays the man and the legend as part of the *Legends in Concert* show running nightly at Harrah’s Las Vegas.

I begin this account of Las Vegas entertainment with Liberace not only because of his popularity and longevity but also because he embodied two characteristic Las Vegas entertainment styles: the nightclub act and visual extravagance. Before discussing them in detail, I turn to the mode that is the city’s entertainment bedrock.

BOOZE AND GAMBLING

Las Vegas began as a stopping point for the railroad heading west, but the railway stop did little to create any type of entertainment culture in this tiny town. The few churches that were established in Las Vegas’s first days strongly influenced the small struggling town. Heavily restricted by the bans posted by the churches of the time, the city

permitted the sale of alcohol only in the region known as Block 16. Historians believe that this area developed as a crossroads of two cultures, “as an area where the elite gathered to imbibe in genteel surroundings or as a saloon district where rowdy gamblers and painted ladies moved across sawdust floors” (Moehring and Green 30). The first real “casino” in Las Vegas was the Arizona Club, built by J.O. “Jim” McIntosh and opened on March 31, 1906 (McCracken 24). Often called the “Queen of Block 16,” it was built to be the most elaborate gambling hall in Las Vegas. “The front doors and fittings featured leaded beveled glass, and the fifty-by-fifty-by-seventy-five-foot bar and columns were made of mahogany. Gaslights lit up the bar . . . The Arizona Club included nickel slot machines, faro, roulette, blackjack, and fifteen-cent drinks” (Moehring and Green 31). Several other clubs that offered gambling and drinking surrounded the Arizona Club and some even had back rooms where prostitutes could ply their trade. The Arizona Club, however, did not. This changed in 1912, when McIntosh sold the property. The club’s new owner followed the neighboring establishments’ practices and the Arizona Club became “the first Las Vegas saloon to build a second story for the express reason of offering prostitution to please its patrons” (Ainlay and Gabaldon 30). Since local government largely ignored these types of saloons, Block 16 became known throughout the West as a place to buy both liquor and human entertainment, with a bit of gambling available on the side. The boom to the area ended in 1910 when a flood destroyed a portion of the nearby railroad, an industry upon which the burgeoning town relied. This event caused the area to fall into an economic depression that stunted the growth of the town, including the infamous red light district. During the ensuing economic slump, the town slowly expanded, but mostly as a home for newly arrived Americans who were attracted to the apparent loose morals and the cheap land.

The population began to climb again in the 1920s. The 1926 *Las Vegas Review* stated, "Las Vegas has five churches, two large banks, two newspapers, electric lighting and telephone systems, a good public library, and all the improvements of a modern community" (Moehring and Green 57). Unable to rely on the railroad as an engine of growth, the citizens of Las Vegas looked for a new source of economic expansion. They discovered the tourist industry, but to support it, the town required a solid infrastructure that could support the families needed to staff the town for tourists. As the town was preparing for the proposed tourist boom, a newer and more immediate call for amenities was heard. The construction of the Boulder Dam on the nearby Colorado River was announced. Dam workers would be moving to Las Vegas both alone and with families, and the town needed to be ready for their arrival. With the proposed influx of both new residents and tourists, the town began a monumental growth spurt with general stores, restaurants, hospitals, schools and, of course, entertainment venues.

In 1924, J.R. Garehime opened a music and jewelry store that offered every type of musical instrument available. Four years later Ernie Cragin and William Pike opened the town's first indoor movie theatre, the El Portal Theatre. The theater provided a welcome escape from the heat in the hot summer months. It boasted seven hundred and thirteen of the best seats in town from which patrons could both see and, later, hear the newest movies from Hollywood. The first film shown was Clara Bow's *Ladies of the Mob* and in the following year, the El Portal premiered "talkies" to the area (Ainlay and Gabaldon 30). In the years that followed, the theatre became the site for many movie premieres, especially those that were set in Las Vegas or other areas of the "wild west."

The year 1924 also saw the opening of the first real resort in Las Vegas. Edward Taylor bought the Kiel Ranch, a working horse and cattle ranch, just on the outskirts of town and converted it to a dude ranch. Taylor later dug two lakes so the resort could offer boating, fishing and swimming. Each of the lakes had a small island at the center on which stood a small building. One of the two island's buildings had a band shell and stage for live performances, while the other building had a trap door to hide whiskey and beer, which were still restricted to the Block 16 area of Las Vegas exclusively. The hiding place for the illegal alcohol prevented its discovery by any local authorities that might enter the resort property.

Another boost to the town's population began in 1928 when the Boulder Dam project was approved and the town was festooned with a huge banner that read "Welcome to Las Vegas: Gateway to Boulder Dam." Entertainment became a necessity in Las Vegas during the construction of the dam. The workers lived near the site in Boulder City and needed a place to relax and spend their hard earned time off as well as their hard earned dollars. Boulder City had strict regulations regarding the offerings there: "there would be no liquor, no gambling, or other practices deemed injurious to the worker" (Land 58). Las Vegas was a short drive away, and soon became the place where workers could let off some steam after a hard workweek. The primary entertainment offerings at this time were more of the saloon type, generally female singers with bawdy tavern songs and questionable morals and gambling. An occasional touring performance troupe might make an appearance in these rough-and-tumble towns and offer an early American melodrama, but little that was offered as "entertainment" was meant to be more than a fleeting diversion for the men working the dam.

The Boulder City workers were just the first of the visitors who would come to Las Vegas for the nightlife. The railway workers, too, had to find a way to escape closely regulated employer-provided housing. Like the dam workers, they flocked to Las Vegas, specifically to the area of town east of Block 16. Block 16 was still the only area in which the sale of liquor was legal. Anyone possessing land outside of Block 16 who was caught selling liquor would be forced by state law to forfeit his land to the railroad. Block 16 became the most popular locale in the town in the late 1930s and early 1940s and began to establish a sense that Las Vegas was the epitome of the Wild West ideal. Unregulated liquor sales combined with liberal marriage and even more liberal divorce laws cemented Las Vegas's image as a modern Babylon. In his 2008 book *Las Vegas Babylon*, Jeff Burbank writes, "behind the stereotype glitter and glamour, Las Vegas is America's version of ancient Babylon, a mixture of eye-catching architecture and sensual excess, where the desires and foolhardiness of its visitors and residents are played out in full, sometimes tragically" (25). This same liberal attitude allowed the legalization of gambling to fly through the system in 1931, and little rough and rowdy Las Vegas began to move toward the wild place it is today. "Fear of national reaction was no longer a major concern, because Nevada already enjoyed a maverick image, thanks to its liberal marriage and divorce laws" (Moehring 20).

Having completed the railway line through Nevada and the Boulder Dam, renamed the Hoover Dam in 1935, workers moved away in search of other employment and the city began to fall into another decline ("Hoover Dam"). In 1938 former Los Angeles vice squad member, Guy McAfee, purchased a small nightclub club on a stretch of land just outside the city limits of Las Vegas. Situated four miles south of Fremont Street on Highway 91, the Los

Angeles Highway, the Pair-O-Dice Club was a gambling establishment with little to offer aside from its location, just outside the city limits. This meant the Pair-O-Dice Club was not under the same laws regarding gambling as establishments within the city limits. McAfee's club became increasingly popular for what it offered--gambling. McAfee named this area the "Strip" after the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles.

The 1950s marked the beginning of the first real boom in Las Vegas for tourism in what was to become a repeatable action. One of the reasons behind the boom was what Vegas had to offer its guests. Luxury hotels were becoming the norm, but they were also available in other, less desolate, areas. Gambling was less common within the United States, but was available in some locales, so this too did not make Las Vegas unique. The real draw to Las Vegas for tourism was the combination and quality of the amenities; high-end resort hotels with legal gambling establishments and entertainment with high production values. Combine these options with a reputation that Redd Foxx once said "is based on gambling, drinking, and women. That's the big three" (Weatherford 219) and you have a travel destination that piqued the curiosity of the repressive McCarthy era population. The town was considered wild, a maverick. A mere four hours from Los Angeles, California, by car and a stop on the railway, Las Vegas was relatively simple to get to, and get to it, people did. The casino had the population they needed to keep the doors open but to keep them coming back, they needed star quality entertainment.

THE NIGHTCLUB ACT

The earliest "Las Vegas strip" resort was the El Rancho Vegas built by California hotel owner, Thomas (Tommy) Hull. Enticed by the "lower land costs and taxes, Hull chose

not to construct a casino downtown but instead set his sights on a property on the highway at the intersection of San Francisco Avenue (now Sahara Avenue)” (McCracken 54). Hull hired a Los Angeles architectural firm to design a motor hotel with a western theme, the El Rancho Vegas. On April 3, 1941, the El Rancho Vegas opened its doors for business with a gala celebration. The loosely western themed El Rancho offered something that the hotels in Las Vegas’ downtown did not, convenience. The hotel offered shops, restaurants, a travel agency, horseback riding, swimming, lodging, parking and gambling. The property boasted

a rustic interior, the main building housed a casino, a restaurant . . . Opera House Showroom, and several shops. Low-rise bungalow and cottage buildings radiated outward from the main structure. A large pool and lush gardens contributed . . . to the El Rancho reputation as Las Vegas’ first “resort hotel. (Moehring 44)

As if the hotel itself, with its honky-tonk western theme, did not provide enough entertainment, the El Rancho also had a showroom. The 250-seat Opera House Showroom offered a variety show featuring Hollywood’s Frank Fay and the El Rancho Starlets. Fay had been a popular vaudeville comedian in the 1920s whose career had turned to films with the introduction of the “talkies.” His raw humor on the vaudeville circuit made him famous, but his style fell out of favor in the more conservative Depression years of the 1930s. Hull brought Fay to the El Rancho and backed his act with a bevy of beautiful chorus girls, the El Rancho Starlets. The combination of the comedy act and the beautiful women made for a stage show that had something to offer all the patrons. As the resort gained popularity, the

El Rancho's showroom boasted some of Hollywood's top stars, such as comedians Milton Berle and Jackie Gleason, and singers Jimmy Durante, Dean Martin and Andy Williams.

The popularity of the El Rancho spawned the next strip resort: The Last Frontier. Built by R.E. Griffith and William Moore in 1942 on the site of the Guy McAfee's Pair-O-Dice club, The Last Frontier also had a western theme. It had all of the trappings that the El Rancho boasted; the difference was its scale. Everything at the Last Frontier was bigger and more extravagant. Not only did it have a bigger main showroom and bigger pool, which could be seen from the highway as an enticement to dusty travellers, its entertainment offerings were more over the top. The Last Frontier offered stagecoach rides, included as transportation to and from the airport to the hotel, horseback riding, and even a small western town named the Last Frontier Village; the town is believed to be Walt Disney's inspiration for Frontierland in Disneyland. The Last Frontier Village had many museum pieces and several shops filled with purchasable western antiques and souvenirs. The most notable aspect of the Last Frontier Village was the establishment of a church, The Little Church of the West, the first wedding chapel on the Strip. The showroom of the Last Frontier, the 600-seat Ramona Room, hosted Hollywood entertainers, including the little known actor Ronald Reagan. The press panned Reagan's performance in 1954; he was never invited to perform again. It was here in the Ramona Room that Mister Las Vegas made his first home and remained for six years. The Last Frontier was the first of the Las Vegas hotels to offer a Sunday brunch buffet, which attracted even the locals. Many attribute the idea of the casino buffet to this establishment. The Last Frontier underwent several name changes as it changed ownership, going from the Last Frontier, to the

Frontier, to the New Frontier and finally closing its doors on July 15, 2007 (Las Vegas Lynn n. pag.).

Live entertainment was already a standard in Las Vegas by the early 1950s, so it was not unique to the Strip properties. Well-known, moderately known and unknown performers had been plying their trades in venues that varied from very intimate, with as few as ten tables and maybe a piano, to ballrooms that sat as many as one hundred tables and still had room for a combo band. The style of their entertainment varied as much as the venues. They were comedians, crooners, and hoofers, all generally performing solo or in small groups. Rarely did the act involve more than three or four performers. It was this broad type of entertainment, with no specific set of rules and rarely scripted, which came to be referred to as a “nightclub act.” The acts relied upon the intimate appeal of the performer to the audience, regardless of the size of the venue; the performers often bantered between themselves and included members of the audience. The entertainment style appeared very casual and off-the-cuff, which allowed the audience to feel “at home” with the performers. These acts were becoming very popular in lounges and resorts throughout the United States during the 1950s. New York City music promoter Bill Miller recognized the potential for the nightclub performer in Las Vegas of both the unknown and headliner varieties. He moved to Nevada and began booking acts into the clubs and lounges of the Las Vegas Strip. From his arrival through the late 1970s, he was responsible for booking big name performers such as Mae West, Tom Jones, Sonny and Cher, Barbra Streisand and Elvis Presley, along with hundreds of entertainment “unknowns.” In Hopkins and Evans’ *The First 100*, Miller says, “I brought in people nobody believed could do a nightclub act” (216). His former colleague, Bill Layne adds, “He was an innovator; he

brought in stars nobody else could get to play Las Vegas, and by doing that, he permanently raised the standard for Las Vegas entertainment” (Hopkins and Evans 216).

Due to the proximity of Los Angeles to Las Vegas, a mere 270 miles, the entertainers who populated the nightclubs on the Las Vegas strip were mostly hired from California as opposed to New York City. Many of the Las Vegas headliners made their permanent homes in Los Angeles and performed regularly in the posh resorts in Palm Springs, California, which was only 274 miles from Vegas. This, by Las Vegas standards, made them almost locals. Innumerable performers played Sin City at some point in their careers, some with more success than others. Some of the performers were right for their era, like Jimmy Durante, Sophie Tucker, and Debbie Reynolds. Other performers got their significant show business start on the Las Vegas Strip, such as Barbra Streisand and Sammy Davis, Jr. Finally, some performers came to Las Vegas and became so intrinsically linked to the strip that it seems as if they were born to headline there. These are people such as Liberace, Wayne Newton, Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack, and Elvis.

The first of the long line of headliners to create a Vegas persona was the aforementioned, Mister Las Vegas, Liberace. Also known as “Mister Showmanship,” Liberace created an act that transported his audience from their lives and their current situations to a different world: a world of fun filled with silly banter and over the top opulence. With Liberace’s guidance, each audience member was placed at the center of the evening’s performance as if the performance was exclusively presented for him or her. He treated the entire room as if it were his own living room and as if he had brought this circle of friends to his home for the evening. It was the Liberace ease and playful manner with which the Las Vegas headliner became synonymous, and it is Liberace’s style that paved the

way for those entertainers who would follow.

Forty plus years later, the nightclub act remains on the Las Vegas Strip, as it does throughout the entertainment world. Moreover, in January 1996 Wayne Newton took the stage at The Desert Inn as he had done so many times before. On this particular night, the show had been sold out well in advance for one reason; it marked Newton's 25,000th performance. He opened his show that night by saying, "the first 25 [thousand] were so easy, the next 25 [thousand] should be a breeze" (Macy and Macy 10). For Newton, the first twenty-five did prove remarkably easy. Newton first came to Las Vegas in 1959. He had dropped out of high school in his home of Phoenix, Arizona, and followed his brother, Jerry, to perform with him for two weeks at the Fremont Hotel in downtown Las Vegas. The two weeks proved profitable enough for the young duo that they stayed another six years. While at the Fremont, they were paid \$380 per week for six shows a night, six days a week.

Eight years later, in 1967, Newton took the stage as a solo artist, signing a contract with Howard Hughes' Summa Corporation to perform at the Desert Inn, the Sands and the Frontier. Newton's contract stated that he was to perform three shows a night, seven days per week for the next twelve years, and Newton never missed a performance. Newton has performed in Las Vegas, now his home, consistently ever since. He now headlines at the Wayne Newton Theatre at the Stardust Hotel on the Strip. He is referred to as the "King of the Strip." Some even venture to say that he has filled Liberace's rhinestone shoes and has become the new "Mister Las Vegas."

Aside from his longevity, what makes Wayne Newton so much a Las Vegas icon? It is his showroom act. Much like Liberace, he transports his audience out of the giant venue in which they sit and makes them feel as if they are being entertained privately in his home.

He reaches out to them and draws them to him. Land and Land say, "over the years he has become a one-man variety show" (153). He is not flashy in the manner of Liberace, but he provides good solid entertainment. He is a known quantity. He always closes his show with his old favorites, the most notable of which is "Danke Schön." The audience loves him, and he them. He is almost as much a part of the Las Vegas Strip as the casinos themselves.

As the casinos scrambled to top one another for entertainment offerings, 1951 marked the arrival of a new personality to Las Vegas entertainment, a name and persona who would be forever linked with "Sin City" in all its incarnations: Frank Sinatra. It was with Frank Sinatra that the nightclub act evolved from a style of entertainment that merely served as a diversion from gambling to the highlight of the evening's entertainment. He changed the status of the nightclub performer to that of a star. Frank Sinatra took his first engagement at the Desert Inn for six weeks. The length of his contract at the Desert Inn was just long enough, by Nevada law, to grant him residency in the state thus providing him the required status to divorce his wife Nancy. It was Frank Sinatra who "was a one-man chamber of commerce who gave Las Vegas something . . . important: an image" (Hopkins and Evans 220). Gregory Peck said of Sinatra, "he brought unmatched excitement to the Strip and defined the word 'swinger' for all times" (Hopkins and Evans 220). Sinatra is credited with bringing a sense of class and style to the desert west. Sinatra gave his last performance at the MGM Grand to a sold out 5,000 seat house in May 1994. Clark County Commissioner Lorraine Hunt said that Sinatra's "aura brought international royalty and made us a global destination" (Hopkins and Evans 220). Sinatra's hold on the Las Vegas entertainment scene is so strong that upon his death in 1998, his beloved Las Vegas dimmed the lights on the Strip in his honor. Frank Sinatra's solo performances of the 1950s

defined the headliner style of Las Vegas entertainment.

During the Sinatra 1950s, Las Vegas saw its first substantial growth since the railroad influenced population boom of the 1930s. The population along the Las Vegas strip area grew with the opening of the Sands Hotel and Casino and the Sahara Resort in 1952. The Sands featured the Copa Room into which Sinatra was booked off and on for the next fifteen years. Mike Weatherford says, “the room . . . would lift the Sands above anything yet seen in Vegas” (*Cult Vegas* 11). Although Sinatra christened the Copa room, he was not its only headliner nor was the Copa his only venue. He could be seen performing, and playing, all along the Las Vegas Strip, but he considered the Sands his personal playground.

The year 1960 marked an important event in the entertainment career of Frank Sinatra. In that year, he brought some friends to Las Vegas for a special show; the show was called “The Summit.” Entertainment Director of the New Frontier Hotel, George Schlatter, said that this show “put Vegas on the front of every newspaper in the world” (*Land and Land* 141). “The Summit” brought Sinatra, Dean Martin, Joey Bishop, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Peter Lawford onstage at the same time. They had been known to “hang out” together in Las Vegas and each had performed at numerous venues up and down the Strip, but it was this event that brought them together performing on a single stage. The group had been known previously as “the Clan,” but the press soon began to call them “the Rat Pack.” It was Sinatra, himself, who titled the event “The Summit” and named himself, “Chairman of the Board.” The 1960 film *Ocean’s Eleven* further brought them together in the public’s eye and from then on the name stuck. The group began to perform two shows a night, setting the stage for the production dynamic that headliners still use today in Las Vegas entertainment.

The early show was cleaner, more for the wife and family, while the later show was more risqué, offering entertainment for a mature audience.

Big names, big budgets and high quality entertainment brought not only regular tourists to see the act but celebrities as well, including politicians and jet setters. The five members of the Rat Pack shared the single star dressing room at the Sands. It was in this dressing room that Sinatra announced to the gang that they had a very famous person in the audience that night, John F. Kennedy, Jr. The young senator was not the only famous attendee of the Rat Pack's performances, many others followed and many more were to come. The earliest of the jet set crowd were beginning to see Las Vegas as an ideal getaway. One could be there in a mere four hour drive from Los Angeles, but it was far enough away from California that the tabloids were not likely to follow. The sun, high-end entertainment, gambling, and luxury hotels began to bring greater numbers to the Nevada desert, creating a boom for the town in the 1960s. As Las Vegas experienced changes in the next decade, the 1970s brought the city the reputation of being the ultimate adult playground.

Elvis Presley arrived on the Las Vegas entertainment scene with little more than a hiccup. In April of 1956, the former Last Frontier was under new management with a new name, the New Frontier Hotel and Casino. That year the hotel presented a newcomer to Las Vegas. The audience had expected to see Shecky Greene, a regular, in the New Frontier's Venus Room, but instead a young entertainer from Memphis was introduced. His billing called him "The Atomic Powered Singer"--a reference to the atomic bomb testing that was happening at nearby Groome Lake and was the subject of much Las Vegas hype. Elvis Presley's manager, Colonel Tom Parker, was convinced that the Memphis sensation would play to sold out houses in Sin City; after all "Heartbreak Hotel" was number one on the

Billboard Charts. Colonel Parker was wrong. The audiences in Vegas were accustomed to comedians like Shecky Greene and crooners like Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Liberace, not pelvis-shaking rock and roll stars like the young man from Memphis. *Variety* said, "Elvis Presley... doesn't hit the mark here" and *Newsweek* compared his debut to "a jug of corn liquor at a champagne party" (Land and Land 135). Elvis completed the two-week run for which he was booked, but he left Las Vegas a failure as a headliner.

Thirteen years later, in 1963, Elvis returned to Las Vegas with actress Ann-Margaret to film *Viva Las Vegas*. The film tells the story of a fictitious Las Vegas Grand Prix race featuring Presley as a young racecar driver and Ann-Margaret as a hotel swimming instructor who fall madly in love and live happily ever after. He spent several weeks in town and was met with a much warmer response this time. Now he was a household name, and the fans of all ages would not leave the young performer alone. Four years later, he returned to the Las Vegas strip with his beautiful, young fiancée, Priscilla, to get married. On May 1, 1967, they were married in the hotel owner's suite at the Aladdin Hotel ("Elvis Presley & Priscilla Beaulieu" n. pag.). By this time, the Beatles had invaded America, but Las Vegas still called Elvis "the King," and his supremacy in the American music industry was undisputed there.

Two years later Elvis' return performances in Las Vegas helped re-establish the city's claim to the title "the Entertainment Capital of the World." In 1969, the intersection of two events created the Elvis persona that would come to be known as "Vegas Elvis." The events were the decline in popularity of Elvis' films and the opening of Kirk Kerkorian's International Hotel. Kerkorian's hotel boasted 1,500 rooms, and was the largest to date; furthermore, the hotel had three performance spaces, the largest of which, the Showroom

International, had 2,000 seats. Kerkorian's general manager, Alex Shoofy, suggested that a venue that big would need a name equally big to inaugurate it. Shoofy extended the honor of inaugurating the Showroom International to Elvis, who was a star. As the performer was in the early stages of what looked to be a career end, Elvis' manager, Colonel Tom Parker, declined the offer stating, "absolutely not . . . We will not open under any conditions. It's much too risky. Let someone else stick their necks out" (Hopkins and Evans 300). Several months later Barbra Streisand christened the room with sold out performances. Colonel Parker then saw the potential for a career boost for his client and signed a four-week contract on behalf of "the King" which paid a weekly salary of \$100,000. Elvis considered this opportunity his "comeback" to the American public. He had performed before in Las Vegas, but his performance at the New Frontier Hotel had brought less than stellar reviews. Fearful of another disastrous reception upon his return to performing in Las Vegas, Elvis began scanning the Strip for inspiration. He was looking for someone on the Las Vegas stage that could help him to create his own onstage Las Vegas persona. In his search, he discovered Tom Jones. Jones became the secret source of his "Vegas persona." It was Jones's tight clothes and manipulation of the middle-aged female crowd that gave Elvis ideas for his costume and show. Backed by a thirty-five-piece orchestra, his five-member rock band, and two gospel choirs, he took his signature moves to the Showroom International stage. He opened to a VIP crowd on July 26, 1969, and was an immediate success. The next day the Colonel sat with Alex Shoofy to negotiate a long-term deal. The deal struck was that Elvis would appear for four weeks twice a year at a salary of \$125,000 per week. By the time, Elvis had concluded his first four-week stint; the International had earned \$2 million from his show, a new record in Las Vegas entertainment. According to

Hopkins and Evans, "it was the first time that a Las Vegas resort ever had profited from an entertainer" (244). Between 1969 and 1976, Elvis sold out an unprecedented 837 consecutive performances and played to more than 2.5 million fans (McKenzie and Whitehair n. pag.). During this period, he performed two shows a day, one at eight pm and the second at midnight, seven days a week for the month. Since he was such a hit for the hotel, Kerkorian hotel built a penthouse residence for him on the thirtieth floor, in which Elvis resided anytime he was in town. Those closest to the performer believe that it was this contract and others like it that started the singer down a road of excess. In an attempt to keep the show fresh, Elvis appeared in 1970 in his now famous white jumpsuit, bedecked with jewels and a huge rhinestone belt, intended to hide his burgeoning belly. This newer Elvis was showing the downside of Las Vegas life, too much money, too much time, too many drugs, and too much alcohol.

In August 1977, twenty-one years after his initial bomb in Vegas, Elvis died at his home in Memphis, Tennessee. He had seen a meteoric rise to fame, a life of excess and finally a death by overdose. That being said, the King still has not "left the building" in Las Vegas. Even today, sprinkled along the Las Vegas strip are Elvis impersonators, from street corner entertainers to the "Vegas Elvis" featured in the *Legends in Concert* show at the Flamingo Hotel and Casino. Additionally, every souvenir shop carries Elvis memorabilia. Even Cirque du Soleil would resurrect The King in its 2010 show *Viva Elvis* that played at the Aria Resort and Casino until August 31, 2012.

THE VISUAL EXTRAVAGANZA

I will consider two kinds of visual extravaganza in Las Vegas: spectacular bodies as seen in the traditional showgirl shows along the Strip as well as spectacular circus acts. Both produce a sense of wonder in audiences but in different manners; both are important to the evolution of the Las Vegas entertainment style.

Spectacular Bodies

In his 1977 book, *Inside Las Vegas*, Mario Puzo wrote “Las Vegas has more beautiful women than any town its size in the world. It may have as many beautiful women as any city in the world no matter what its size” (176). Beautiful showgirls were introduced to Las Vegas in the 1940s as they backed Frank Fay at the El Rancho Hotel, but in their own right, they became an alternative to headliners in Las Vegas entertainment beginning in the late 1950s. “In 1955 [Bill] Miller . . . bought an interest in the new Dunes Hotel and signed on as the entertainment director . . . That started all the big production shows you have in Vegas today” (Hopkins and Evans 219). In 1957, Miller booked Harold Minsky’s show, *Minsky’s Follies*. *Minsky’s Follies* was not a new idea in entertainment, just new to Las Vegas. The show was renowned as a mimic of the popular entertainment revues in Paris. What was most remarkable about Minsky’s production was that the troupe performed topless, an act which brought strong criticism but sold out performances in its first week. The show brought, not only, beautiful, exotic, and foreign women to the strip: it brought nudity.

Capitalizing on the popularity of the showgirl extravaganza that Minsky brought to The Dunes, Miller brought the *Lido de Paris*, a Parisian dance review, to the Stardust Resort

and Casino in 1958 (“Lido at the Stardust” n. pag.). Miller says,

this was the first time that we changed the conceptualization as to being an American location to an International location . . . [Las Vegas] now brings in this show and because it’s Parisian and because it’s a well established identity . . . that means you are dealing with a show that has some cultural overtones to it. It comes to Las Vegas and it is a sensation. (Koran 31)

Somehow the show at the Stardust seemed more tasteful and more exotic than *Minsky’s Follies*. In her 2002 thesis, *Lights, Audience, Profit: The Evolution of the Las Vegas Spectacle*, Jamie Lee Rana Koran says, “the nudity was not seen as shameful and only added to the idea of the sophisticated Parisian women wearing costumes and jewelry that sold an iced sex appeal. There was a cool elegance to the dances and the ways the women handled themselves” (32). The show boasted sixty of the world’s most beautiful women but only about half actually appeared bare breasted. The production itself was a mix of dances of different styles: modern, classical and tap interspersed with promenade numbers. It was these promenades that featured the topless showgirls who more than made up for their lack of attire with elaborate feathered and jeweled headdresses, some weighing as much as sixty pounds. The women appeared onstage, at the top of a grand staircase, escorted by a handsome costumed male escort. After descending the stairs, they walked and posed elegantly around the stage. These women were selected based on very strict standards. Robert McCracken says, “before a girl could become a member of the line she had to meet three requirements: she had to have extensive ballet training, stand a minimum height of five feet, eight inches— with most of that leg—and radiate beauty” (82).

The popularity of the *Lido* led Bill Miller to book another showgirl show the following year, this time at the Tropicana Hotel. He brought the *Folies Bergère* from Paris in 1959. Along with the show, Miller also brought his old friend, producer Donn Arden. Arden produced *Folies Bergère* for the Tropicana and the show remained in production from 1959 until March 28, 2009, making it the longest running show on the Las Vegas strip having performed 29,000 times during the fifty-year long run (Navadi n. pag.). In bringing the *Folies Bergère* and Donn Arden together to the Strip, Miller cemented what would become a hallmark of Las Vegas production: the scantily clad, feathered and jeweled showgirl revues. The idea behind the *Folies Bergère* remains visible on the Strip today in such shows as *Crazy Girls* at the Riviera Hotel and Casino, *Crazy Horse Paris* at the MGM Grand and *Jubilee!* at Bally's Las Vegas Resort and Casino (Green n. pag.). Donn Arden's production, *Jubilee!* opened in August of 1981 and is considered to be the most like the original *Folies Bergère* on the strip today (Domanick "A Peek Inside 'Jubilee!'" n. pag.). The burlesque show combines over the top Bob Mackie costumes lavishly embellished with feathers and rhinestones and beautiful, tall, leggy showgirls. "It's been more than 30 years since its debut, and Donn Arden's lavish stage spectacular, *Jubilee!* is still wowing audiences and winning awards year after year. *Jubilee!* is a classic Las Vegas production--in fact, it's the last authentic showgirl revue in the city and remains synonymous with Las Vegas" (ballyslasvegas.com). This show was one of Arden's last before his death and marked the final collaboration of Arden and Miller in Las Vegas. This entertainment style was also referenced, without the bare breasts, in Cirque du Soleil's *Viva, Elvis* at the Aria Resort and Casino. Although Arden was renowned for the showgirls of the Las Vegas strip, Hopkins and Evans state, "[he] didn't invent topless showgirls parading sensually wearing heavy

feathered headdresses, glimmering costumes, and omnipresent smiles . . . then surround them with massive stage sets and mind boggling special effects. But the late producer was . . . the first to fuse these elements into creative, over-the-top presentations” (253).

Nevertheless, Arden realized that naked female breasts alone would hold an audience captive for only so long. His background in vaudeville made him look for additional acts to keep the spectacle always changing. In the 1970s, he began to bring animal performers such as Siegfried & Roy and Jon Berosini, as well as illusionists who performed without animals to his Las Vegas revues. Arden’s influx of magic and illusion was at the forefront of Las Vegas entertainment by 1992. A survey taken in that year showed that there were more than thirty professional magicians playing Las Vegas regularly (Rothman 43). Arden died in 1994, but the extravagance and sensuality of his shows have left lasting marks on Las Vegas’ entertainment legacy. In testament to his contribution to Las Vegas, the lights of the strip were dimmed upon his death.

Spectacular Circus Acts

In the 1970s, Las Vegas became the land of the magician, with performers such as David Copperfield and Doug Henning. An elaboration of the standard magic act was the act brought to Las Vegas by the duo of Siegfried Frischbacher and Roy Horn, who combined magic with an exotic animal show. The team came to Las Vegas as a specialty act in 1971 from the *Lido de Paris* show to perform at the Stardust Hotel and Casino. Through the 1970s, they performed their act in Vegas at any hotel that would hire them as a specialty number in a variety show. By 1978, they were performing with star billing as the thirty-minute finale of the *Lido de Paris*, back at the Stardust Hotel, but they were still part of

someone else's show ("Siegfried and Roy: The Entertainers" n. pag.). However, after ten years as gypsy performers on the Strip, they were ready for their own show. Their first Las Vegas solo show was *Beyond Belief*, which they performed at the Frontier Hotel from 1981-1988 ("Siegfried and Roy in *Beyond Belief*" n. pag.). The show was greeted with great enthusiasm and the men no longer needed to be referred to anything aside from "Siegfried and Roy." While at the Frontier, they became avid conservationists and instituted a breeding program to help prevent the extinction of white tigers. In 1982, they formed an affiliation with the Cincinnati Zoo and began their conservation project with a single white tiger cub and two striped white tigers, and from this stock, they created the hybrid species known as the Royal White Tigers of Nevada. They performed their magic act twice nightly for three weeks at a time accompanied by their signature white Bengal tigers and a host of other exotic animals (Abowitz, "Siegfried and Roy's Return" n. pag.).

In 1990, Steve Wynn built the duo a habitat for their animals and a theatre for their show at his new Mirage Hotel and Casino. He paid them \$57.5 million a year to perform eight shows a week at this new location, making them one of the highest paid acts on the Las Vegas Strip (Abowitz, "Siegfried and Roy's Return" n. pag.). In addition to exotic animals and magic, the show featured costumes and sets designed by acclaimed theatrical designer John Napier. According to William L. Fox, Wynn's goal in establishing this show at the Mirage was to "offer his patrons entertainment that did not feature nudity or overt sex, [with the hopes of] increasing the appeal of his resort to women" (72). The hotel offered upscale shopping, fine dining and according to Richard O. Davies, "the world's top magic team, Siegfried and Roy, in a production considered . . . the greatest stage extravaganza in entertainment history" (104). Fox contends, Wynn felt that their "pretty boy looks and

glittering costumes . . . fit perfectly with [his] aesthetic rationale behind building the first luxury resort on the strip without neon” (72). No one was sure that his gamble with a different style of show and a lack of neon would succeed, but the show and the casino were an instant success. The sold out show “defined what was possible for family entertainment in Las Vegas” (Fox 72). The show continued to run as a must see for any visiting tourist, until October 3, 2003 when an accident onstage ended the magnificent production. Siegfried and Roy’s Secret Garden (an animal sanctuary) and the legends remain, but the show has gone dark.

In 1990, Cirque du Soleil began negotiations with the management of Caesar’s Palace for a new show in Las Vegas. That same year, Wynn built the new theatre at the Mirage for Siegfried and Roy. Rather than opening in one of the newly constructed Strip properties, Cirque’s first point of entry was slated to be the somewhat older and more sedate Caesar’s Palace. Caesar’s Palace opened in 1966, and although it had been renovated twice since, it remained one of the refined grand dames of the Strip, not succumbing to the tawdry glitz of other properties. Although it did not exactly match the image of a newer, fresher Las Vegas, Caesar’s Palace did offer a grand theatre space, the Circus Maximus, with enough performance space for the troupe to really shine. The show that was slated to open was the root from which *Mystère* would eventually grow. The unnamed show was planned to play upon the theme of the casino itself, being based in Greek and Roman mythology. Upon considering the move to Las Vegas from their touring life, Michel Crête of Cirque du Soleil said,

Vegas . . . was still very influenced by *Les Folies Bergère*, with the scarves, feather boas, etc. There was a European culture already in place, oddly

enough, not an American one...The people who opened the door to something new were Siegfried and Roy. They were the first to move away from the *Folies Bergère* thing. (Babinski 146)

After Cirque's final presentation to the Caesar's Palace entertainment team, Caesar's withdrew their offer. Guy Laliberté says, "*Mystère* was developed for Caesar's Palace . . . but . . . they said it would be too risky and esoteric for a town like Las Vegas" (Babinski 146). This would not be Cirque's last pitch to create a permanent home in Las Vegas, but Cirque du Soleil would have to meet with another Las Vegas visionary, Steve Wynn before they would be able to find their first home in the desert.

FANTASY HOTELS

Bugsy Siegel and his associates, who needed a place to legitimize their earnings from underworld deals in Chicago and New York, were the first notable entrepreneurs after Tommy Hull and R.E. Griffith and William Moore opened their western themed Las Vegas resorts to open a resort on the newly burgeoning Las Vegas Strip. After trying to purchase the El Cortez Hotel in downtown Las Vegas and being declined by the city for his reputed mafia connections, Siegel and associates bought out William (Billy) Wilkerson Sr.'s overextended Strip project, the Flamingo Hotel. Wilkerson was a Hollywood nightclub and restaurant owner and the founder of the *Hollywood Reporter*. According to Hal Rothman's 2003 book *Neon Metropolis*, it was Wilkerson who "envisioned Las Vegas as Beverly Hills in the desert" (10). However, Wilkerson lacked the capital to complete his project, and in order to complete the project, he needed Bugsy Siegel and his friends. Wilkerson had planned this hotel to be Las Vegas' "first national destination...world-renowned spectacle

of gambling, entertainment, and fun by blending the themes of Monte Carlo, Miami Beach, and Havana with the resort like hotels that proceeded” (Rothman 10). The documentation to prove whether Wilkerson ever made any profit on his idea is not available, but it is known that Siegel, Meyer Lansky and company continued with the Flamingo project. In his book *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, Eugene Moehring says, “the Flamingo was the turning point because it combined the sophisticated ambience of a Monte Carlo casino with the exotic luxury of a Miami Beach-Caribbean resort” (49).

Siegel’s resort differed from the previous two on the strip not only in theme, but also in style and class. Instead of a place of fun and cowboys, the Flamingo offered a desert oasis. The elegant hotel had many of the same amenities as the Last Frontier and the El Rancho, but they were taken to a new level, and set a new standard. The dining rooms were first class with chefs hired from New York and Los Angeles. The casino had a European flair à la Monte Carlo with expensive, imported furnishings, instead of a honky-tonk western theme. Important guests and entertainers were drawn from Siegel’s connections in Hollywood. He filled the hotel with stars and starlets not just on stage, but also at the pool and in the shops and restaurants. The Flamingo even had a dress code. Siegel’s backers were eager to see the establishment opened and pushed the grand opening date to December 26, 1946. The opening was a complete failure due, in part, to the fact that the resort was not actually completed at the time of the opening. At this time only the casino, the theatre and the restaurant were open to the public. The Flamingo hosted a second grand opening in March 1947 which was much more successful, but not for Siegel personally, who had been found dead in his Los Angeles home just several months later.

After Siegel's murder much of the original intent in the Flamingo changed. Siegel's original associates (Gus Greenbaum, Morris Rosen, and Moe Sedway) took over the hotel's management and brought in a publicity manager whose first task was to abolish the dress code, remove the stigma of exclusivity from the hotel, and change its name to The Fabulous Flamingo. With its new name, the Flamingo also changed its image from elite to "Everybody Welcome" (McCracken 63). It became a favorite not just with the Hollywood set, but also the local population. The hotel has since gone through numerous owners and several major remodels, so that today it bears little resemblance to Siegel's hotel of the 1946, but the name and the history of the hotel still stand as a reminder of the beginnings of the Las Vegas strip.

The 1960s saw two important events that brought change to the spectacle of lodging on the Vegas strip: the arrival of reclusive billionaire Howard Hughes, and hotel magnates William F. Harrah, and Baron and Conrad Hilton. Harrah and the Hiltons brought their experience and backgrounds in hotel management to the tawdry desert town and turned the face of high end lodging on its ear. They took the burgeoning idea of spectacular themed lodging to the next level. They also dreamed, much as Bugsy Siegel did, of a Las Vegas with class. Howard Hughes arrived in Las Vegas with the intention of bringing his entire corporate empire to the shining desert city because, according to McCracken, "he believed it was one of the last frontiers and one of the last opportunities to build a model city" (89). In 1966, Hughes took over the ninth floor of the Desert Inn. When management complained that he had taken an entire floor reserved for high rollers, Hughes bought the hotel for his exclusive use. After the Desert Inn acquisition, Hughes went on to buy the Sands, the Frontier, the Castaways, the Silver Slipper, and the Landmark. By the end of the 1960s,

McCracken says that Hughes “purchased nearly every vacant lot along the Strip in a 3-mile stretch from the Tropicana to the Sahara” (89). Initially, Hughes seemed a blessing to the Strip’s properties, but his eccentric behavior became his downfall and a detriment to his hotels by the early 1970s.

Gambler and entrepreneur Jay Sarno took another step in the development of the Las Vegas hotel spectacle. The creator of the “cabana motor hotel” idea introduced throughout the United States in the 1950s, Sarno created the first truly “themed” full service property on the Strip. On a visit to Las Vegas in the late 1950s, he found that the accommodations on the Strip were lacking the flourish he felt that Las Vegas should offer its guests. Sarno thought that “the Flamingo was sick—like an old storage room . . . The Desert Inn was a stable . . . Las Vegas had done the Wild West motif to death. What it needed was a little true opulence” (Land and Land 159). He conceived and built Caesars Palace, which he had originally called “Desert Palace” until he saw that the final cost to build the establishment was over \$19 million. This figure represented the most spent to date on a single hotel construction in Las Vegas. He then adorned the interior in an elaborate Greco-Roman style that would impress even an emperor. It was the hotel’s final cost, combined with its architectural and decorative style, which gave Sarno the idea for a new name, “Caesars Palace.” According to Barbara and Myrick Land’s *A Short History of Las Vegas*, “he deliberately omitted the apostrophe from Caesar’s because that would mean the palace belonged to only one Caesar . . . [He] wanted to create the feeling that everybody in the hotel was a Caesar” (159). Writer Jefferson Graham says, “the result was the gaudiest, weirdest, most elaborate, and most talked about resort Vegas had ever seen, . . . [its] emblem was a chesty female dipping grapes into the waiting mouth of a recumbent Roman,

fitted out in a toga, laurel wreath, and phallic dagger” (53). Adorned with “classical” statues and fountains, Sarno’s structure also housed the eight hundred seat Circus Maximus Theatre that was fashioned after the Coliseum in Rome. It was at the Circus Maximus that the headliners flocked to perform. It was here that larger than life performances were born: the first headliners to open the Circus Maximus were Frank Sinatra and Barbra Streisand. Jay Sarno brought a different twist to Las Vegas entertainment that also helped set the stage for today’s Cirque du Soleil offerings. Hopkins and Evans state that it was Sarno who created the “fantasy resort and the modern family resort, twin ideas that have guided the past three decades of Las Vegas’ growth” (286). Sarno insisted that every element of the hotel from the front desk staff uniforms to the fountains, to the gambling tables reinforce the “Greek ideal.” In *The Boardwalk Jungle*, Ovid Demaris contends that Caesars Palace was “a Mob-controlled casino from the day it opened its doors” (177) on August 5, 1966. In his book, *Vegas, Live and in Person*, Jefferson Graham recounts the casino’s opening: “long legged, Greco-Roman, pony-tail-wigged cocktail waitresses, . . . were instructed to walk up . . . and say ‘Welcome to Caesars Palace. I am your slave’ (53). Sarno recognized why people came to Las Vegas: “it wasn’t the gambling that attracted people. It was the fantasy” (Land and Land 160).

Sarno did not want to only offer one type of entertainment at his posh resort, so he explored the world of entertainment looking for something different to offer. To that end, Sarno brought sports, most specifically boxing. Koran states, “this was the first time that big sports were showcased on the Las Vegas Strip and it started a lucrative business that continues even today” (40). By the grand opening of Caesars in 1966, Sarno had moved on

to another project but his idea to bring something different to Las Vegas entertainment would pave the way for Cirque du Soleil's "flowers in the desert."

Three years after the opening, Sarno sold Caesars Palace for sixty million dollars to Clifford Perlman of the Lum's Restaurant chain. Sarno's next project would again provide an inroad for Cirque's later arrival. Sarno planned a resort that would be family friendly with the building itself shaped like a circus tent and filled with trapeze artists, a pink elephant and Sarno himself, dressed as the ringmaster, greeting guests. His project was to be called "Circus, Circus." The endeavor proved to be a failure at the start. Industry historians say the fatal flaw lay in the fact that the casino was planned as just that, a casino. It lacked any accommodations for its patrons. Sarno was sure that the casino itself was so unusual that it would draw patrons from less interesting properties on the Strip. Sarno's gamble proved wrong and he soon dumped his initial investment in the themed casino to Bill Bennett and Bill Pennington of the Del Webb corporation who turned the failure around by adding accommodations and thus establishing the circus as a part of the Las Vegas entertainment tradition. Furthermore, their inclusive approach in gearing the casino to a middle-income price point helped reintroduce Gus Greenbaum's notion of "Everybody Welcome."

Kirk Kerkorian, commercial real estate entrepreneur and owner of the largest hotel in the world, saw the potential of themed properties on the Las Vegas Strip and wanted into that market. His first Las Vegas hotel, the International Hotel, opened in 1969, and although it may have held the world's record for size, it did not begin to compete with the overall grandeur of Caesars or even the kitschy quality of its much smaller cousin, Circus, Circus. So, in 1975 Kerkorian moved into the Las Vegas Strip themed hotel market by combining

his ownership of the MGM movie studio and his ability to build a grand hotel. He opened the MGM Grand Hotel and Casino on the corner of South Las Vegas Boulevard and East Tropicana Avenue. The completed complex had more square footage than his previous property, the International Hotel, and was decorated with film memorabilia from Kerkorian's MGM studio collection. The hotel was hugely popular for its elegant Los Angeles movie mogul feel, but in 1980, disaster struck. On November 21 the hotel caught fire, killing eighty-seven people in a disaster that is known as the worst hotel fire in history ("Kirk Kerkorian" n. pag.). Eight months later, Kerkorian reopened the hotel with even lusher décor and even more film memorabilia, some of which had to be reconstructed to match original items that were lost in the fire. The fire did little to keep new visitors away and the hotel was soon profitable again. But Kerkorian was a smart entrepreneur, and he knew when to get out of a situation. In 1986, he sold the MGM Grand to the Bally's Corporation for \$440 million in cash ("Kirk Kerkorian" n. pag.).

The next power player in Las Vegas hotel development of note is Steve Wynn. Wynn had grown up in Las Vegas, the son of a chronic gambler. Upon graduation from the University of Pennsylvania, he moved back to Las Vegas to recoup what his father had lost at the tables. In 1971, Wynn made his real move when he learned that Caesars Palace did not actually own a small strip of land on the corner of the Strip and Flamingo: Howard Hughes did. Hughes had repeatedly refused to sell the land parcel to Caesars. Wynn went looking for a way to obtain this parcel. He found a small bit of land that Hughes needed for his own business growth and he obtained the land rights. Wynn then swapped his parcel with the parcel on Flamingo that Hughes owned. Wynn then offered the parcel to Caesars for \$2.25 million, which resulted in a \$1.2 million dollar profit for Wynn. With his profit,

Wynn bought his first casino – the Golden Nugget, located off the strip in the decrepit downtown district in 1973. Within a year of the purchase, Land and Land document that Wynn’s casino “profits rose from \$1 million dollars to \$4,250,000 and by 1977 . . . the figure had jumped to \$12 million” (171). In 1977, he began to add to the property, and his expansion project lasted more than twelve years before it was fully complete.

In the ensuing years, Wynn and other hotel magnets began to change the face of Las Vegas. By 1980, many of the largest and most glamorous of these hotels were now publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange, which provided what seemed to be an unending influx of money. It was during this boon that entrepreneur Wynn set a goal for himself: to make Las Vegas more than just Hal Rothman’s “mecca of glitz and excess” (24). His plans were to transform gaming and thereby transform the city. His first project was the \$630 million Mirage resort, complete with a working volcano that spewed flame on the hour, as it still does today. Rothman states, it was Wynn’s idea to make Vegas the city where “fantasy became reality” (25). In 1988, Wynn began construction on “the most elaborate and expensive casino ever constructed up to that time – The Mirage. Hal Rothman says,

the Mirage embodied the essence of what Las Vegas could offer a tourist: an invented reality that only occasionally demanded the suspension of disbelief. Siegfried and Roy and their famed white tigers were part of the ambience, as were a tank of live dolphins, and later the nouvelle circus, Cirque du Soleil.
(25)

In addition to unusual entertainment offerings, the hotel was planned to have 3,000 rooms. No one was sure that a hotel of that size could be filled, since the economy in Las Vegas in the 1980s was slowly declining. Wynn did not miss his mark and in 1989 The Mirage

opened, and changed the style of Las Vegas resorts forever. It was the first new casino to be built on the Strip in nearly sixteen years, and infused the area with additional development dollars. With this hotel a new standard was set for Las Vegas lodging, shopping and entertainment. Two years later, with The Mirage being touted as the most profitable casino on the Strip, Wynn began his next project— the pirate themed Treasure Island, which was planned to complement The Mirage as a sister resort. When completed, the two mega-resorts would cover more than one hundred and twenty acres and were later connected by a tram that could ensure that patrons did not have to leave a Wynn resort in order to have all the best that Las Vegas could offer.

After his success with The Mirage and Treasure Island, Wynn bought another Las Vegas Strip property, the bankrupt Dunes Hotel and Casino, and demolished it. Upon the former Dunes site, he began construction of a luxury resort situated on a fifteen-acre man-made lake. Originally named “Beau Rivage,” Wynn opened his newest offering, the Italian villa themed Bellagio Las Vegas on October 15, 1998 (“Mirage Resorts, Inc. 1998YE” n. pag.). The Bellagio cost over \$1.6 billion to complete and to this day holds the record as the world’s most costly resort ever constructed (“Big, Bigger, and Bellagio” 59). It was at these Wynn properties that Cirque du Soleil would finally make their grand entrance onto the Las Vegas entertainment scene as is discussed in the following chapters.

In the 1990s, it seemed that a fancy hotel was not enough to keep ahead of the tourism game; businesses on the Strip had to become bigger and grander. They had to offer more than resorts outside of Las Vegas. They needed to place the spectator at the center of the spectacle. The city was the spectacle. The sights, the sounds, the smells of Las Vegas needed to be taken to a bigger and grander scale. Casino owners also looked to create a city

in which the spectator travelled the world in just 4.2 miles (the length of the Strip). Newer, bigger, brighter hotels were opened, each with a different, exotic, international “feel”: the Luxor Hotel, an Egyptian pyramid; the Paris Hotel with its 75% scale Eiffel Tower’ and the re-envisioned Treasure Island, now called “TI” sinking a huge pirate ship replica nightly. The changes in Las Vegas hotel style caused the mayor, Jan Lavery Jones to say in 1993, “This is part of a major metamorphosis in Las Vegas . . . Las Vegas is changing from just adult entertainment to a resort destination” (Rothman *Neon Metropolis* 151). As the 1990s progressed, hotels and casinos were being constructed to suit every visitor’s vacation ideal. Even a hotel intended for a younger crowd was created. In 1995 the Hard Rock Café management company moved into the Las Vegas market and created the first casino and hotel geared to attract twenty-somethings, the Hard Rock Hotel.

By the year 2000, annual visitation to Las Vegas exceeded 35,000,000. In *Neon Metropolis*, Hal Rothman says, it is then that “Las Vegas could truly claim it had become the only city in the world devoted to the consumption of entertainment” (151). As the hotels offered their own version of spectacle, the entertainment industry showed its ability to change with the times. The shows have always managed to parallel the grandeur of the hotels in which they were contained. The goal of Las Vegas spectacle is to make you, the visitor, feel that you are at the center of the spectacle, that you are playing a part in the immense show that is playing out before your eyes. As we shall see, Cirque du Soleil is the latest visual extravaganza in Las Vegas to do that and if ticket sales and renown are to be believed, they do it well.

CHAPTER III

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL: BEGINNINGS TO LAS VEGAS

This is not a circus of the future. It's a circus of the present. It only seems like the future, because all the other circuses are in the past. (Jenkins 75)

Cirque du Soleil is credited as being the brainchild of three Canadian street performers: Guy Laliberté, Gilles Ste-Croix, and Guy Caron. These men wound their way in and out of each other's lives for a number of years performing on the streets of Québec, Canada, both alone and with other street artists. Eventually the men came together with a shared love of street performance and a passion for the circus arts. Their ultimate desire was to create a national circus for Canada. In the years since, they have been joined by a number of other artists who have helped to shape "the Cirque" into what is has become today, the internationally known mega-conglomeration: Cirque du Soleil.

What is Cirque du Soleil? They call themselves a reinvented or nouvelle (new) circus, but what is a "new circus" and why is Cirque du Soleil accurately described as such? Circus historian Pascal Jacob traces the beginning of today's circus standards to ancient Greece, while other scholars claim the circus dates back to the Egyptians. While the Egyptians and the ancient Greeks held entertainment events reminiscent of a circus, the Romans really laid the groundwork for many of today's common circus practices. The Romans offered entertainment that featured animals as well as human performances of

juggling and acrobatics. Through the centuries, the circus has evolved from its ancient roots in travelling street performance, through Italy's *commedia dell'arte* to today when one can see the influence of military techniques such as precision horseback riding. Jacob dates the first modern circus to 1530 "when Peter Tremesin, an English knight, rode straddling two horses for the amusement of King Henry VIII" (Babinski 61). Cirque du Soleil biographer Tony Babinski names Philip Astley as the first circus ringleader when he built Astley's Amphitheatre Riding House in London in 1768. Astley's structure housed an enclosed circular performance space where horse driven tricks and feats of daring were performed. Others followed Astley's idea and trained animal performances, within a ring, were soon presented throughout England, Europe and the United States. The late 1700s also saw the addition of clowns to the circus. Originally, circuses added clowns as a cover for the gaps between animal acts. As the popularity of circuses grew, so too did the number of clown acts and soon the clowns were as much a featured part of the performance as the animals. In 1807, "Le Cirque Olympique" performed in Paris and featured both animal and human acts. In 1857, Jules Léotard introduced aerial performance with what is the precursor to today's trapeze and this too was soon added to the "circus."

While the European circus tradition was developing, Asia was also developing a similar type of entertainment with greater focus on the feats of the human body as opposed to animal acts. Both Russia and China were in the forefront of the human circus movement until the emergence of Cirque du Soleil. The central focus of the Chinese and Russian circus styles, and now Cirque du Soleil, is acrobatics and gymnastics.

In America, the circus was a combination of Asian and European traditions with showman P.T. Barnum at the forefront of the American circus movement. Barnum

introduced the first three-ring circus for the Brooklyn World's Fair in New York in 1871; Barnum's circus featured animal acts, human feats of daring and strength and a bit of sideshow. Many consider Barnum's American circus the basis of the traditional circus style in that it combines all the elements of previous circus styles worldwide.

In the 1970s, "alternative" circuses began to emerge first in Europe and soon after in America. One such, "alternative circus" was the *Cirque National à l'ancienne* produced by Alexis Gruss in 1974. Circus historian Ernest Albrecht says that Alexis Gruss "reintroduced western audiences to the sanctity of the single ring and the possibilities of the circus as an art form" (ix). Gruss' group is today considered the basis for the "new circus." Scholars agree that the alternative circuses of Canada and the United States are more than just "new circus," but that they have a decidedly "American" feel; they are the "new American circus." In her study of rituals and culture in American circus performance, Kelly Rushing contends that the new American circus is "more focused on artistry and less on spectacle. The traditional circus consists of a string of unrelated acts interspersed with pitches for souvenirs. The new circus attempts to tie the acts together with some type of theme or storyline" (1). Furthermore, the contemporary circus style is focused on aesthetic impact, so higher production standards are demanded in all areas including both performance and design. Contemporary circus has also moved away from a garish musical standard and instead incorporates music frequently originally written for the work. Some examples of alternative or new (*nouvelle*) circus troupes are the Pickle Family Circus from San Francisco, the Teatro ZinZanni from Seattle, and the New Circus from Australia.

Currently, the most well known of all the *nouvelle* circuses is Canada's Cirque du Soleil. This is not to say that all that Cirque du Soleil has become is based exclusively in new

circus. Cirque still embraces some traditional European circus practices and some Asian or Russian circus techniques. Cirque du Soleil reaches back to the roots of European circus style with its single ring or performance space. It references Asian and Russian circus standards in featuring only human acts. Many of Cirque's featured acts have traditions dating far back in circus history. The banquine, an acrobatic act involving three or more people and two or more bases that allow members to fly from one location to another, is featured in many of Cirque's shows and dates back to ancient Italy. The classic trapeze first introduced by Léotard has numerous adaptations in Cirque's shows, acts such as aerial straps, aerial tissu, and Washington trapeze. Additionally, every Cirque show has clowns, some of whom perform acts of daring, others of whom fill spaces between acts, and others of whom propel the story forward. Blogger and author of *The Long-term Travel's Guide: Going Longer, Cheaper, and Living Your Dream*, Jeremy Jones, describes Cirque du Soleil as "being loosely inspired by common circus acts, but amplified with the extreme nature of the X-Games . . . A loose theme ties them all together for a rough story, but you do not see a Cirque du Soleil show for the 'plot', it is entirely for these boundary pushing acts" ("Living the Dream" n. pag.).

Regardless of the circus traditions linked to Cirque du Soleil, Cirque's founder, Guy Laliberté, locates his group's roots in street performance. Rushing says, "although it [Cirque du Soleil] has come the farthest from its origins in street performing, it has, at the same time, remained most faithful to the spirit of street performance" (7). Rushing states that what makes street performance special is the performers ability to "amaze and delight." Amaze and delight are words so often applied to Cirque du Soleil that they could be the

troupe's name. Bryan Curtis of the *National Post* says that Cirque did not invent anything new, nor did they reinvent anything. He contends they are a "refinement – a new, new American[ization of] circus, wedged between spectacle and shoestring" (A18). Likely, Curtis' opinion will prove to be right when the annals of circus history are rewritten to include Cirque du Soleil, for they combine spectacle and circus traditions with the street performer's ability to amaze and delight. Cirque is its own entity and Cirque performers stand on the shoulders of others who brought the circus to a new level.

THE ROOTS OF CIRQUE DU SOLEIL

As of this writing, Cirque du Soleil has twenty-one "unique" shows in performance throughout the world. Of the twenty, eleven are international tour shows, and nine are resident shows housed in cities in the United States. The tour shows are divided into two general categories, Big Top and arena. What separates Cirque's Big Top shows from their arena productions is the length of the performance run and ticket sale volume. Big Top shows perform only in cities that are "large enough to generate sales of 100,000 tickets" (Kelly 18), or more during a single engagement. The current Big Top production tours include: *Corteo*, *Kooza*, *Ovo*, *Totem*, *Varekai*, and *Amaluna*. All Big Top productions perform in Cirque's trademark yellow and blue Grand Chapiteau (big tent). The current tent set up includes,

a main tent, one large entrance tent, the box office, the kitchen, a school, offices and warehouses. The site takes eight days to set up and three to take down . . . Between two and three generators provide electricity . . . [and] the [entire] complex is self-sufficient for electrical power . . . Cirque du Soleil's

main tent . . . is 66 feet high, has a diameter of 167 feet and is supported by four masts, each of which is 80 feet tall. A team of 80 people is needed to raise the main tent. The Grand Chapiteau can seat 2,500 to 2,600 people . . . [and all] are climate-controlled. (Carter, "Cirque du Soleil's *Totem* Tackles" n. pag.)

Additionally, the Big Top and its supporting ancillary structures occupy an extraordinarily large footprint when fully installed. Realistically, the Big Top can only play where there is the possibility for large open space and large crowds to attend.

Cirque's second category of touring production is arena. These are smaller scale shows that perform for shorter runs in existing local venues. Arena offers Cirque the option to perform in less densely populated locales where they will sell "between 20,000 and 30,000 tickets over the course of a two or three night run" (Kelly 18). It is not uncommon for Big Top shows that have been extremely popular to be converted into arena shows when Cirque feels the show has reached its fullest audience potential on tour. The conversion of the show to arena style merely scales the show back somewhat so that it can fit in the existing venues with a shorter "load in" time. The current arena tour shows are; *Alegria*, *Dralion*, *Michael Jackson: The Immortal World Tour*, *Quidam*, and *Saltimbanco*. Of these, all but *Michael Jackson: The Immortal World Tour* have been converted to arena scale. The Michael Jackson show, instead is being re-invisioned for a resident house at Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino in Las Vegas. In its new form, it is being retitled *Michael Jackson: One*.

Regardless of the style of tour show, Big Top or arena, all Cirque du Soleil shows begin their touring careers at home in Montréal's Vieux-Port (old port) district. Aside from the practicality of opening a show in the town where it has been created and rehearsed, the

executives at Cirque du Soleil want to give the people of Montréal the first chance to see the new show as a treat for the “home team.” In 2011, Cirque publically announced their ideal tour schedule, stating the desire is “to have an arena tour every year, while Big Top productions, which arrive every two or three years, will tour the globe for ten to fifteen years” (Kelly 18). This means that in any medium to large sized city there is the likely chance that a Cirque du Soleil production will perform at least once in a calendar year. Moreover, to date they have maintained or exceeded that proposed schedule.

Of the resident shows, seven are currently playing in Las Vegas, one in Los Angeles, and one is resident in Orlando, Florida. In May 2013, *Michael Jackson: The Immortal World Tour* is scheduled to retire from touring and become the eighth resident show for Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas. However, Cirque is not limited to live action production; they have also ventured into the worlds of film and television, video gaming, and nightclub creation.

Where did this enormous entertainment machine begin and how did it start? The early roots of Cirque du Soleil, including the formation of the bond between Laliberté, Ste-Croix and Caron, are as much a mystery as a legend. Very little has been accurately publicly documented about these early years except on Cirque du Soleil’s own website, www.cirquedusoleil.com, and in Cirque’s only authorized histories, *Cirque du Soleil: 20 Years Under the Sun*, by Tony Babinski, and *Cirque du Soleil*, by Sylvie Drake. It is from these authorized sources that much of what is included next of the early history of the troupe and its founders stems. Unfortunately, the sources are biased toward Cirque, as would be expected; therefore, the early history documented here has been enhanced with information as it could be culled from published interviews on related Cirque topics, such

as new show openings and Cirque performance events. In describing itself, Cirque du Soleil says,

Cirque du Soleil is a Québec based company recognized the world over for high-quality, artistic entertainment. Since its dawn in 1984, Cirque du Soleil has constantly sought to evoke the imagination, invoke the senses and provoke the emotions of people around the world. (“Discover Who We Are.” *cirquedusoleil.com*)

But where did it all begin?

The self-proclaimed father of Cirque du Soleil is Guy Laliberté, making Gilles Ste-Croix the grandfather. Ste-Croix, who in 2006 became the senior vice president of creative content, was born in rural Québec on September 5, 1949, to a family of modest means (“Gilles Ste-Croix” A2). Ste-Croix claims to have led a “normal youth” until his early twenties when he became involved in the commune culture of Québec. From Québec, he moved to Vancouver, where he explored the North American counterculture movement. He says, “in Vancouver, I realized there was a whole movement I could be part of. I lived with these freaks, trying to make a change in society. Vancouver was really influenced by the West Coast, San Francisco . . . It was a maelstrom” (Babinski 16). Ste-Croix travelled throughout the western part of Canada but eventually headed back east, landing, finally, in a commune in Victoriaville, Québec, where he began exploring various circus techniques. In Babinski’s text, he says, “one day we were picking apples in the orchard. I thought: ‘Wouldn’t it be great if the ladder was attached to my legs?’ So I decided to make a pair of stilts” (21). That incident in the orchard led to Ste-Croix’s fascination with stilt walking and with what could be done with, and on, stilts, a skill that would prove useful for both

Ste-Croix and the embryonic Cirque du Soleil in the future. Later, another member of the commune told Ste-Croix of a group in nearby Vermont who were performing theatre on stilts. Ste-Croix was intrigued. He travelled to the United States where he first observed Peter Schumann and his Bread and Puppet Theatre. Amazed by the concept of politically aware performance art and the group's Big Revival Circus, Ste-Croix became friends with Schumann. The group invited Ste-Croix to become their stilt performer. It was this time with the Bread and Puppet theatre that planted an idea that he would carry back with him to Canada. Once home, Ste-Croix aligned himself again with the commune culture. "I ended up in this politically orientated commune . . . We were trying to be self-sufficient and ecologically sound . . . It was very socialist in orientation. Most of the rural communes in Canada were connected to cooperatives in Montréal, all of which were striving for an 'alternative economy'" (Babinski 16).

Enter the first of the collaborators with which Ste-Croix would connect to create what is now Cirque du Soleil: Guy Caron. Caron owned a cooperative called La Grande Passe café located in the heart of Montréal's art district. The café began as a place for performances and exhibitions and later became "an experimental meeting place for street performers, clowns, actors, and aspiring folk musicians" (Babinski 16). In addition to being part owner and café director, Caron was an actor, clown and street performer. Shortly after crossing paths with Ste-Croix at La Grande Passe, Caron sold his share of the café to pursue his real passion, circus performance. He joined Sonia Côté and Rodrigue Tremblay to form a clown trio called *Chatouille et Chocolat* (Tickles and Chocolate). When asked, Caron remarks, "I was the 'et'" (Babinski 23). The group performed on the streets of Montréal and soon developed a solid local following. Accepted in 1975 to the École nationale de cirque de

Budapest (circus school of Budapest), the trio left Québec to study clowning and other circus arts (*cirquedusoleil.com*). With this accomplishment, they gained greater notoriety among their fellow street performers who believed that *Chatouille et Chocolat* had “made it”. The time in Hungary allowed Caron to explore and begin to appreciate international circus cultures and traditions, which he would bring back with him to Québec. Upon returning home, Caron began to pursue his new goal: to found the country’s first national circus school. In 1981, he, along with fellow circus professional Pierre Leclerc, established the École nationale de cirque de Montréal in Montréal’s east end. Although never officially affiliated with Cirque du Soleil, the École nationale was, and still is, the training ground and primary recruitment place for many of Cirque’s performers through the years. Caron served as the École’s executive director for the next ten years, after which time he would meet again with Ste-Croix and eventually join “the Cirque.”

By 1979, Ste-Croix left the commune scene and was back in Québec in a small artist’s colony in the town of Baie-Saint-Paul (Saint Paul’s Bay) on the northern shore of the Saint Lawrence River. At the time, Baie-Saint-Paul had become something of a mecca for Canadian hippies who did not make the journey to California. In Baie-Saint-Paul, Ste-Croix got a job managing a summer youth hostel called Le Balcon Vert (the green balcony), which was founded in the 1947 on the premise of open-mindedness and had since become the summer home of many a creative youth. Also employed there at the time was Daniel Gauthier, another young man who would become an important figure in the development of Cirque du Soleil. Gauthier was working as an administrator and accountant for the hostel. Before officially opening for the summer, a young performer, by the name of Guy Laliberté, came to Le Balcon Vert looking for housing and potentially a job.

Guy Laliberté was born a decade after Gilles Ste-Croix and Guy Caron, in Québec City, Québec, on September 2, 1959, to a large middle-class family (“Guy Laliberté” *worldpokertour.com*). He considers his upbringing relatively traditional. In an interview with David Thomas of *The Independent*, he says he was part of

a typical French Canadian family . . . There was always a reason for a party, always music in the house. But I never really played anything. My parents tried to get me piano lessons, but I was always giving up. I was never into the notion of structuring the learning process. At school, I was smart at getting good marks. But . . . I won't tell you how I was getting them! (9)

In the late 1970s, when Laliberté began high school in Montréal, the commune counterculture of Québec had died down, but the lasting effects of the movement were still evident, especially in the arts and this interested Laliberté. He became heavily involved in the arts at his school and was responsible for several arts-infused projects, but it was one evening at a French music festival in Montréal's Lafontaine Park when Laliberté made the discovery from which his future life would spring. Laliberté was listening to Louisiana born, Cajun folk musician Zachery Richard when the performer invited the entire audience to come to Louisiana and celebrate Mardi Gras. For Laliberté it felt like a personal invitation. He began looking for ways to get to New Orleans. Laliberté's drama teacher, Pierrette Brunelle, became instrumental in Laliberté's scheme. Brunelle was looking for an opportunity to introduce his students to the concepts of performance and spectacle when Laliberté announced his desire to travel to Louisiana. After several discussions about the feasibility of such a trip, Laliberté took on the challenge of planning and coordinating a school-sponsored trip to Cajun country. He says, “this was the first thing I had to do from

scratch. I had to get permission from parents and school. I had to raise funds. I had to organize the whole thing. We raised money through benefit shows, flea markets, garage sales, however we could” (Babinski 18). Laliberté was able to raise enough money and coordinate the whole endeavor with a small amount of money left. Laliberté identifies this first large scale undertaking as his entree into the world of fundraising.

The trip reinforced Laliberté’s love of folk music and gave him a new appreciation for the cultivation of one’s creative heritage as a possible career path. Laliberté left school to begin to travel throughout Québec in search of both his cultural heritage and for a career. During his travels, Laliberté met many of the artists who were prominent performers at La Grande Passe café. One was artist/owner Guy Caron. Laliberté says “I was really influenced by that whole scene . . . Guy Caron and those guys—I hung around with them . . . They were principally street performers” (Babinski 18). After hanging around La Grande Passe with its street performers and folk musicians, Laliberté joined a folk group called La Grande Gueule (Big Mouth) as an accordion and harmonica player as well as a vocalist. Laliberté and his fellow performers set out on tour throughout Canada and eventually ventured to Europe. His time with La Grande Gueule really ignited his passion for performance and for the road. He says, “we played around the province, [mostly] at festivals. Some of the guys were working, so when they couldn’t make it, I’d go alone, from festival to festival, from hostel to hostel” (Babinski 18). While in Europe, Laliberté often played alongside a variety of street performers. He was fascinated with the entire culture of performance and found himself performing in any manner possible both solo and with La Grande Gueule. His easygoing nature and open personality allowed him to form friendships with a variety of skilled street performers. He says, “I played in the street . . . in Paris I met up with acrobats

and fire breathers. Street performers and folk musicians were kind of on the same circuit” (Babinski 24). This was when Laliberté gained many of his more daring performance skills such as fire breathing, juggling and even a little magic.

Upon his return home to Canada, Laliberté, now eighteen, decided he should settle down into a more traditional job. Although hired to work on a hydroelectric dam in James Bay, Québec, a traditional job was not in the cards for the young Canadian. Three days after he started at the dam, the workers went on strike. As a worker at the time that the strike broke out, he was eligible for governmental strike pay. With income in hand, Laliberté again hit the road. He found himself in the small town of Baie-Saint-Paul. Laliberté wanted to stay in Baie-Saint-Paul for the summer, but would need lodging. He inquired at Le Balcon Vert, the summer hostel where Giles Ste-Croix was booking entertainment for the establishment’s clients. The hostel’s administrator and accountant, Daniel Gauthier, remembered Laliberté from high school, and Laliberté was hired. An enduring friendship formed that summer between the three men. That friendship would grow in later years into a multimillion-dollar performance operation.

During the winter of 1979-1980, Gauthier, Ste-Croix and Laliberté attempted to keep the hostel open. While doing so, they created a performance group much like the Bread and Puppet Theatre that Ste-Croix had observed in Vermont. The trio formed a socially aware, not-for-profit Canadian-based troupe that performed on stilts. They named themselves Les Échassiers de Baie-Saint-Paul (the stilt walkers/waders from Saint Paul’s bay). This early performance group and the founder’s friendship became the foundation of Cirque du Soleil. They then invited additional friends to join the group. The additional members were Serge Roy, Stephané Roy, and Pino Noel. Another of Ste-Croix’s friends,

Sylvain Néron, then joined the five men. Néron was instrumental in helping Ste-Croix establish the group as a recognized entertainment and artist agency called the Échassiers de la Baie Enr. (Gauthier and Harvey n. pag.). The group created their first production, *La Légende d'Alexis le Trotteur* (The Legend of Alexis Trotteur), which centered on the well-known Québécois folk hero, Alexis Lapointe alias *le Trotteur*. The work was performed by seven artists on stilts accompanied by three musicians (Gauthier and Harvey n. pag.). After calling upon friends and relatives to assist in getting the show opened initially, Les Échassiers began to perform at any venue in Québec that would allow them, including hockey stadiums during intermissions. They quickly gained a small following for their performances, but they needed more than just friends to keep the work running; they needed money. In March of 1980, the Échassiers de la Baie Enr. applied to the Québec provincial government for funding. Ste-Croix says, “there was funding available, because the Parti Québécois government had allotted a lot of money to push Québec culture” (Babinski 28). The members of the committee who reviewed their funding application were skeptical of the entire undertaking. They felt the group was not yet strongly established and was not sufficiently popular to entitle them to government assistance. Ste-Croix recalls, “the guy who read the project said, ‘well you need endorsement, you’re nobody’” (Babinski 28). Unwilling to take no for an answer, Ste-Croix felt he needed to perform a stunt to prove his dedication. He, therefore, planned a “stilt-o-thon.” After asking various local merchants along the fifty-six mile trek from Baie-Saint-Paul to Québec City to sponsor him financially for each mile he walked, he donned his stilts and walked the entire distance with a cameraman documenting his every step, Ste-Croix made the twenty-two hour trek. He describes the walk as “a rite of passage.” I wanted to become a showbiz

person, but I had to have a trial by fire to do it . . . And after that, I was indestructible. I could do anything” (Babinski 28). In retrospect, Ste-Gilles attributes his belief in the ultimate success of Cirque du Soleil to that walk, the dedication it took, the showmanship it displayed, and the experience it produced.

The stunt brought the group tremendous notoriety with Ste-Croix featured on his eight-foot stilts arriving in Québec City on the front page of the local newspaper, *Le Soleil*. It proved to government officials that Les Échassiers de Baie-Saint-Paul were serious. After seeing the photograph, the official, who had originally declined their application, acquiesced and granted Les Échassiers governmental funding of \$60,000 (Gauthier and Harvey n. pag.). He said, “well, if you did this, you proved you can do the project” (Babinski 30). Ste-Croix used the funding to hire his friends and supporters, and *La Légende d’Alexis la Trotteur* toured Québec through 1980 and into early 1981 under the management of Guy Laliberté

In the summer of 1981, Les Échassiers added an additional production to their repertoire, *Le Défilé du Dragon* (The Dragon’s Parade). Influenced by the larger than life papier-mâché puppets from the Bread and Puppet Circus, the work’s central feature was a papier-mâché dragon that required seven men for its operation. Ste-Croix felt his life come full circle when they performed in Vermont for the members of Bread and Puppet. After the Vermont sojourn, the group was invited to present *Le Défilé du Dragon* in hockey stadiums throughout Québec during the intermissions of games. The group gained public attention when they performed with their dragon, but more so when they performed on ice wearing stilts. The hockey contract paid Les Échassiers \$10,000 and at the end of their second tour season the group was able to post a small profit (Gauthier and Harvey n. pag.). Giddy with

the prospect of profitable operations, the company moved on to organize a street performance festival called La Fête foraine de Baie-Saint-Paul, an event that they all consider the embryonic stage of Cirque du Soleil.

In order to create an organized festival, Ste-Croix knew he needed more than just an entertainment agency that was comprised of volunteers using small governmental grants and hockey game stipends. Ste-Croix turned again to his friends and created another non-profit organization he named Le Club des talons hauts (the high heels club). By creating Le Club des talons hauts as an officially recognized non-profit with a mission to create public entertainment, the group became eligible for greater governmental funding, meaning everyone could actually be paid for their work. He appointed Serge Roy as president and put Le Club des Talons Hauts to work planning the first Fête foraine (carney/street performer celebration). Ste-Croix says, "It [the Fête foraine] was intended to re-create an atmosphere similar to that of Middle Age Festivals, when street performers would roam the cities of Europe during the great market fairs of the period" (Gauthier and Harvey n. pag.). Due to a ban established in the 1970s on "festivals," the city of Baie-Saint-Paul initially vetoed the proposed celebration. Le Club, with Ste-Croix leading the charge, carefully crafted a presentation for the Baie-Saint-Paul civic authorities that placed the focus on the street performers and not the festival atmosphere. Ste-Croix recalls,

I said, we don't want to do a festival. We want to do a *fête foraine*. It's like what they used to do in the middle ages, when minstrels came, and there was an exchange of crafts and so on . . . If I'd said "a minstrel's festival," we'd have been screwed, so we said "*fête foraine*" and explained that "*foraine*" meant street performers. They said "okay." (Babinski 35)

The first Fête foraine de Baie-Saint-Paul was held in July of 1982 and according to Gauthier and Harvey, they fulfilled “their wish . . . to interact with the spectators in a more playful way, instead of being limited to the more or less rigid formal social constraints of a traditional performing environment” (n. pag.), another ideal that Cirque du Soleil would embrace in future years. The first year, the event ran for one week and was free to all who chose to attend. It was so popular that it became an annual happening and the duration of the event increased each year. It was a combination of street performances and circus arts workshops for spectators and circus artists worldwide. Guy Laliberté became the general manager of the event and as such, he was responsible for booking both the performance talent and the workshop presenters. He turned to his friends and acquaintances from his days as an independent street performer. One such friend was Guy Caron, who was back in Montréal working with the École nationale de cirque. Hired as a performer, Caron brought a more valuable asset to the Fête foraine; he brought his connection to the circus school. Through Caron’s connection, Laliberté was able to hire performers that were more skilled to conduct the workshops and to entertain the public. Among the artists that Caron brought was René Dupéré, a traveling street musician with a background in musical composition. This early connection to a musician and composer would provide the opportunity for the group to consider the power of original music as an aspect of their performance style.

Offering both performances and workshops in the circus arts, La Fête foraine was popular from the start, and financial success quickly followed. In its second year, the Fête foraine saw increased popularity with 25,000 spectators participating (Gauthier and Harvey n. pag.). The increased popularity allowed for greater profits especially with the addition of admission fees charged for entrance to the grounds. By the third year, the event

was so popular that the group levied an additional charge for admission to the circus tent. The Fête foraine's popularity allowed Laliberté and Ste-Croix to perceive the event's larger potential. Reflecting, Laliberté says, "I remember we used to say: if we put all this under a Big Top and toured with it, we'd have a circus" (Babinski 44). In 1984, they launched that circus for the 450th anniversary celebration of French explorer Jacques Cartier's discovery of Canada and thus, Cirque du Soleil (Circus of the Sun) was born.

Selected as a part of the Canadian celebration was a big deal for the small, struggling group, not just for the performance opportunity it offered, but also for the connections that resulted. One connection was the introduction of Laliberté and his group to Jacques Renaud, the Commissariat general for the celebration. As the Commissariat general, Renaud was the Director of Programming, meaning he was the gatekeeper to major arts funding throughout the province. Renaud loved Laliberté's idea of a national circus for Canada created in Québec, but Renaud wanted to connect this national circus idea with a project in development as an offshoot of the 450th anniversary celebration. Renaud wanted this new national circus to join, the following year, Danielle Bouchard's International Year of the Youth tour. Renaud granted Laliberté \$30,000 with the caveat that it was to develop the touring circus concept.

With partners Robert Lagueux and Marguerite Fortin, Laliberté created a compromise between Le Club des talons haut, who wanted to create a local big tent circus event, and the desires of the provincial officials, who wanted the touring show. Laliberté says, "my dream was to put on a circus show under a big tent, but the government wanted an activity that would tour the regions . . . the compromise was to have this gathering of street performers descend on eleven towns over thirteen weeks. Within that . . . [was] the

embryo of what would become Cirque du Soleil (Babinski 51). For the big top circus tent production and the tour show, Laliberté asked for \$1.6 million. Renaud countered the offer with \$900,000. Dissatisfied with the lesser offer, Laliberté presented to Renaud's group a report of what they would get for the original requested amount of \$1.6 million. Renaud's group countered again, this time with \$950,000. Laliberté created a bigger and more elaborate presentation of what they would get for \$1.6 million and this time he included a presentation of what Renaud would not get for the lesser sum. In the end, the \$1.6 million was awarded (Babinski 51).

Again, Laliberté used his old friends as co-creators. Gilles Ste-Croix gathered the performers and performed himself. Robert Lagueux was placed in charge of the marketing. Daniel Gauthier acted as the administrative controller, while Laliberté was responsible for producing the tour overall, named *Le Grand Tour du Cirque du Soleil* (Cirque du Soleil's grand tour). Now that Le Club des talons hauts was more than just a rag tag band of street performers, but a real bona fide circus troupe, Laliberté again contacted Guy Caron, as he had done to secure performers for the Fête foraine in 1982. Caron's job was to coordinate the street performers into a more truly codified circus with a theatrical focus based upon characters and not animal acts. Christine Temin says even with this early venture, the founders knew they would "create jobs for people . . . [rather] than jobs for elephants" ("Cirque du Soleil Touches." B1). At this time Le Club des talons hauts was actually producing two different events simultaneously, *Le Grand Tour du Cirque du Soleil* and the third Fête foraine. Laliberté notes, "when *Le Grand Tour* got to Baie-Saint-Paul, we were both there at the same time. It was a beautiful moment for all of us" (Babinski 52). This event allowed the young group to sample what it might be like to have one show in

resident production while another show was on tour. This became the model that Cirque du Soleil would continue in grander scale with each passing year.

In the first year, the newly named Cirque du Soleil troupe toured eleven cities in Canada. *Le Grand Tour du Cirque de Soleil* had ten acts that included trapeze, stilt walking, clowns, contortion and fire breathing, and this collection of acts would become the blueprint for future Cirque shows. Everyone in the company did everything from marketing to tent building to performing. Most importantly, according to Tom Lee, they were “reinventing the very concept of the circus; it dramatized traditional acts and garish outfits into a fluid sequence of aesthetic showpieces” (n. pag.). Cirque began to generate great buzz by word of mouth; however, the beginning was rocky at best. Many of the mechanics of tour life were learned as they travelled. They acquired a blue and yellow tent under which they would perform, but they did not hire a tent master to construct it at the performance sites. Serge Roy, who served as the group’s first tour manager says, “the first time we put up the big top, we ended up damaging it a few hours before our first press conference” (Babinski 53). The press bus arrived to the broken performance area and only one reporter was onboard. This first tent never did work for Cirque du Soleil. It was not until they had their own tent and tent master, as opposed the rental with which they began, that they would actually perform in a functional big top.

Staffing proved to be another difficult hurdle to overcome. With the connection to Caron’s École nationale de cirque, Cirque du Soleil was able to hire, not just local performers, but also international performers who had studied with or were studying with Caron. The international performers were more skilled and more practiced not only at the art of the circus, but also in the art of touring and performing. Many had been on tour and

had expectations beyond that of the young Canadian troupe members who were happy to collect a check and glad to be creating a project that was truly Canadian. The first staffing complaint was regarding payroll. The troupe was to be paid on a fifty-fifty split of the ticket sales, with fifty percent of the sales going to the performers and fifty percent going to the government, since it was a governmentally funded project. Since the group was performing as a new homegrown circus, the artists hired from Québec and other regions of Canada were happy with the fifty-fifty split. They wanted to become a home team phenomenon, so if the hours were long or extra duties were asked, the local talent pitched in and got the job done. The performers hired from Europe were a different story. The salary was acceptable to them, but long hours, mediocre housing option and extra duties were not why they had come to Canada. Laliberté recounts the situation at the first stop on the tour,

the only place we could house them was at youth hostels in Gaspé. They took umbrage at that . . . at the press conference . . . Gilles Ste-Croix walked up to me and said he had a letter from the artists that they wanted him to read to the press . . . it was a list of complaints about how they were being treated.
(Babinski 54)

Laliberté reported that at times the tensions between artists and management were so bad that Robert Lagueux would come to production meetings carrying a baseball bat. Laliberté considered giving up. His dreams of creating a name for Québec in the circus industry and truly being a world representative of Canada won out, however, and he persevered. Laliberté recalls,

I thought I was doing something noble, . . . bringing legitimacy to the whole street performer scene. The last thing I expected was that the artists would

turn on me. I almost thought, "Forget it, you just don't get it. It's not worth it. But sheer pride kept me going." (Babinski 54)

The artist's temperament did not much change nor did the mishaps until the audiences began to respond. As audiences became larger and fans more widespread, the tempers began to diffuse and the management team began to work more harmoniously with the artists.

As they ended the first year of touring, Cirque du Soleil reported a \$60,000 profit. The Canadian federal government was ready to sign Cirque to tour another year with the plan to move them into provinces outside Québec. Québec, having a tenuous relationship with the Canadian federal government and its policies, was not necessarily ready to take on the further expense of another Cirque du Soleil tour. Eventually after much heated debates and discussion, Cirque was granted another year of funding under the combined auspices of both the Québécois and the federal governments. As they headed out in 1985 to tour Canada, they no longer considered themselves a band of street performers, but a bona fide circus, with roots in the streets, in folk music, in communes and cooperative. They considered themselves a "reinvented circus." In defining this term, Guy Laliberté says Cirque du Soleil is, "a circus that came from nowhere but was looking for its roots. In the absence of any, it determined to create some" (Harvie and Hurley 299). The July 15, 1985, edition of *The Globe and Mail* listed them as "Canada's first touring theatrical circus." Cirque felt it was free to be something else, more than just a circus, something new; they would be the circus of the sun. Babinski quotes Laliberté saying, "Cirque could now meet its destiny head-on, without compromise" (55).

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL AS AN ENTERTAINMENT MACHINE

From the onset, Cirque felt it had the option of creating something outside the standard established by circus history. Gilles Ste-Croix says, “we weren’t part of the circus tradition, because we weren’t a family, . . . Circuses in Europe were always run by families. If you weren’t part of that family, you had no tradition, so you could do something different” (Babinski 64). This idea combined with Laliberté’s dream of creating something that would make Canada proud, gave the group the freedom to take risks. This feeling of freedom is what has allowed the group to be ever changing and ever evolving, so that they are always presenting something new. Laliberté says, “I believe that the more you give people something new, . . . the more they’ll like it” (Babinski 64).

The evolution of Cirque from street performance to a genuine nouvelle circus began in 1984 with the appointment of Guy Caron to the position of artistic director for Cirque du Soleil. His first task was to help create the “something new” of which Laliberté dreamed. To accomplish this task, he invited Italian born and Belgian raised Franco Dragone to direct the company in 1985. Caron met Dragone in 1982 when Caron invited him to teach *commedia dell’arte* and acting techniques to the students at *École nationale de cirque*. Dragone had specialized in *commedia dell’arte* while he was a theatre student at the Royal Conservatory of Mons in Belgium. He continued his education after graduation by studying social and political theatre with Dario Fo.

Dragone’s job with Cirque du Soleil was to make the troupe more theatrical: “it was important that we feel part of the circus world, but, at the same time, we wanted to change the way people did it” (Babinski 64). In order to bring more theatricality to Cirque’s street performance style, Dragone urged the performers to explore more than just their acts. He

wanted them to create a story or an event through their performance. Babinski says, “Dragone pushed them to explore the political, social, and artistic potential of increased theatricality” (66). Dragone combined his desires for political awareness with theatricality and his background in *commedia dell’arte* to urge the performers to explore the notion of character development and storytelling. He further pushed the artists to think about the work as character driven. He wanted each performer to do more than the feats of acrobatics in which they were skilled. They were asked to use the acrobatics in combination with the creation of a character that might move in such a manner or might tell a story with their movement. He says, “the characters we invent have to have something to do with life at large” (Babinski 69). He helped to bring a person out of each of the performers acts; a person with a story that started before they entered the performance space and continued well after they left. This character creation concept remains today; they have a story to tell and they will try to connect with the audience so that they can tell that story. Laliberté calls it, “establishing a deeper connection between artist and audience [and it is] a Cirque du Soleil trademark” (Babinski 69). Connection between character and audience is also one of the ways that Cirque empowers its viewers. If these are real people, however fantastical, with stories to which we as the audience can relate, presenting extraordinary human feats, then we as real people can also do the extraordinary. It is this contribution by Dragone that helped propel Cirque du Soleil out of the traditional circus milieu, and into the world of “nouvelle circus” (new circus). His story telling techniques, use of all-encompassing themes and character creation are still the style for which Cirque is known.

With an innovative and talented director onboard, Caron began to feel the need for greater control over the musical accompaniment of the performances. Rather than using the circus standard brass band sound, he wanted to have music with a greater connection to the work being presented, something more suitable, and something more like the sounds from other “nouvelle circuses.” He hired his old friend René Dupéré to compose original music to which the company could perform. Caron says, “the music was part of the action. For us, music should create movement, and out of the movement should come music” (Babinski 64). Caron considered the work they were creating to be more like film in its use of music, more like cinematic underscoring; without it an aspect of the storytelling would be lost.

Gilles Ste-Croix reflects on 1985’s year of performance and says, “in 1985, Cirque du Soleil became a typical one-ring circus like you see in Europe, but with no animals, because we had no animals, we didn’t have to have a dirt floor. We could have a good solid floor to do acrobatics” (Babinski 70). They concentrated on acrobatics, and began to develop new death defying acts that circuses that are more conventional would not attempt. Combining these new acts with Dragone’s characters and Dupéré’s original music, Cirque began to move further away from other circus’ styles. Additionally, Cirque began to explore additional theatrical conventions that were not considered “circus-like.” For one, they explored scenery, hiring an old friend and colleague from the Les Échassiers de Baie-Saint-Paul, Stephané Roy, to create sets that were more advanced than mere circus tents. The Grand Chapiteau was not just a tent held up by a single pole at the center as was common, but was supported instead by a pair of skeletal lighting towers. The central playing space resembled a typical circus floor, but lacking sawdust and needing to accommodate

acrobatics, it was instead brightly painted and highly decorated. The playing space was edged with illuminated star cut outs that further made the space feel more theatrical and less carnival. Additionally, they explored lighting effects and considered lighting to be a performer that danced alongside the human performers in each act.

As with any company with big dreams and a non-profit status, money eventually became an issue. At the end of 1985, Cirque had run through every dime of profit they had made in the previous year and showed a deficit of \$750,000 (Babinski 78). The group was bankrupt, but Laliberté knew that if they could hold on a bit longer, they could turn the situation around, since they were in consideration for performance in Expo '86 in Vancouver. Laliberté turned to Daniel Gauthier, who had been with him since the days in Baie-Saint-Paul, for help in solving the logistics of the financial situation at hand. Laliberté says, "the job he had to do at the organizational and administrative level was as huge as the creative work I did" (Babinski 75). Gilles Ste-Croix joined Laliberté and Gauthier to solicit the help of Clément Guimond of Le Mouvement Desjardins; a Québec based Credit Union equivalent, for financial support. Guimond, impressed by the trio's passion for the project, agreed to become their banker. He still holds that position with Cirque du Soleil today (Babinski 76). Guimond says, "They showed us not only that they had a dream, but that they could also deliver artistically. These people could turn a dream into concrete reality, and create something people wanted to see" (Babinski 76). Guimond began overseeing their books and trying to keep the group financially stable. He and his bank allowed

numerous non-sufficient fund checks to clear the bank, just to keep the group solvent.

Laliberté says,

it was funny. First they would say, “okay, stop writing checks over \$5,000!” So we would pay in increments of \$1000 or less. Then they’d say: “No more checks for over \$1,000!” and so on. We ended up writing tons for checks for under \$100! They took a big risk on us, much bigger than any other financial institution would have. (Babinski 81)

Although stretched to the limit, the bank never gave up and neither did Laliberté. Laliberté says, “from the beginning . . . I told the government funding agencies that we’d be free of needing their support within five years” (Babinski 100). Laliberté and Gauthier spent weeks calling vendors to whom the group owed money and asked for repeated extensions on their bills. Reaching the end of their financial ropes, the group finally got additional governmental support from Québec’s Office of Cultural Affairs. The offered Laliberté and company \$250,000 to keep the company alive and Laliberté turned the offer down, knowing that they needed a full \$400,000. Laliberté believed so strongly in what he was doing that he was able to convince the government to give the group the full amount needed; had they done otherwise Laliberté knows the cultural affairs office would have had to have written the money off as a loss. He was right.

In addition to the financial crises Cirque was suffering, 1986 also brought the loss of one of the founding members of Les Échassiers de Baie-Saint-Paul, Gilles Ste-Croix. Ste-Croix was thirty-five and decided that his time performing on the road was at an end. He wanted to create a more settled life for himself. He left the group to study theatre at Concordia University and began working at the Opéra de Montréal’s property shop

(Babinski 83). The loss of his long-time friend as an artistic partner was almost more than Laliberté could bear and he almost quit again, but the exposure at Expo '86 was just too tempting and he held on and worked diligently to hold the company together.

1986 marked a turning point for Cirque du Soleil. Franco Dragone returned to the group, this time as production director. He brought with him a former collaborator, Michel Crête, to design costumes for the new show being developed. Crête was a recent graduate of the Scenography program at the National Theatre School of Canada and was eager to make his name in the theatrical world. The newly formed Cirque du Soleil seemed like a good match for his skills and he accepted Dragone's offer to join the circus.

The show Dragone developed was called, *La Magie Continue* (The Magic Continues). It was rooted deeply in the circus arts with high wire, trapeze acts, and juggling combined with dance and heavy reliance on clowning. Cirque introduced hand-to-hand balancing into the acrobatic acts, which would become a Cirque favorite in later shows. From his theatre training, Crête brought a more theatrical approach to the costuming. Rather than costuming each number individually or even allowing the artists to costume themselves, Crête looked to create a more uniform whole to the look of the show's costumes, he says, "I thought that performers should be dressed in a coordinated manner, from beginning to end, like at the opera, or in a musical" (Babinski 84). Furthermore, Crête created costumes with a real 1980s fashion feel as opposed to the quasi-military look used by the traditional circus. Crête incorporated masks and relied sparingly on the use of sequins, thus creating more subtle costumes than were seen traditionally in this art form.

For *La Magie Continue*, René Dupéré composed an entirely original score of world-beat music that no longer sounded like the carnival music of street performance or the

brass sound of the circus. A multi-piece band played Dupéré's music live onstage, and provided the "dialogue" for the show as the only other utterances presented were clownish gibberish included in some acts, another facet that would become a standard for Cirque du Soleil through the years. Initially presented at the Vancouver Expo '86, *La Magie Continue* received very favorable press, so much so that in the following year the creative force behind *La Magie Continue* reconceived the show and retitled it *Le Cirque réinventé* (We Reinvent the Circus). This show began the introduction of the Canadian native circus to the world market, and they began with a full tour of North America.

Le Cirque réinventé toured and introduced Cirque du Soleil to North America from 1987 through 1989. The tour helped to stabilize the financial situation for the company, and adding greater creativity became easier with fewer financial woes. In 1987, Cirque du Soleil became a privately held company with a very limited partnership that included the group's original founders, Daniel Gauthier and Guy Laliberté. At this time, members of the company who held percentage of box office agreements agreed to exchange those for permanent employment (Babinski 100).

As their financial arrangement changed in 1987, the style of their productions began to evolve and a more cohesive work emerged. With the production, *Le Cirque réinventé* characters began to emerge from the performance and with character creation came visually inspired narratives. To this point in the evolution of Cirque productions, the result was nearly organic, almost as if it happened in spite of the creators. Cirque historian Tony Babinski calls the approach that Crête and Dragone developed for show creation "painterly" (86). Dragone says, "very early in our history, . . . I wanted to create, between the audience and the show, the same relation that exists between an individual and a painting . . . I

wanted to create images that could speak to the audience” (Babinski 86). He cites Peter Brook as a major influence in his creative life, saying, “artists should be attuned to the possibilities of the reality around them, and should be a conduit between those possibilities and the audience” (Babinski 86). This painterly approach allowed organic show creation. Rather than starting from a written script, Dragone could start from a series of acrobatic numbers that he knew he wanted to include. From there, a way to connect the performance dots was explored, by not only the director, but by the troupe of performers themselves. From the collaborative connection, the creators could look for a creative hook upon which to hang the show. According to Babinski, the hook in *Le Cirque réinventé* was “a show by Cirque Grusse in Paris called Paris-Peking . . . about Marco Polo’s voyages, and in the second part, Marco Polo meets the Monkey King” (89). The story did not really hold for Cirque, but the idea of the Monkey King led them again to Guy Caron’s background in commedia dell’arte at l’École nationale de cirque and to one of his students who was pursuing commedia as well as kung fu. Dragone realized this student, often called “king of fools,” by his peers, was the perfect hook for the show. He presented the idea to director Franco Dragone, who immediately jumped onboard, and thus, *Le Cirque réinventé* centered on the king of fools.

Wearing a commedia mask, the King of Fools begins the show in a cloud of white smoke and, soon thereafter, is joined by the Queen of the Night, a beautiful young acrobat. They circle the performance space and in a cloud of fog enter the Ordinary People. “The ordinary people enter . . . in search of their destiny” (Clément 12). They are dressed in ordinary clothes, but are wearing commedia masks. They mill about, interacting with the audience watching them. The audience interaction is transformative for the ordinary

people and one by one; they become various circus artists including a contortionist, an acrobatic cycling troupe, a pair of high wire acrobats and a hand-to-hand balancing pair. Cirque enthusiast and blogger, Richard Richasi says the ordinary people, turned circus artists, “let out the folly and playfulness [sic] buried deep inside them. And they begin to show us that this playfulness [sic] is inside of us as well” (n. pag.). The only recognizable spoken words are a welcome to the audience. Conveyed through simple, broad and comical clowning, the story is conveyed. The show was bright and colorful with original music by René Dupéré and Benoît Jutras. The costumes were created by Michel Crête, the set created by Andre Caron and the lighting created by Cirque’s former lighting technician, Luc Lafortune. Lafortune studied scenic design at Concordia University in Montréal, but toward the end of his studies at Concordia, he had shifted his focus to the world of lighting. Having little on his resume in the way of lighting design, Lafortune’s first theatrical jobs were in the area of lighting technology, which is how he met Caron and Cirque du Soleil. He worked for Cirque du Soleil as a light board operator and general lighting technician from their beginning in 1984 until 1986 when the company began to use him as their lighting designer (Albrecht, *The Contemporary Circus* 64).

The overall feeling of the show defined the style of Cirque that was to come. The production itself showed the acrobatic virtuosity for which Cirque would become known and the audience interplay that would become their trademark. The production showed greater polish than its predecessor but was still simple in production approach (as we shall see, Cirque’s Last Vegas shows are highly technical). While *Le Cirque réinventé* is entertaining, it is simple; none of the elaborate effects for which Cirque will become known in the next twenty-five years were presented.

The tour of *Le Cirque réinventé* generated enough popularity that the group garnered the attention of the head of the Los Angeles Arts Festival, Thomas Schumacher. Intrigued, Schumacher flew to Québec to see first hand what he had only heard about, the nouvelle circus from Canada. Laliberté met him at the airport and drove him to Cirque's performance site. Schumacher says, "[Laliberté] exuded such confidence, man, woman or mule would fall for Laliberté. He could charm anybody. At the time, no one understood this, the whole nouvelle cirque idea. It was just brilliant" (Laliberté "From Street Performer to Billionaire"). He saw the show five times over the course of the weekend in Québec City. He says, "what we saw was what everyone in Montreal and in Québec had been seeing for years, which was complete magic because you climbed inside this yellow and blue tent, and it exploded out. It was as if it was bigger than anything the tent could contain" (Babinski 93). Intrigued by Laliberté and the fresh and innovative nature of his troupe, Schumacher invited Cirque du Soleil to perform the opening of the festival.

The problem was that the festival did not have the money to bring the entire show to Los Angeles. Taking a risk, Laliberté said, "give us the opening slot, promotion, and one hundred percent of the gate" (Babinski 95). For this high profile performance, Laliberté and the rest of the creative team knew the show would need more polish. They wanted to pull off more than they had before; they wanted to truly "wow" this new audience of Americans. They also knew that everything they had was riding on this event. Laliberté, no stranger to financial risk, called in every favor he still had and brought the company to L.A. His greatest fear was that they would not make enough revenue at the door to cover the expense of returning home, but he had a plan. If there was not enough earned at the box office to allow the troupe to return home from America, they would sell the Grand

Chapiteau and use the income to get everyone back to Canada. Laliberté refers to this endeavor as Cirque's "to live or die in L.A. moment" (Babinski 95).

Adding more acrobatic feats for the festival, the group pulled out all the stops, including hand balancing, chair balancing and the Korean Plank (Richasi). The risk paid off, Cirque du Soleil became L.A.'s new flavor of the month. Laliberté says, "Thomas Schumacher says it was the worst deal he every made . . . He thought he was saving money, but he could have made a bundle if he had kept part of the gate" (Babinski 96). It was in L.A. that Laliberté and his Cirque were introduced to celebrities and entertainment executives and they to the Cirque. Entertainment critics praised the production in *The Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Times*. Johnny Carson invited Cirque to bring one or more of the acts from the show to perform on the *Tonight Show*. TV talk show host Joe Franklin began to call it "Cirquemania, because it reminded me of the impact Beatlemania had on all of us, decades ago" (Halperin 65). From the earliest reports, Cirque was a hit in the United States, and Laliberté and company began looking toward the future to hold onto their current success.

Cirque hit a financial milestone in 1987. They were able to retire all of their debts and, since then, have not encountered any substantial financial obstacles. In retiring their debts, Laliberté was able to take back full financial control of the organization, and no longer had any reliance upon the Canadian government or any private banks. From 1984-1994, the federal and provisional governments provided over five million dollars to Cirque du Soleil for both touring and general operations (Harvie and Hurley 303); in the end the money was repaid in full and Cirque du Soleil became again a privately held operation. Laliberté was able to "reprivatize" the organization and re-establish himself and Daniel

Gauthier as the company's principal owners. They were now free of the financial woes that plagued their dreams and stunted their creative freedoms, and the future of Cirque du Soleil appeared cloudless.

As the company was reeling from its success, they also were shaken with some changes in key personnel. In 1988, Cirque artistic director Guy Caron left the organization taking several other Cirque members with him. Laliberté and Caron had been involved in small disputes ever since the group left Québec City regarding the connection between what was now Cirque du Soleil and the National Circus School in Québec City. Laliberté had dreams of taking the success of the company forward into additional venues with additional troupes, while Caron wanted the profits to be used, in part, to continue to finance the school. Laliberté maintains that the beginning of this argument goes all the way back to the fundamental starts of these two men's careers. Caron was part of the commune and cooperative generation, and his focus lay in the world of non-profit; while Laliberté had spent time in that world, his heart was set on using his creative energies for profit. Caron is silent on this issue. Regardless of the roots to the disagreement, Caron's departure rattled the foundation of the organization with some wondering if the group could weather this storm. Laliberté remained to fill the gaps and keep Cirque du Soleil moving forward.

As Laliberté had done in the past, he turned to a former collaborator and friend, Gilles Ste-Croix for help. After a nearly four-year absence, Ste-Croix returned to Cirque du Soleil as the second artistic director for the company. Ste-Croix faced challenges in gaining the trust of the Caron loyalists who had remained with the troupe. He says, "they saw me as Guy Laliberté's man" (Babinski 99). As Ste-Croix struggled to win over the disgruntled

company members, Laliberté made another major staff change. He fired Normand Latourelle.

Latourelle had been with the company since 1984, as part of the planning team for Cirque's performance in the 450th anniversary celebration. In 1986, he was promoted to Assistant General Manager. After a disagreement between Latourelle and Laliberté regarding Cirque's potential performance in Los Angeles, Latourelle quit. Six months later, Daniel Gauthier, who was handling the business side of Cirque du Soleil, came to Laliberté with an ultimatum that Laliberté hire Latourelle back, or else he would leave as well. Not wanting to lose another founding member in Gauthier, Laliberté, with his tail between his legs, approached Latourelle. Latourelle agreed to come back on two terms; one was that he be named General Manager and the other was that he becomes a full partner with Gauthier and Laliberté in the company that had recently changed from a nonprofit to a for-profit enterprise. Placed over a barrel, Laliberté agreed and Gauthier and Latourelle were both named general managers each with unique responsibilities: Latourelle would be in charge of Marketing and Operations while Gauthier would handle Finance and Administration. This arrangement left Laliberté in charge of Business Development and Creation (Babinski 100).

At first, the arrangement seemed to work, but soon the partnership was in trouble. Laliberté and Latourelle could not agree on the future of the organization and Latourelle began pitting performers against Laliberté. Emotions, already strained with the loss of Caron and the addition of "Laliberté's man," Ste-Gilles, the situation rapidly deteriorated. Latourelle began campaigning against Laliberté with the performers, making promises to them that he failed to meet then blaming Laliberté for the failure. The last straw in the

situation came when Latourelle tried to remove Laliberté from his role as head of creation. Laliberté says, “I come from the street, where you take partnerships seriously . . . So I take it very personally when I feel someone is betraying an agreement . . . I told Daniel [Gauthier], “it’s either him or me” (Babinski 100). The decision was left to Gauthier, and Latourelle was let go while Laliberté was retained.

Unfortunately, the personnel issues created by Latourelle and the financial burden of buying out his share of the corporation left the remaining members fearing again for the company’s financial future. Instead of turning to outside entities financially, as they had in the past, Cirque returned to the west coast of America, where they had been so popular two years prior. Here, they presented a revamped *Le Cirque réinventé* to poor reviews. The audience seemed to sense this was a “warmed over” offering and was not impressed (Babinski 100). Ste-Croix stepped in with the idea of a new show. The new show would be called, *Nouvelle Expérience (New Experience)* and the goal was to “revolutionize the circus arts” (Babinski 100). With *Nouvelle Experience*, Ste-Croix moved the company toward what many Cirque du Soleil followers consider the first full-length production by Cirque du Soleil. This show introduced Cirque du Soleil to Las Vegas and began the combined forces of the spectacle of Las Vegas and the spectacle of Cirque.

Nouvelle Expérience continued the creative exploration and expansion that Cirque began with *Le Cirque réinventé*. For this project, Gilles Ste-Croix asked Franco Dragone to return to Cirque to direct the work. Franco agreed on one condition, he said, “If I am going to work with you again, I want to build a cohesive team” (Babinski 107). The condition was granted and the team assembled. Ste-Croix would serve as the Director of Creation, former costume designer, Michel Crête would be the scenic designer, music would continue to be

composed by René Dupéré and Luc Lafortune would again design lights. The new member of the team would be Dominique Lemieux. Lemieux studied fine arts and design at Concordia University in Montréal and became a children's book illustrator. While working as an illustrator, she began studying scenography at the National Theatre School of Canada. It was at the National Theatre School that she met costume designer, Francois Barbeau, whom she assisted from 1986-1988. While assisting Barbeau, Lemieux worked in Cirque's costume department on *Le Cirque réinventé* (dominiquelemieux.com). For *Nouvelle Expérience*, however, Lemieux would design the costumes herself.

Dragone says, "the idea for *Nouvelle Expérience* came from Jules Verne . . . [who wrote] *La Chasse au Météore*" (The Chase of the Golden Meteor) (Babinski 108). Dragone extrapolated Verne's idea of a meteorite crashing to earth into a story of a jeweled meteorite crashing and breaking into a million valuable pieces. Dragone says, "our show would be a trip across the planet to find those little [meteoric] jewels" (Babinski 108). In his review of *Nouvelle Expérience* in *The Globe and Mail*, Liam Lacy describes the shows action in the following manner,

A traveller . . . wearing a trench coat, carrying a suitcase, wanders into a magical world. At first confused, he begins to delight in it and is transported back to childhood by the experience. Each event in the circus becomes part of his - and the audience's - process of transformation. (C1)

The action is propelled forward as the traveller looks all over the Cirque world for meteoric "jewels." The jewels are the specialty acrobatic acts, which included a quartet of female contortionists, a troupe of Korean Plank performers, a trapeze artist, aerial strap performer, a chair balancing performer, a pair of stilt walkers and the ubiquitous Cirque du Soleil

clowns. This time the clowns played the mistress of ceremonies and her consort as well as a group of mischievous “flounces” (Weiss 40).

Although Cirque had been using original music from the beginning, it was with *Nouvelle Expérience* that music took the forefront where it remains today. In this production, Cirque began to use music as the narrator. Composer René Dupéré says, “we really wanted the music to be an actor in itself, to be the speech of the show, the narration” (Babinski 116). Dupéré continued to use a “world beat” as he had in *Le Cirque réinventé*, but this time he thought of those sounds as the “words” to the music and composed accordingly.

Nouvelle Expérience was a huge success as it toured North America from 1990- 1991 in its big yellow and blue tent; the company recouped all financial losses from the personnel changes of *Le Cirque réinventé*. In his review of the show, Lacy wrote,

[The] charm and panache of the ensemble presentation - is much more memorable than any individual feat by the 39 artists who make up the show. The emphasis [is] on integration of the disciplines . . . no particular act is indispensable here. More than anything, Cirque du Soleil is a stunning display of collective stagecraft, highlighted by the dance of the rainbow-hued light [and] the brilliantly costumed nonsense-gibbering {sic} clowns . . . who dance and mime throughout. The production, the delicate balance of grace and humour [sic], form a flowing river of visual delights, accompanied by a jazz-funk-new-age soundscape. (C1)

Hedy Weiss in her *Chicago Sun Times* review of *Nouvelle Expérience* speaks of Cirque in a more general manner: “Cirque du Soleil is not the kind of circus you’d dream of running

away with. It's the kind of circus that sweeps you up in a swirl of stardust" (40).

Nouvelle Expérience ended its tour on December 21, 1991, in the parking lot of The Mirage Hotel and Casino where it gained the attention of entrepreneur Steve Wynn. As of 1991, the show had been seen in dozens of cities throughout North America by more than 1.3 million people, but it was *Nouvelle Expérience* in the Mirage parking lot that would eventually lead to Cirque's permanent residence in Las Vegas.

While *Nouvelle Expérience* was on tour, the creative teams at Cirque du Soleil in Montréal began exploration of the next work they wanted to produce. This work, *Saltimbanco*, opened its first tour date on April 23, 1992, and wrapped that tour in 1997 (Richasi). In 1998, the show revamped and restaged for arenas was put back on the road, and it is still performing today. In Babinski's text, Vice President of Creation, Lyn Heward says,

to keep a show running, you always have to look for its relevance to a new society . . . Before we choose to send a show to a new place, we ask "Is it still relevant?" Not only passable, but also *stimulating* in today's society. So far, with *Saltimbanco*, we haven't come to the conclusion that it's no longer relevant . . . That buck will stop with Guy. (129)

According to Caroline Chia of *The Straits Times*, by the end of 2012 the show will have "been staged six thousand times in forty-nine countries and in more than two hundred and twenty-five cities" (n. pag.). Having performed worldwide for over twenty years, the show closed, back home in Montreal, in December 2012, making this the longest running show in Cirque du Soleil history.

Cirque describes this show as, "decidedly baroque in its visual vocabulary, the

show's eclectic cast of characters draws spectators into a fanciful, dreamlike world, an imaginary city where diversity is a cause for hope" (*"Saltimbanco"* *cirquedusoleil.com*). Gilles Ste-Croix calls it "totally original . . . It has a style all its own, it's theatrical, it's musical, it combines street performing and the [nouvelle] circus" (Tracy Johnson A1). As with all Cirque shows, there is a theme to the work: urbanism. Artistic guide Guy Laliberté says,

Saltimbanco is a message of peace. In the 1990s immigration was an issue, the mixing of culture in cities, and *Saltimbanco* reflects that mix with all its personalities and colors. It's the challenge we have in today's world: respecting each other, living and working together, despite our differences. (Babinski 125)

Franco Dragone, who assembled much the same design team he had used for *Nouvelle Expérience*, directed the show. Michel Crête designed the set, Dominique Lemieux designed the costumes, René Dupéré composed the music, Debra Brown choreographed the performance and Luc Lafortune designed the lights. The new addition to the team was Nathalie Gagné, who joined the creative team to design make-up. Having been trained in the industry at École Christian Chauveau, Gagné worked in film, television and theatre before joining Cirque du Soleil as the Head Make-up Designer on *Saltimbanco* (Nolan).

The colorful, playful work has its basis in traditional circus spectacle, but still does not have any animals. Less dependent upon technology for spectacle than their later Las Vegas works, the work is much more human centered. Maxime Charbonneau, publicist for *Saltimbanco* says, "It's the closest we have to traditional circus . . . the show's emphasis is on human expression. The performers want to move the audience with their acting as much as they want to wow them with their daredevil moves" (Carrero n. pag.).

Following *Saltimbanco*, Cirque toured Japan in 1992 for the first time with a show they created especially for that tour and that country. The show was *Fascination*, and it premiered on May 22, 1992, and closed on August 31, 1992 after one hundred and eighteen performances (Richasi). The production marked a first time collaboration for Cirque du Soleil with outside entities, notably Kirin Beer and the Fuji Television Network. The work represented a combination of acts from retired shows *Le Cirque réinventé* and *Nouvelle Expérience* as well as some characters created for those shows, such as *Le Cirque réinventé's* King of Fools. The creation, production and performance teams were also a combination of both artists from the previous shows, like Michel Crête, René Dupéré, Dominique Lemieux and Luc Lafortune and new artists such as director Roger Parent and choreographer Allison Brierly. The Korean Plank and Hand-to-Hand were also revived from the previous tours for this production. The creative team was asked by the Japanese producers to “scale up” for Japan and Laliberté called the show a “mega-spectacle” he continues by saying, “I am convinced that the Japanese public will receive this tour with enthusiasm and that they will be enchanted by this experience. Coming to Japan has always been in our dreams” (CP C3).

The work offered a unique learning curve for Cirque’s artists. In addition to it being a production that was coproduced, the work had to be approved by the Japanese executives from Kirin and Fuji Television for appropriateness for the Japanese audience. In the end, the work offered two opportunities for Cirque to grow: it helped them recognize that cultural differences inform audience sensibilities and to learn how to function under pressures from outside collaborators.

Cirque du Soleil wrapped up 1992 on a high note. They got their first signs of true

recognition from the country they hoped to represent, Canada. They were awarded the 1992 “Business of the Year” category for small and medium businesses (Christiansen 3). The annual completion organized by the Canadian Chamber of Commerce gave Laliberté and his fellow Cirque founders the knowledge that they had begun to achieve their dream of creating a circus that would represent Canada on the national scene.

After opening six different touring shows, with one that was still on the road at the time, Cirque du Soleil opened its first resident show in Las Vegas, *Mystère*. It premiered on December 25, 1993, at the Treasure Island Resort and Casino, just six months short of Cirque du Soleil’s tenth anniversary as a performance entity. Most of the artistic staff for Cirque’s previous tour shows were involved. The “creative mission statement” that was attached to this production was to “plant a flower in the desert” (Babinski 145). The reviews for the show were praiseworthy. *Time Magazine* says, “If someone were to dream of a cathedral to the goddesses of earth and rebirth, and then dare to build it on the Vegas strip, this would be it” (“*Mystère*” *cirquedusoleil.com*). The *Atlanta Journal/Constitution* observed, “The stage is always alive with radiantly costumed performers slithering like reptiles or strutting like birds, accompanied by ethereal music that sounds like something half-remembered from a dream” (“*Mystère*” *cirquedusoleil.com*). Audience members have praised the show from the start, but as Cirque du Soleil has produced bigger and more spectacular shows on the Las Vegas strip, the responses to *Mystère* have tamed somewhat. In comparison, the show seems somewhat basic, but still provides a unique entertainment offering in its Las Vegas home, and in its eighteen years of continuous performing, it still sells the house at over fifty percent, enough for the show to remain profitable for Cirque du Soleil (Weatherford, “Cirque du Soleil’s *Mystère*” J6).

As Cirque du Soleil has grown, it has continually added shows to its production roster in Las Vegas and on the road. Since *Mystère* opened in 1993, Cirque has brought six more “flowers to the desert,” which include *O*, *Zumanity*, *Kà*, *Love*, *Criss Angel Believe*, and *Viva Elvis/Zarkana*. In Chapters V-XI, I will examine each of these works in detail.

CHAPTER IV

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL: THE 1990S THROUGH TODAY

On the dividing line between reality and fantasy, our creations are portals into unknown worlds. Strange characters lead you through unbelievable sets and surreal atmospheres to the sound of entrancing music.

("Discover Who We Are." *cirquedusoleil.com*)

OUTSIDE VEGAS: ROAD AND RESIDENT SHOWS

Cirque du Soleil has continued to produce road shows and non-Vegas resident shows that push the artistic envelope. The first tour launched since *Mystère* opened in Las Vegas, was *Alegría*, which premiered in the Big Top on April 21, 1994, and continues to tour worldwide today as an arena production. Created to celebrate the company's tenth anniversary as Cirque du Soleil, *Alegría* is Cirque's eighth show to be open. The work is considered by some to be an introduction to Cirque du Soleil. This work is comprised of what Cirque does best; perform death-defying and gravity-defying acts with little need for a linear story. Cirque says,

the themes of the show . . . are many. Power and the handing down of power over time, the evolution from ancient monarchies to modern democracies, old age, youth - it is against this backdrop that the characters of *Alegría* play

out their lives. Kings' fools, minstrels, beggars, old aristocrats and children make up its universe, along with the clowns, who alone are able to resist the passing of time and the social transformations that accompany it. ("*Alegría*" *cirquedusoleil.com*)

Gilles Ste-Croix speaks of *Alegría's* theme of new world order. He speaks of the impending end of the century, man's lack of faith in leaders and man's lack of direction. He adds that even the scenic design reinforces the new world order idea by creating a square structure as the central playing space, from which the action bursts. Ste-Croix says it is not important that the audience get all meaning from *Alegría*, "we work in subliminal images . . . Don't get caught up in interpretation when you watch. Let the emotion carry you" (Temin B1). *Alegría* is primarily an acrobatic show and its creators want the audience to be caught up in the wonder of the ability of the human body, to see what is possible for man. Cirque further wants the audience to take a moment in time to soar above the problems of today's world, which Ste-Croix believes we can do if we merely crane our necks upward to observe the wonder of the high flying acrobatics in *Alegría*.

The next tour launched, and the ninth show produced by Cirque was *Quidam*, on April 23, 1996 (Richasi). Developed by much the same artistic team that created *Alegría*, the work uses its acts and clowns to make a statement on the isolation of man through the young girl, Zoé. The show is somewhat dark in mood, relying for its theme on the works of Belgian surrealist artist Paul Delvaux who is best known for paintings that feature people who appear to have no connections to each other (Albrecht, *The Contemporary Circus* 6). Director Franco Dragone says, "there are crowds . . . but you realize that nobody is watching anyone else. That is what I tried to stage" (Albrecht *The Contemporary Circus* 6).

The character of Zoé is the one person with which the audience can connect. She is a young girl largely ignored by her parents, even at home. Into her world of isolation walks a faceless Magritte-esque man who takes her to another world where she can fly. It is a world that is populated with “characters who encourage her to free her soul” (“*Quidam.*” *cirquedusoleil.com*). Her escape world is filled with highflying acrobats on rings and on fabric banners, juggling clowns, a troupe of complicated jump ropers, tumblers and Cirque du Soleil’s unique clowns. Laliberté calls *Quidam*, “a tribute to the faceless people you don’t get to know” (Babinski 189). Critics say this show is more “circus” in feel because the performance focuses more on the acts than on dance performance. *ReviewVancouver.org* says, “It was what we expect from the circus [...] clowns, beautiful athletes, fabulous costumes, and remarkable feats of artistry, poise, sensuality and balance” (“*Quidam.*” *cirquedusoleil.com*). The work, in all, is a reminder of what Cirque can do best; entertain with human strength and grace combined with high production standards.

Between the opening of *Quidam* and Cirque du Soleil’s next show in Las Vegas, *O*, Cirque co-produced an odd bit of interactive dinner theatre that originated in Germany in 1990. The show is *Pomp Duck and Circumstance*. Although this is not truly a Cirque show, the group considers it their tenth show produced. Cirque became involved with *Pomp Duck and Circumstance* in 1997 when it was restaged in Hamburg. Gilles Ste-Croix was responsible for the rewrite and the restaging of the work. On the Google Group, *rec.juggling*, Jamie Skidmore says, Ste-Croix “Cirqued it up, giving it more panache and style” (n. pag.). *Pomp Duck* is more a variety/cabaret style show with acrobatic elements such as contortion and a balance board act called rolla bolla. The most remarkable differences between this work and others by Cirque du Soleil to date are the use of spoken dialogue

and the production as dinner theatre. The dialogue is spoken in French, German, and Italian while an entire meal is served to the audience and the show is performed. Furthermore, the cabaret theme also offers a more adult production than Cirque generally produces. *Pomp Duck and Circumstance* did not prove to be as popular in the United States as it was in its original home of Germany, with poor reviews of both the show and the food here in the States. Important to note is that the work is hard to connect to Cirque du Soleil. It appears as a small footnote on both their website in the press release section, and has a single page inclusion in *Cirque du Soleil: Twenty-five Years of Costumes*. Furthermore, it is fully omitted from the Babinski text. Likely considered by Cirque as a failed undertaking, it likely proved useful to Gilles Ste-Croix and Cirque du Soleil in 2003 when they introduced *Zumanity* to Las Vegas.

Following the successful opening in Las Vegas of *O*, on October 19, 1998, Cirque created another resident show, *La Nouba*, in Orlando, Florida, in the heart of Walt Disney World's "Downtown Disney." As with *Fascination*, the show represents another collaboration with non-Cirque personnel. The negotiations for this production took over ten years, with Disney executive Michael Eisner and Guy Laliberté at odds over all the aspects of the work, from the content to the funding. The resultant contract allowed Cirque du Soleil to retain all creative control, while Disney provided the funding for the project. Eisner says, "when you have a Spielberg or a George Lucas or others of that level, you let them have creative control. With Cirque du Soleil and Guy Laliberté, you create a financial box, and you let them do it" (Babinski 239). *La Nouba* premiered December 23, 1998 and continues to perform ten shows per week to nearly sold out houses (Richasi). Most important about this production is that it is another resident show for Cirque du Soleil in

another tourist-oriented community.

Once the details of bringing a Cirque du Soleil production to Orlando were ironed out, the process of creating a show was addressed. Like with other Cirque offerings, the initial ideas came from Laliberté himself. Of *La Nouba*, Laliberté says, “being at the heart of Disney, the master of the fairy tale, necessarily meant that we had to tell a fairy tale our own way” (Babinski 239). Cirque describes the show as,

the meeting of two worlds poles apart: the fantastic world of the circus artists - the Cirques (circus people), sporting bright, fluorescent colours—and that of the Urbains (urbanites), who wear dark, monochromatic outfits. When these two worlds first make contact, the magic and amazing feats of the one set fire to the pale mundanity of the other. (“*La Nouba*” *cirquedusoleil.com*)

The following year, 1999, Cirque sent another Big Top show on tour. Their twelfth show, *Dralion*, combined ancient Chinese circus traditions with Cirque’s modern style. This show marked the first since *Nouvelle Expérience* that did not have Franco Dragone as its director. Instead leading the creative charge was former Cirque Artistic Director Guy Caron who had left Cirque over artistic and financial differences with Laliberté twelve years prior. Journalist Pat Donnelly says that Caron returned to direct this work to “preserve a sense of continuity” (“*Dralion Returns Older*” F3). Other members of the central creative staff were also different for this show from the previous ones, including costume designer Francoise Barbeau, the mentor of former Cirque costume designer Dominique Lemieux, and choreographer Julie Lachance who replaced Debra Brown. Another old friend also returned to the creative team: scenic designer Stephané Roy was back at the design table

with Cirque after working primarily in theatre design in Montréal. The change in staff reflected the growth of the company more than any other reason, regardless of the gossip to the contrary. Caron says,

this team switch isn't about cracking a stale mold . . . It's a necessity born of rapid expansion. Launching three new shows ("*O*", *La Nouba* and *Dralion*) within one year was simply too much for Dragone, Brown and the others to handle. They're not retiring. I'm not here to say I'm team No. 2 . . . I'm here to create this show and that's it. ("Cirque Comes Full Circle" D1)

In his book, *Guy Laliberté: The Fabulous Life of the Creator of Cirque du Soleil*, Ian Halperin discusses this staff change. He says, "Guy always likes to keep an inner circle, even if he sometimes got burned by them . . . He believed in making happy the people who were with him from the beginning" (101).

After an uncharacteristically long break between new show premiers, *Varekai* opened three years later, on April 24, 2002. Laliberté said that *Varekai* marked a new beginning for Cirque; it was the first show to open after several changes in staff and was the first show of the 21st century. The first monumental staff change was the departure of founder Daniel Gauthier, one of Laliberté's partners from the days in Baie-Saint-Paul. In early 2000, shortly after *Dralion*'s opening but long before *Varekai* even left Montréal, Guy Laliberté bought out Gauthier's share of Cirque du Soleil for an undisclosed sum leaving Laliberté holding ninety-five percent of the company (McCarroll 9). Although there was speculation about difficulties between Laliberté and Gauthier, Laliberté says the split was amicable, "I think it was a good point for both him and Cirque—Daniel made a personal decision to pursue other things. We're still neighbors, we're still friends" (Babinski 288).

Gauthier's official statement on his leaving was, "my decision to put an end to our business partnership comes after a great deal of reflection and lengthy discussions with my partner . . . My choice was made on strictly personal grounds, and I wish these reasons to remain private" ("Press Releases" *cirquedusoleil.com*). Gauthier now lives in the ski resort area of Le Massif de Charlevoix located in the Charlevoix region of Québec. He is the creator and developer of the area which serves as a cultural retreat with sustainable environmental preservation, similar to the commune systems where his early ideals formed. ("Le Massif de Charlevoix").

Gauthier's leaving followed closely after the departure of other members of the original Cirque creative team and left some members of the company concerned that it marked the beginning of the end for Cirque du Soleil (Babinski 288). However, with the departures of old staff came new staff. The new creatives produced *Varekai* and new executives were placed in leadership roles at Cirque du Soleil headquarters. Daniel Gauthier's position, which at times had proved to be too much for a single person, was divided into two positions. As he had done before, Laliberté promoted a current member of his staff into one position and for the other position brought an old friend from his early days as a busker into the fold. Lyn Heward was moved from her former position as Vice President of Creation to President and Chief Operating Officer (COO) of the Creative Content Division ("Lyn Heward") and Daniel Lamarre, former chief executive of TVA group (a French language television in Canada), was hired as the President and COO of Shows and New Ventures Hiring (Leger C 01). Lamarre says, "we had been flirting with each other forever, but I never had a specific offer" (Leger C 01). Refusing to linger in the past, Laliberté referred to these changes as forward movement. Laliberté says, "Cirque du

Soleil's 'Volume 2' has officially begun. 'Volume 2' . . . will be about establishing Cirque du Soleil's legacy" (Babinski 289).

"*Varekai's* message is that there is comfort after chaos" (Babinski 307). This was a good message for a show that marked the new century and a major Cirque du Soleil staff overhaul. Guy Caron had returned to Cirque to direct a single show and to maintain the continuity of the group after the changes post *La Nouba*. Now, Laliberté needed to hire a director who would become a permanent fixture in the Cirque du Soleil camp as Dragone had been previously. Feeling the pressure of too many changes, Laliberté reached back to his Québécoise heritage and hired a director from Québec. Laliberté says, "I always said we were a Québec company . . . and that creativity in Québec was a natural resource. It made sense to get a director in Québec" (Babinski 291). He hired Dominic Champagne to direct *Varekai*, the first of many Cirque du Soleil shows he would direct. Like Dragone, Champagne came from a background in theatre, having graduated from the National Theatre School of Canada in 1987 ("*Varekai*" cirquedusoleil.com). He was also a writer and has worked in theatre, film and television. In describing himself and his style, Champagne says,

I'm not just the kind of theatre person who plays with Beckett or Shakespeare . . . I try to create my own universes, and I try to find a fusion between music, cabaret, and dramatic performance. I want there to be a party between the performers and the audience. I think it's the spirit of wanting to mix the spectacular and the dramatic that interested Guy, who invited me in. (Babinski 292)

Champagne was not the only new member of the team, in fact, the only creative who

had worked with Cirque on prior productions was scenic designer Stephané Roy. The change in executive structure as well as creative structure also meant a change in creative process. Lyn Heward says, “ the intuitive approach to creation championed by Dragone would be difficult to replicate . . . The problem with intuitive is that it doesn’t necessarily happen spontaneously. It takes time to develop” (Babinski 298). Having worked as a writer as well as a director, Champagne offered an option that was new to Cirque production, a fully fleshed out written script. In Champagne’s estimation, a written script allowed for a more narrative work, and the works created by Cirque du Soleil from *Varekai* on have moved ever forward in terms of narrative development. Champagne says,

we weren’t trying to make a revolution. The bar is already set high . . . But I thought that what I could bring to a Cirque show is to try to integrate drama and acrobatics more. In other words, to tell a story, or give a little more meaning to the acrobatic numbers. (Babinski 301)

Just as Champagne created a narrative story in the production of *Varekai*, *Varekai* created the beginning of the new story for Cirque du Soleil, setting a new style and a change for the future to come.

In 2003 and 2004, Cirque du Soleil opened back-to-back shows in Las Vegas with the burlesque cabaret *Zumanity* and costly martial arts extravaganza, *Kà*. *Zumanity* marked their fourteenth production overall and their third in Las Vegas, while *Kà* marked the fifteenth overall and the fourth in Las Vegas. Following *Kà*, the Big Top tour *Corteo* opened on April 21, 2005. The work presents the more comic side of Cirque du Soleil as The White Clown, who imagines his own funeral happening during a carnival, tells the story. The visual elements rely heavily on the baroque while the performance elements owe tribute to

Baroque theatre and carnival entertainment. According to Ronald Clément in his Cirque authorized book, *Cirque du Soleil: Twenty-five Years of Costumes*, “the show brings together the passion of the actor with the grace and the power of the acrobat to plunge the audience into a theatrical world of fun [and] comedy” (90). The music has carnival tones and circus-like feel. The acrobats fly high overhead dressed as angels who watch over the clown who is very much inspired by Pierrot. Overall, the work has a strongly old Europe feel at the same time it is a lighthearted entertainment.

Not wanting to become too traditional, *Corteo* took big technology steps forward. For this tour, Cirque brought into play wireless DMX for their lighting control (Terdiman), now a standard practice for lighting control, wireless DMX was just making its mark on technical theatre in 2005 when *Corteo* premiered. With the wireless system, the lights throughout the theatre can be controlled without the use of wire, which is important not only because it is a tour show but also to avoid serious injuries in a show that is predominantly in the air. At the time the tour launched, *Corteo* had more technicians employed than any prior Cirque show, and was considered the most technologically advanced of all the Cirque shows to date. This achievement in lighting would soon become commonplace in theatrical production.

After exploring the power of a musically driven performance concept with their eighteenth show overall and the fifth for Las Vegas, *Love*, Cirque du Soleil looked to capitalize on the power of music as a vehicle for production. In 2006 Cirque premiered a work that *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* called a “flashy invitation to a younger crowd” (Adcock 27) Cirque introduced another type of Cirque du Soleil extravaganza—the stadium (arena) show. *Delirium* was the first offering from Cirque du Soleil that was meant to feel

more like a rock concert and less like a Cirque show. Additionally, it was initially conceived and produced not to be in the trademark blue and yellow Grand Chapiteau, but in an existing arena space. *Delirium* is also different in that the music, which has been remastered from existing Cirque du Soleil music, has lyrics in English, French, Spanish, Wolof and Portuguese (Bourneau 1B). The biggest change from other Cirque shows is the staging. *Delirium* puts the musicians and vocalists at center stage and relegates the acrobats to the fringe of the performance. Susan Rife of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* describes the show as relying heavily on 540 feet of projection screens that show “acrobats, characters and dancers perform[ing] to the soundtrack; their images are then re-projected during the performance as the cast elaborates what’s on the screen” (30). Reviewers agree that Cirque claims the show has a narrative story line, but that seems thin compared to the overwhelming use of music and technical production. The work played for a limited run, premiering January 26, 2006, and closing its tour on April 19, 2008 (Richasi), during which time the show ranked number six on *Billboard Magazine’s* Top-Grossing Tours for both 2006 and 2007, earning more than \$138 million in just twenty four months. The most important outcome of this work was that Cirque realized that they could indeed produce their works in existing spaces and did not have to bring the Grand Chapiteau to all their locales. This idea brought about the practice of retiring Big Top shows and reintroducing them as arena shows with the plan to reach more of the world.

After delving into the new world of arena performance, Cirque returned to Big Top touring with production number nineteen, *Kooza*, which premiered on April 19, 2007, and began a world tour that continues to this day (Richasi n. pag.). *Kooza* returns to Cirque’s roots by placing the emphasis of the production back on the spectacle of the human body.

Ronald Clément says, “between strength and fragility, laughter and smiles, turmoil and harmony, the show revives the sensation and emotion of the ring by bringing two circus traditions together—acrobatic performance and the art of clowning” (108). According to the *Hollywood Reporter’s* Mike Barnes, the show features the type of acts that brought Cirque together in the first place, “trampolines, a high-wire act, stilts, somersaults, unicycles, bicycles, a trapeze . . . [and] jugglers with bowling pins” (6). *Kooza* proves that, with all the forays into something different or new, Cirque du Soleil still connects with its roots in the circus arts and that it can still perform them flawlessly.

In 2007, Cirque premiered its twentieth production, *Wintuk*, which critics agree was not Cirque’s finest hour. The piece was created specifically for Madison Square Garden’s WaMu Theatre and was planned as a seasonal production for the following four years. Everything from the low ceiling at the venue to the lack of “full-throttle vigor” to its seasonal nature seems to be to blame for the show’s lack of success. The show by Cirque standards is modest with a mere \$20 million in preproduction costs; there was a time in the history of this group when this sum would have been considered a fortune but it appears those days are gone. Joe Dziemianowicz of the *Daily News* sums the show up in this manner: “*Wintuk* leads inevitably to a climactic in-house confetti blizzard, which is literally a blast. But it’s too little, too late. In the end, this is Cirque du So What” (35). The hope was that Cirque du Soleil could move into the Rockette holiday tradition and perhaps engage a younger audience that would at some point grow up with fond memories of Christmas and Cirque du Soleil and buy tickets as adults at adult prices. It appears that the show was not improved in the off seasons, as the reviews for the 2010 season were as bleak as they had

been in the opening season. Eric Grode of *The New York Times* wrote,

The bigger challenge for the creators of *Wintuk* is to keep the deserved focus on their gifted performers while populating the grievously wide auditorium of the former WaMu Theater. This clutter is where the piece, for all its individual delights, falls short with at least some of the intended audience. As my 7-year-old theater companion put it at intermission: “Stuff is going on as far as I can see. It’s kind of annoying.” (14)

In 2008, Cirque du Soleil travelled back to Asia to present *Zaia*, which marked Cirque’s first permanent show outside of North America. The show opening marked the first anniversary of the Venetian Macao-Resort Hotel in Macau, China. The work was created for a purpose built 1800-seat theater with an estimated cost of \$150 million United States dollars. (“*Zaia—The First Permanent Cirque du Soleil Show in Asia*”). Remarkably, the show is being presented in a hotel chain that is also on the Las Vegas strip, but does not have a Cirque du Soleil resident production at this time. The Venetian Macao-Resort-Hotel is part of the Las Vegas Sands Corporation, but does not appear to have any type of entertainment agreement with Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas like the MGM Mirage Entertainment chain does. Macau appears very much to be the Chinese Las Vegas, with fifteen million visitors a year and 3.7 billion dollars in gambling revenue in the first quarter of 2008, according to the Macau Gaming Inspection and Coordination Board (Kuo W13). Jerry Nadal, a senior vice president for Cirque du Soleil says, “We looked at how much money . . . [was being invested] in the Venetian Macao, and saw how many tourists were coming here -- Macau is also a rising convention destination. So we said, 'Why not?'" (Kuo W13). More telling is the comment from the now Cirque du Soleil President and CEO of

Cirque du Soleil, Daniel Lamarre,

We are extremely excited to bring this unique show to the Cotai Strip as our first permanent step in China . . . The creative challenge is very interesting for us as this area has yet to be developed for its entertainment offers. Thanks to our partnership with Las Vegas Sands, we are anxious for Asian audiences to discover this Cirque du Soleil production. (*“Zaia – The First Permanent Cirque du Soleil Show in Asia”*)

Lamarre’s words indicate that although they have not opened any Cirque du Soleil shows in Sands Corporation properties in Las Vegas, this market is one that Cirque would like to further explore and perhaps one day exploit. As of this writing this plan has not come to fruition as *Zaia* closed on February 18, 2012, and there are no indications that it will either tour or be brought back into production, nor has Cirque du Soleil opened any further resident shows in China (*“Press Releases” cirquedusoleil.com*). Furthermore, Cirque has not yet opened a show in any more of the Sand’s properties either in China or in Las Vegas.

On October 1, 2008, Cirque created another production in conjunction with Walt Disney Attractions, this time for Tokyo Disneyland (Ouzounian *“Zed”* 9). Titled *Zed*, the show was Cirque’s twenty-second show produced and contacted to run for ten years (Matsuoka 14). The show closed six years short of its original contract due to the devastating earthquake in Japan in March 2011. Kyoichiro Uenishi, Chief of the Oriental Land Co., Owner of the Tokyo Disney Resort, said, “it is hard for Oriental Land to continue running the *Zed* show at its Cirque du Soleil Tokyo theatre. The show will close at the end of this year due to a fall in the number of spectators following the March disaster” (Urayasu n. pag.). As part of the evacuation of Tokyo after the earthquake, Cirque du Soleil moved all of

its employees from both *Zed* and *Kooza*, which was in Japan on tour, to the Venetian Resort-Hotel in Macau, China, where *Zaia* was still in performance. In an official statement from Cirque's corporate Public Relations manager, Chantal Côté says, "The *Zed* and *Kooza* teams will benefit from the support of their Macau colleagues and will be able to pursue their training at the Macau training centre" (Donnelly "Cirque Moves Artists" C5). Reviewing *Zed*, Pat Donnelly of *Canwest News Service* says, "audience reaction has been so positive that controlling egos has become [director Francois] Girard's job" ("*Zed* Fits Well" B2) and Richard Ouzounian of *Daily Variety* says, "*Zed* is not the biggest or most spectacular show in Cirque's long history, but it very well may be the most magical" (Ouzounian "*Zed*" 9). During the earthquake hiatus, Cirque considered *Zed* to replace *Viva Elvis* at the Aria Resort and Casino at CityCenter in Las Vegas when it closed, but chose not to do so. In spite of positive audience and critic response, Cirque chose to close the show on December 31, 2011 ("Press Releases" *cirquedusoleil.com*).

Shortly after opening *Zed* in Tokyo, Cirque du Soleil was back in Las Vegas for their sixth Vegas show, *Criss Angel Believe*. The show opened on October 31, 2008, and marked another collaboration for Cirque du Soleil. In the following year, Cirque opened another Big Top touring production *Ovo*. *Ovo* marked the twenty-fifth anniversary season of Cirque du Soleil and served as a reminder to audiences that Cirque du Soleil is more than just an entertainment machine; it is also a socially aware organization with a commitment to diversity. The work is populated with a cast of larger-than-life insects who create an acrobatic ecosystem, which Clément identifies as "teeming with life, where insects work, eat, crawl, flutter, play, fight and look for love in a non-stop riot of energy and movement" (18). The title, *Ovo*, which comes from the Latin word for egg, tells all about the conflict in

the story, as it the arrival of a strange egg into Cirque's insect world then moves the show to its climax. Director Deborah Colker says, "the egg is a metaphor for the cycle of life . . . It is food, it is fertility, it is the natural world . . . It's all about transformation" (D'Souza n. pag.). The work focuses on both the idea of a fragile and wonderful ecosystem as well as tolerance of strangers, even in the form of bugs, a lesson we should all take to heart. Cirque is also proud of the fact that this is their first production directed by a woman, feeling that this pushes the concept of acceptance and tolerance even further home.

Writer, director and choreographer Deborah Colker began her career in Brazil. She has since gained worldwide acclaim for her creative dance style, even garnering a Laurence Olivier award in the United Kingdom for "Outstanding Achievement in Dance" in 2001. Colker's directing style is much more like Cirque's earliest creative model, started by Franco Dragone. She prefers developing concepts through the rehearsal process as opposed to going into the process with a defined goal ("*Ovo*" *cirquedusoleil.com*). What she brought to the show was greater integration between Cirque's circus elements and the dance elements for which Cirque was starting to become known. "[She] has little patience for the traditional boundaries between genres such as dance, theatre and circus" (D'Souza n. pag.). Everett Evans of *The Houston Chronicle* suggests that this show "refresh[es the] Cirque du Soleil formula" ("A New Kind of Bug Story" 4), and *Daily Variety* agrees that *Ovo* proves that Cirque du Soleil is not simply resting on its laurels, saying,

while keeping the same basic ingredients that have driven Cirque shows for the past quarter-century (clown acts, colorful staging, minimal concept), *Ovo* branches out in several fairly bold directions, which – while not always

successful – are a clear sign of an organization willing to challenge the status quo. (Ouzounian, “*Ovo*” 12)

Evans of *The Houston Chronicle* continues, “increased emphasis on choreography makes *Ovo* move with an artistic totality and seamless fluidity that some past Cirque touring shows have lacked” (“A New Kind of Bug Story” 4). Frank Rizzo of *McClatchy – Tribune Business News* concurs, saying,

how is [*Ovo*] different from the other Cirque shows . . . A certain sameness and structure, however beautifully executed, does tend to wash over Cirque shows after a while. Its lush and lovely mood music has plenty of atmosphere but little specificity . . . But *Ovo* has a focus (however soft) and cohesive visual theme that makes its more of a stand-out. In future years, I still will be able to describe *Ovo*. I can't remember for the life of me what "Dralion" was about.

(n. pag.)

In all, Cirque used its twenty-fifth anniversary to pull back a bit to their roots and combine their beginnings with practices that have proven to be successful. They have embraced the Franco Dragone style of creative process in which the artists are asked to explore a concept, while at the same time using their more recent practice of beginning creation with a prewritten script.

Also for their twenty-fifth anniversary, Cirque decided to create another “venue” show that would tour without the blue and yellow Cirque du Soleil circus tent. *Banana Shpeel* was very much a vaudeville style show à la Cirque du Soleil using a variety show format and a partially scripted story. The scripted story, with spoken dialogue, involves clowns antagonizing a producer who is unable to get rid of them. The variety show acts

include foot juggling, hat juggling, hand-to-hand and some tap dance. The response to this style of production for Cirque du Soleil was poor. Its initial opening in Chicago in December 2009 had “scorching reviews” (Acocella 82). The show underwent a not atypical Cirque overhaul and moved to New York City as planned, but the scheduled opening date of February 11, 2010 came and went without an opening. The show finally opened on May 19 of that year (Acocella 82), and the reviews were not much better. Joan Acocella of *The New Yorker* says,

the makers of *Banana Shpeel* were a little embarrassed by the idea of reverting to the variety-show format and therefore did whatever they could to make the show seem up-to-date in other respects. We get “South Park-style” political incorrectness . . . something I have never seen on a stage before. If you’re trying to wean the kids from schoolyard humor, you might want to leave them at home. I recommend, instead, taking them to Big Apple Circus. (82)

Toronto reviewer Robert Cushman sums up the show in this manner,

There are two obvious ways in which *Banana Shpeel* differs from all the previous Cirque du Soleil shows that have been seen in Toronto. One is that it’s staged in a theatre rather than a tent. The other is that it has dialogue, lots of it, that can be both heard and understood. These are not good things.

(AL 4)

Banana Shpeel played in Chicago, New York City and Toronto before the tour was cancelled in late 2010, even though it was scheduled to perform at two more venues before the close of the year. There has been no further discussion of *Banana Shpeel* or any type of variety

show since.

Seemingly riding on a trail of misfortune, Cirque's next show to open was the ill-fated *Viva Elvis* at the Aria Resort and Casino at CityCenter on February 22, 2009. Following to two missteps of *Banana Schpeel* and *Viva Elvis*, Cirque returned to the road with production number twenty-seven, *Totem*, launching the tour in the year of Charles Darwin's 200th birthday. Cirque du Soleil calls *Totem* "a fascinating journey into the evolution of mankind" ("*Totem*" cirquedusoleil.com). The work premiered on April 22, 2010; since its opening, the show had toured more than sixteen cities in four different countries and has been performed for more than two million spectators. In all the venues to date, the show has received tremendous critical acclaim. Cirque considers it a "hybrid" of their tour types, the first of its kind. It is hybrid in that the show "can play in permanent structures – such as arenas – and in the Grand Chapiteau" (Carter "Cirque du Soleil's *Totem* Tackles" n. pag.). Cirque, again, presenting a socially aware theme, hired Robert Lepage, who directed the Las Vegas resident show, *Kà*, to direct the work. He agreed to direct *Totem* because he wanted to return to the "small" circus style of a Cirque big top show as opposed to the enormous production style of *Kà*. He says,

we kept bumping into each other round the world, but I could never really find the right time or the right project. They kept saying, "if we're going to hire you, it will have to be a big razzmatazz thing." So I did the big thing [in Vegas] and decided not to do it again -- not because I didn't enjoy it but because once you've done it, you don't want to do it again. *Totem*, for me, is more fun because I always wanted to do this kind of thing. I was naive enough to think of it as a "small" show, though. (Cavendish B12)

Of course, no Cirque show by this time was a small production. This tour has an international cast of fifty-two including Cirque's usual high quality acrobats and even a high wire unicycle act. Thematically, the production tackles man's beginnings and Canadian folk history. In his review in Canada's *National Post*, Dominic Cavendish identifies "evolution theory . . . the totems of Canada's First Nations and the founding myths of civilizations" (B12). In Melissa Leong's article, "The Origin of Trapeze" director Robert Lepage is quoted as saying,

I wanted to do something that would be about evolution . . . Evolution is about the body, how you go from a nucleus to an amphibian to a mammal to standing upright and eventually flying. There's enough space in that idea to go into the origins, go into the past, talk about the present and project ourselves into some sort of poetic ideal. (AL 1)

In Zenitha Prince's review in *Afro-American*, Lepage further says that he was "inspired by the foundation narratives of the first peoples" (B3). He then elaborates: "*Totem* explores the birth and evolution of the world, the relentless curiosity of human beings and their constant desire to excel . . . the word totem suggests that human beings carry in their bodies the full potential of all living species, even the Thunderbird's desire to fly to the top of the totem" (B3).

Even the creation of the show followed the idea of the survival of the fittest. Melissa Leong describes the creation of *Totem* as,

follow[ing] Darwinian principles. Everyone involved is interdependent. Each artist brings unique traits to develop the work. And only the fittest ideas (and talent) survive . . . ideas begat other ideas . . . costume designer Kym

Barrett . . . work helped define Totem for everyone, including the director. "The lush aesthetics from the whole show are beyond the costumes. They really come from her . . . [and the] evolution continues . . . More than a year after its debut, *Totem* is still being tweaked. (AL 1)

Totem is staged on a giant tortoise, the symbol for the origin of man in many ancient cultures. Chris Kaltenbach of *McClatchy - Tribune Business News* further describes the action as

featur[ing] four recurring characters: a Scientist, a Tracker (a friend of the animals who aids the Scientist in his explorations), an Amerindian Dancer and a Crystal Man, who brings the spark of life to Earth . . . They will guide you through the show . . . *Totem* includes 12 acts, featuring all manner of aerial wizardry, dancing, roller skating, unicycling and juggling. (n. pag.).

Totem has been immensely popular for Cirque, earning both critical and popular acclaim. Journalist Richard Ouzounian says, "Robert Lepage redefines every art form he touches. *Totem* is well worth waiting for" ("All the World's a Stage" E1). In another review by Richard Ouzounian, this time for the *Daily Variety*, Ouzounian says, "*Totem* may look like the other Cirque du Soleil touring shows . . . it takes very little time to realize that while Lepage may be duplicating the exterior shape of previous shows, the interior content is something completely different" (Ouzounian "*Totem*" 3). Pat Donnelly of *The Gazette* says, "Cirque du Soleil's show has subtly evolved" (Donnelly, "Totem now a True Wow!" C5). Donnelly refers to more than just the show improving as it has travelled the road; under Lepage's tutelage, the performers have become more adept at story telling through acting. Ouzounian says, "Lepage has taught his gymnasts to act, so that the expressions on their

faces sometimes rival the legerdemain of their bodies" (Ouzoiunian, "*Totem*" 7).

Zarkana opened as Cirque's twenty-eighth production at Radio City Music Hall's six thousand-seat theatre in New York City in 2011. The plan for the work was that it would share the space with the world renowned Radio City Rockettes, playing for six months each year, in the season between the Rockettes' Easter and Christmas shows. During the times that it was not playing Radio City, *Zarkana* would tour select cities throughout the world. The plan was for this world to be open for five years (Ouzounian, "All the World's a Stage" E1). Cirque calls this show "an acrobatic spectacle that blends circus arts with the surreal to create a world where physical virtuosity rubs shoulders with the bizarre" (Giola).

Considering the competition of Broadway, New York's own resident circus, the Big Apple Circus, and the poor showing of Cirque's *Banana Shpeel* and *Wintuk* the previous year, many wondered if Cirque's resident production could be successful in New York City. President and CEO, Daniel Lamarre says, "'We are doing great in New York . . . We are expecting to sell between 600,000 and 700,000 tickets there this year alone" (Ouzounian, "All the World's a Stage" E1). He continues, "we never publish our box office figures because we are a private company, but I will tell you that our weekly gross for *Zarkana* is reaching \$3.2 million and the top grossing show on Broadway (*Wicked*) is taking in \$1.8 million" (Ouzounian, "All the World's a Stage" E1). So, when *Viva Elvis* was ordered to close at the Aria Resort in Las Vegas, Cirque moved *Zarkana* into the available theater and opened performances on November 1, 2012.

Described as a "love letter to the art and science of cinema," Cirque's twenty-ninth production, *Iris*, opened at the home of the Academy Awards, the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles, on September 25, 2012, after two months of previews (McNulty D1). Titled *Iris*, as

a play on words—describing both the beautiful and unique flower, and the mechanism that controls the amount of light allowed into the eye, just as the lens allows light into the camera--the work is ideal for Los Angeles because the show centers on the movie business. Cirque President and CEO, Daniel Lamarre says, “It’s very different from every show we’ve ever done and offers a nice tribute to the movie business, both humorous and sentimental” (Ouzounian, “All the World’s a Stage” E1). The work represents a one hundred million dollar investment by the company, and has been described as having “many breathtaking moments, brilliant directorial touches [by Philippe Decouflé], 72 performers, and a lush symphonic score by cinema veteran Danny Elfman” (Donnelly “Cirque du Soleil’s Iris” C3).

Remarkably, this Cirque offering has understandable English dialogue, a risky move given the failure of their last foray into “talkies,” *Banana Schpeel*. Most of the talk is “barbs aimed at the film industry” (Donnelly “Cirque du Soleil’s Iris” C3). Paul Hodgins of *The Orange County Register* says,

like many Cirque shows, “Iris” is light on story . . . [but] “Iris” is Cirque squared. It’s more intense and spectacular than most Cirque du Soleil shows, taking advantage of a permanent home to intensify its grand theatricality. There will be a few grumblers who will find “Iris,” like other Cirque creations, too opaque, non-linear and spectacle-filled. But most will be happy to sit back and let the magic wash over them. Like a great popcorn movie, it’s a feast for the senses, not the brain. (E)

Although intended for a ten year run, *Iris* closed in Los Angeles on January 19, 2013 due to a steady decline in ticket sales. Ironically, once the closure was announced in November

2012, the show sold to packed houses, leading Cirque du Soleil to consider keeping it as an option for a later tour show.

A mere week after *Iris* officially opened in Los Angeles, Cirque's next Big Top touring show, *Michael Jackson: The Immortal World Tour*, opened on October 2, 2011 (Ouzounian, "All the World's a Stage" E1). The following summer it was named "the best touring musical arena show in 2012" by Billboard magazine (Clarke "Mixed Media about *Zarkana*" 3A). Cirque President and CEO Daniel Lamarre later announced that the Jackson show will open at Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino on May 23, 2013 (Clarke, "Mixed Media about *Zarkana*" 3A). Lamarre is quick to remark that the show will not be exactly as it was when it toured. He says,

major changes are being made from the show that stopped here a year ago. What you saw was a rock show. What you will see is a theatrical show. One thing we learned is that Michael Jackson fans don't want excerpts, they don't want medleys. They want "Beat It" all the way . . . expect to see technological leaps. (Clarke, "Mixed Media about *Zarkana* 3A)

Some have speculated that the Jackson show will never make it to Las Vegas, given the poor showing of *Viva Elvis*, another show based on a superstar. Lamarre insists that the works are not the same. He says, "I know I am saying this all the time . . . but this show is also very different from anything we have ever done . . . It's as different as Michael Jackson is from Elvis. It's a rock pop concert. The show will bring the same energy that Michael had onstage. We have to feel his presence at all times" (Ouzounian, "All the World's a Stage" E1). In publicity statements, Cirque has said, the show is "aimed at the singer's fans and those experiencing the pop star's creative genius for the first time, the show uses Jackson's music

and lyrics to explore his creative process and underscore his messages of love, peace and unity” (Carter, “Cirque du Soleil’s *Totem Tackles*” n. pag.).

Cirque’s newest Big Top tour show, *Amaluna* is a Cirque du Soleil take on William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*. The show is described as

invit[ing] the audience to a mysterious island governed by Goddesses and guided by the cycles of the moon. Their queen, Prospera, directs her daughter’s coming-of age ceremony in a rite that honours femininity, renewal, rebirth and balance which marks the passing of these insights and values from one generation to the next. In the wake of a storm caused by Prospera, a group of young men lands on the island, triggering an epic and emotional story of love between Prospera’s daughter and a brave young suitor. But there is a love that will be put to the test. The couple must face numerous demanding trials and overcome daunting setbacks before they can achieve mutual trust, faith and harmony. (Hetrick n. pag.)

In addition to the extensive live production chronology addressed here, Cirque made numerous appearances at additional events internationally. They have performed as an opening act for the United States Academy of Motion Picture Awards (the Oscars) twice, a half time act for the 2004 Super Bowl, an opening to the 2012 FIFA Woman’s World Cup and as a cover act for the United States Miss America Pageant, just to enumerate a few.

OTHER MEDIA

In addition to their live action productions, Cirque has made several forays into film and television through their multimedia division, Cirque du Soleil Images. Cirque du Soleil

Images is responsible for television, film, video and DVD production and the distribution of those products. To date they have created two television series, *Fire Within* and *Solstrom*. *Fire Within* was produced in 2002 as a thirteen-part documentary series focusing upon eight performers as they create and eventually open *Varekai*.

Solstrom is also a thirteen-part series created the following year, in 2003. This show is much more like Cirque's live stage productions. A theme is followed and illustrated through the feats of physical prowess by Cirque du Soleil artists. The theme of *Solstrom* is wind, "specifically a 'solar wind' that transforms ordinary citizens into graceful athletes" (*Cirque du Soleil – Solstrom*). Most people agree that while the television series are interesting, they do not have the power that a live Cirque du Soleil production possesses.

In the medium of film, Cirque has considerably more offerings, thirty-three in all. They range from documentaries about show production, to videotapes of actual productions, to film adaptations of live action productions, to retrospectives about the shows and company to date. The most current of these films, was released nationally on December 21, 2012. *Cirque du Soleil: Worlds Away* is a 3D film directed by James Cameron that focuses on the seven shows currently playing in Las Vegas. It winds them into a linear narrative about "two young people . . . who meet in a real-world circus and fall into another universe, where they search for one another and finally meet again" (Stone n. pag.). As with Cirque's productions, the story is told visually and through music; there is no spoken dialogue. The film proved popular at its premiere at the Tokyo International Film Festival on October 20, 2012, and has had quite an Internet following since its release.

Cirque du Soleil also has its own music division that handles the distribution of the company's original aural work. Cirque du Soleil Musique is responsible for the creation and

production of all of the Cirque du Soleil music worldwide. Cirque du Soleil Music is more than just a distribution company; it is a recording company that is involved in the process of musical creation. It also maintains a mandate of developing “a new music catalogue through alliances with emerging artists” (Molaro n. pag.).

Cirque is currently exploring other avenues of entertainment with its division Sandbox Hospitality Group. Cirque states, “Sandbox is dedicated to transforming the landscape of hospitality, nightlife, leisure and entertainment by providing innovative and inspiring experiences” (“Hospitality.” *cirquedusoleil.com*). This group is the most collaborative of all the Cirque divisions. They have to be. As of this writing, Sandbox has opened two nightclubs in Las Vegas with an additional one planned for opening in March 2013. The Cirque nightclubs are like theatrical productions with strong emphasis on what technology can bring to an environment. The first of the two open nightclubs is The Beatles Revolution Lounge, which is located in The Mirage Hotel and Casino. The club is very 1960s inspired with an atmosphere of psychedelic energy created by light and music. The second of the clubs is The Gold Lounge, created to be a club for the after *Viva Elvis* set. After a bit of revamping because of the closing of *Viva Elvis*, the red and gold interior now has a more sophisticated art deco feel and is a comfortable location for that after-*Zarkana* cocktail. The third nightclub, which is yet to be opened, is under construction at the Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino, soon to be the home of the *Michael Jackson One*. The club will be interactive and offer “cirque activities” in an upscale dance club environment.

Cirque states that “more than 100 million people have seen a Cirque du Soleil show since 1984” and “close to fifteen million people will see a Cirque du Soleil show in 2012” (“Discover Who We Are” *cirquedusoleil.com*). Richard Ouzounian says,

Of course, there are 18 other shows running around the world, which means that roughly 350,000 people attend Cirque du Soleil presentations each week. The Guinness Book of World Records hasn't been consulted yet, but I'm willing to bet that's a number that hasn't been beaten. How do they manage to keep so many balls in the air at the same time? The answer, according to Cirque's genial, grey-haired president and CEO, Daniel Lamarre, is that, "We try to focus on one show at a time and evaluate each single opportunity as it comes along. ("All the World's a Stage" E1)

It is clear that what started as a small troupe of touring street performers has grown into one of the largest entertainment organizations in the world, topped only by such giants as the Disney Corporation. Laliberté has repeatedly stated that what makes his productions different are that they are unique, each one an individual. What makes potential audience members pay anywhere from sixty-seven to two hundred and seventy-six dollars to attend one performance? It is more than just the originality and individuality of the shows, it is also the brand; it is the known quality and style that a potential audience member can expect. How does Cirque du Soleil create a unique production with this quality? They have a unique staffing structure and creative process that is always fluid and ever ready to be adapted in anticipation of the next big thing.

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL, A UNIQUE STAFFING STRUCTURE

What began in 1984 as a dream of three men is now a multimillion-dollar enterprise with its own international headquarters in Montréal and over five thousand employees

worldwide. Cirque du Soleil employees speak more than twenty-five different languages and come from over fifty different nationalities.

Cirque du Soleil's artistic staff is organized differently than that of other performance groups. The company has an executive artistic staff which functions more like a producer in American theatre. The executive artistic staff put the pieces into place to create each individual show and make sure that these shows have whatever they need to survive. Each show, then, has its own artistic creative staff who are actually responsible for creating that individual show.

Since its birth, Cirque du Soleil has seen many team members come and go, including some of the original members, but one has remained a constant: Guy Laliberté. Laliberté sits at the center of the Soleil, with all of the arms of the company revolving in orbit around him. Often referred to as the "producer," Laliberté is listed on all of Cirque's productions, including the Las Vegas shows as the "founder." He says, "I'm a creative producer, not just a business producer" (Babinski 90). Laliberté tends to be involved in a work at the beginning and the end. In discussing his connection to the creation of new works for Cirque, he says,

I was always close to the creators; having been one myself . . . I knew what the creative process was all about. I got to choose people I had confidence in, and I gave them a clear path, without obstacles. Since I had confidence in them, I knew I was making a good decision. (Babinski 90)

Gilles Ste-Croix describes Laliberté's participation in the creation of a new show as "very creative." He says that Laliberté "contributes ten percent . . . He gives the first five percent and the last five percent. And that ten percent makes a difference as to whether the show is a success or not" (Babinski 90). All agree that by bringing Laliberté in at the beginning and

the end, he sets the parameters for the work. Babinski says that Laliberté provides “fresh eyes on the process” (90). He says, “I can be more objective, because I haven’t been involved day to day. Sometimes I can see that there were objectives we had at the beginning that we’ve strayed from” (Babinski 90). Although Laliberté offers his creators freedom to discover their shows on their own, Cirque’s President and CEO, Daniel Lamarre says, “it’s not a case of maverick personalities running their own shows . . . Guy gives every director a clear mandate based on where the show is opening and what he expects it to accomplish . . . he gives them financial perimeters and artistic perimeters and then allows them the freedom to create” (Ouzounian, “Cirque Hot to Trot” 51).

Additionally, Laliberté has numerous other titles attached to his name on both the Las Vegas projects and on the tour productions. He is listed as the “show concept creator” on *Love* and as the “Chief Operating Officer” on *Zumanity*. On all of the Las Vegas shows, except *Criss Angel Believe*, he is also credited as “guide.” The title guide is one that Laliberté especially loves. As the guide, Laliberté considers himself the one who can take the audience on a journey to another time and another place. To take them out of their own lives to a place of escape for a few short hours. In his 2011 *20/20* interview with Barbara Walters, he says, “everything we do here is to entertain at Cirque du Soleil. To let people dream for a few hours and this is good for the soul.” He is the “guide” for the entertainment and for the dream, however fleeting.

Regardless of the additional titles assigned to Laliberté on a given production, he is always identified as Cirque du Soleil’s founder. It is certainly his natural charisma that tends to draw people to him and his drive and creative zeal that hold them there. U2 singer Bono says, “I’ve never met anyone as sharp as Guy . . . He’s one of the most powerful people

ever in show business for a reason. He's likeable, smart, and very open to new things" (Halperin 29). He is the front man on all production in Las Vegas and at home in Canada, and serves as the master of ceremonies at all of the "lion's dens," Cirque's title for the first preview of a show that is in works. It is at this time that members of all of the creative teams, the production team and the financial folks, as well as any invited guest who have a connection to the work, such as Sir Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr in the case of *Love*, are invited to see a rough performance of the work. Laliberté is always on hand for the previews and openings of new works and is noted for being present at random times on shows long in production, checking that the quality of the original production is being maintained. He is also the face of Cirque du Soleil, serving as the primary public relations face to the general public as needed. In his *20/20* interview, Laliberté says, "I have the best job in the world."

In 2011, journalist Richard Ouzounian interviewed Daniel Lamarre for the *Toronto Star*. His goal was to identify the secret to Cirque's rampant success. In that interview Lamarre says, "We are owned by one man, Guy Laliberté. We're not traded on the stock exchange. We're stimulated by creative challenge, not the bottom line. Cirque is more than a company; it's an institution that people in Canada are proud of and we want to continue to make them proud of us" ("All the World's a Stage" E1). In Melissa Leong's *National Post* interview with Robert Lepage regarding his participation on *Totem*, the director says of Laliberté, "his barometer is the hair on his skin . . . if the hair is up, it means it's good. If not, well, then it's not going to work and it's out" (AL 1). Laliberté's instincts have managed to keep audiences rapt for decades with Cirque du Soleil's body-bending, high-flying formula. Lepage says that he rarely argues with Laliberté regarding production. "I have this great

relationship with Guy when it comes to discussing artistic intuition. It's rare in my life to be able to say this, but he's always right" (Leong AL1).

However, Laliberté cannot do all of the creative conception himself. There have been numerous changes at the head of this conglomeration since its inception in 1983, but Cirque's current management model puts three men at the top of the creative food chain. In 2008, Daniel Lamarre, then president and chief executive officer said, "There are only three people who are involved in every show we do . . . Guy Laliberté, Gilles Ste-Croix and myself. Management here has stayed very tight and stable. Laliberté founded the company, while Ste-Croix serves as VP of Creation" (Ouzounian, "Cirque Hot to Trot" 51). Lamarre calls the trio a "tight-knit executive triumvirate" (Ouzounian, "Cirque Hot to Trot" 51).

Gilles Ste-Croix was one of the original partners with Laliberté in his entertainment adventure, but in 1985, he decided that he wanted to retire from performing, so he left Cirque du Soleil and his partnership with Laliberté. During that time, he studied theatre at Concordia University in Montreal, Québec. After finishing school, Ste-Croix began working in the property studio at the Opéra de Montréal. In 1988, Laliberté convinced Ste-Croix to return to Cirque du Soleil to replace Guy Caron as the artistic director for the corporation. At first, the task was hard, the group had changed in four years, and the departure of Guy Caron had left a bit of a schism in the remaining company. Ste-Croix persevered and his brainchild, *Nouvelle Expérience* premiered successfully in 1990. After the successful premiere of *Nouvelle Expérience*, Ste-Croix's position changed to Director of Creation, a title he held until 2000. As Director of Creation, Ste-Croix oversaw the development of a number of Cirque du Soleil shows, including *Saltimbanco*, *Alegría*, *Mystère*, *Quidam*, *La Nouba*, "O," and *Dralion* ("Dralion" *cirquedusoleil.com*). In this position he was less directly connected to

any one of the productions than he was while serving as the Artistic Director; instead he was responsible for amassing the talent needed to develop and produce the aforementioned shows. Additionally, in 1992, Ste-Croix directed his first Cirque du Soleil show: *Fascination*. Five years later, he was again given the opportunity to direct, when he produced the little known *Pomp Duck and Circumstance* in Germany.

In 2000, Ste-Croix left the daily operation of Cirque du Soleil and moved into a position as consultant. He used this time to combine his childhood love of horses and his passion for the circus arts in the creation of the 2003 production *Cheval-Théâtre* (Horse Theatre). The show toured North America, playing in a limited number of selected cities. The work featured thirty horses and acrobats working in tandem and solo to create a work that was outside the realm of Cirque du Soleil because of its use of animals as performers. Having achieved the dream of creating a circus show with horses, Ste-Croix again returned to a leadership role at Cirque du Soleil. In 2002, he was named Vice President of Creation, New Project Development. Ste-Croix's position again changed in 2006 when he was named Senior Vice-President of Creative Content ("Press Releases." *cirquedusoleil.com*). When asked by journalist Mike Weatherford about his position in the area of creative content, Ste-Croix spoke of his personal connection to the teams he creates for projects: "every team of creators I put together now has to fit . . . I don't hire a creator by phone" ("Hippie Pats Helps" 1K).

Ste-Croix's association with Cirque du Soleil through the years might seem to an outsider to be disjointed, but Ste-Croix has always remained loyal to the idealistic company gone entertainment machine. Yes, he has left for personal projects now and again, but he has always come home to roost. In an interview with Jenn Godbout, Ste-Croix says, "We're

very complimentary [Ste-Croix and Laliberté]. We've been together for over 35 years . . . [Laliberté] has a great mind and works quickly with ideas and I'm a good organizer, so we complement each other" (n. pag.). Today he remains not only a piece of Cirque du Soleil's history but an ever changing part of the present and future of the company and its worlds yet to create.

The third member of the current monarchy at the helm of Cirque du Soleil is Daniel Lamarre who was appointed as President and Chief Operating Officer (COO) of New Venture Division in 2001. In this position he sought "financing and partnerships for six entertainment complexes . . . He [was] also . . . responsible for the Cirque's multimedia and television divisions, retailing and other unspecified ventures" (Leger C 01). In 2004, Lamarre was moved from his position as COO to the position of Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Upon receiving this promotion, Lamarre has become the name attached to public relations information from the Cirque du Soleil company while Guy Laliberté has become the face. Lamarre says, "I succeeded here because I love artists. My mission is to find work for artists" ("Call of the Circus" 8).

Each individual production, then, has its own creative team who answer to the power trio above. The individual creative teams are responsible on a day-to-day basis for development and production of a new show. However, these creatives do not work in a vacuum; they are under the watchful eye of members of the power triumvirate at key points throughout the production process. The structure is one of checks and balances. Laliberté and company creates a set of parameters for a given production and the show's creatives work together with the performers to execute a concept that is in sync with these parameters. Shows are created in a fluid and organic manner, allowing artists to bring

ideas to the greater whole for consideration. Cirque takes pride in this organic creation process.

Once a show is created and officially opened, the creative team leaves, often returning to Montréal to undertake a new project. The production's run crew is responsible for the show's continued maintenance. "After each show opens, there is an artistic director on site to see every performance and push the artists to make sure they're always delivering their best. And then there's what we call a "flying team" from Montreal who pay frequent visits to each production to make sure that the original intention of the show is being honoured" (Ouzounian, "All The World's a Stage" E1). Richard Ouzounian's 2008 *Variety* article reports, "there are currently two hundred and fifty creators (not counting cast and technicians) working on nine shows" ("Cirque Hot to Trot" 51). It is not uncommon, once a show is in its production run, for Laliberté, Ste-Gilles, and/or Lamarre to make spot appearances either to bring renewed attention to a show or just to see if the show is in need of one of Cirque's standard overhauls.

THE CREATION PROCESS

The actual step-by-step, day-to-day process for the creation of a Cirque du Soleil show is a bit of a mystery to outsiders because the Cirque organization is very guarded in discussing how a show really comes to life. They only allow bits of the process to be discussed with the general public, only as much as is necessary to launch a new Cirque production. What they are willing to discuss openly is the company's mission. In an interview with Regina Molaro on *Liscensemag.com*, Lamarre says that Cirque's goal is to "invoke the imagination, provoke the senses, and evoke the emotions of spectators

worldwide” (n. pag.). Guy Laliberté, who is at the forefront of any new or existing Cirque production, continually discusses the organic nature of the creation when pressed for an answer on the subject. To a certain extent this is actually true, and not just a public relations answer. He initiates each production; this is the first five percent to which Gilles Ste-Croix refers. With each production, he wants the group to take a risk, much like he does in his own life. His idea or ideas are then moved to the creative team that has been assembled for the given production. Some of the design staff have worked on nearly every one of the thirty-six productions that Cirque has created. Some of these Cirque “old-timers” include lighting designer Luc Lafortune, choreographer Debra Brown, property designer Patricia Ruel, make-up designer Nathalie Gagne, and scenic designer Stephané Roy.

The creation process that was begun by Franco Dragone on *Nouvelle Expérience* is the preliminary blueprint for all productions now created by Cirque. Drawing on his training and experience in theatre, Dragone instituted a workshop idea that allowed the artists to discover a character within them that could advance the idea given by Laliberté. During the character creation phase, the costume designer is invited to watch the workshop to gain design ideas and begins sketching characters.

Performer and former gymnast Michael Rosenberger who has performed in *Alegría* and *Saltimbanco* says,

to do those workshops was completely different and challenging . . . It was fun, but it could also be draining . . . Franco would ask you to propose something . . . but you would never be sure what he wanted. You’d try something, and it wouldn’t work. And then you’d do something and he would

say, “Yes!” It was stressful. You’re trying to do something creative, you’re trying to please this person, and you don’t always know what to do.

(Babinski 118)

Some performers find this process frightening. Their backgrounds, primarily athletics where experimentation is frowned upon, did not prepare them to try something until it felt right and until the director liked what they saw. Former Olympian, Paul Bowler, who has performed the aerial cube in both *Alegría* and *Mystère*, offers this comparison to competition gymnastics as opposed to Dragone’s experimentation,

when you do gymnastics, there’s a book that says, “you need to do a crucifix, a handstand, a double-back somersault, etc. to get 10.” Six men will judge you and they’re going to copy down every mistake, then they’ll blast it and show 15,000 people how not-perfect you are. That’s gymnastics in a nutshell.

(Babinski 118)

Other athletes turned circus performer have found the change in approach to be exciting. They describe the Cirque creation process as more welcoming and inviting as well as enjoyable. Canadian gymnast Natasha Hallett who has performed the role of the Red Bird in *Mystère* and is now part of *La Nouba* in Orlando, Florida, says,

I didn’t want to stay in gymnastics. My coach was abusive. We weren’t allowed to eat, to smile in the gym, to have fun, to listen to music. Everything was “no, no, no” . . . A lot of people go crazy after gymnastics, because they’re restricted from doing so much at such a young age. With Cirque, I went from this completely restrictive environment to complete freedom. (Babinski 121)

Generally, the artists who stay with the company begin to understand the importance of the workshop process in the creation not only of their own character, but also of the production as a whole. Former *Alegría* performer turned *Mystère* company manager, Danielle Rodenkirchen, says, “I realize now . . . that Franco was breaking us down and seeing what he could use” (Babinski 121).

The artists of any Cirque company will speak of another Cirque tradition called “the door.” The door is an exercise used to get the performers to show off the character they have created to other cast members. On one side of the door stands the member who is presenting; all other cast members stand on the other side. The presenting cast member comes through completely in character and the cast responds. The response is intended to allow both the cast to understand the characters in the show, but also to allow the performer to see how the audience will see the character. This exercise also works on a personal level for the performers; it makes them offer the best of themselves to the cast and ultimately to the audience. Natasha Hallett describes the process: “you had to come out and show them who you were. If you didn’t know who you were, you had a problem. That was really what he [Dragone] was trying to get at. What is it inside you that makes you special” (Babinski 121).

Director Robert Lepage suggests that shows like the one he directed, *Totem*, are authored by the director but guided by Cirque. Of show creation, he says,

it's a tightrope walk toward a shared vision but one conducted without gritted teeth. In general, everyone on the creative team has to get excited as adults. We don't approach it with a child's eye. If anyone puts himself or herself in the skin of a child or family, it's Guy Laliberté, he's more of a

businessman and knows his audience. But the moment anything becomes a bit obscure, people around you will tell you. We do so many run-throughs and there's so much feedback that you know very early on if what you're doing is accessible or not. (Cavendish B 12)

Ste-Croix describes the creative process for *Nouvelle Expérience* and all Dragone shows that followed as multilayered. He explains, “there’s Guy’s [Laliberté] wish list, Franco’s ideas, and then Michel will see what’s pertinent. Dominique will create images from Franco’s fantasies” (Babinski 108). Lemieux elaborates,

we always start from an idea . . . It will evolve as we work through it. When we’ve got something that makes sense, we go home, and I start drawing characters. Michel will draw sets, and Franco will keep doing research. It’s just a point of departure. It doesn’t mean we’ll stick with it throughout the work. (Babinski 108)

The creative process is also extended to additional members of the team like the choreographer and lighting designer to bring their ideas to share with the group.

In discussing the creation of an individual show, Gilles Ste-Croix says it takes “thirty-six to fifty months, but it depends on how complex the show is” (Godbout n. pag.). In all, Daniel Lamarre states, “Each creative team is built like a little cell, and no one can interfere with what they do. Creators need freedom” (Ouzounian, “Cirque Hot Trot” 51).

Creation is all done at the \$30-million Cirque corporate office and training facility in the northeastern corner of Montréal (“Cirque du Soleil Gets New Digs” n. pag.). The headquarters was designed by architect Dan S. Hanganu and opened in February 1997 to replace the blue and yellow circus tent from which the company originally worked (Busch

48). Named “Le Studio,” it is considered to be Cirque’s “center of creation and production” (Harvie and Hurley 299). Le Studio was built in part through a \$4.8 grant from the Québec government (“Le Cirque du Soleil Profite” G12). The government granted the funding with the hope of providing jobs for the people of the Montreal community. Le Studio is not a performance venue, only a practice location, so visitors are rare; the public is invited to walk the grounds but they are not permitted into the actual structure.

It is here that each Cirque du Soleil show begins its creative process, from conception through to first premiere. The table work by the creative team is completed here, as are the auditions and the training of the artists. “Here we welcome top level athletes and we train them to become exceptional artists” (“A Visit to Cirque du Soleil’s Studio”). The compound provides more than just studios and training facilities, the artists are also housed in the nearby dormitory. Preparation for a show is much more like Olympic training than a Broadway show’s rehearsal. Cirque believes that the process to create a show is so intense that the artists should be groomed on everything from classes in English to acting, dance, percussion and even nutrition. Every moment of every day is spelled out for the participants; even their meals are provided at le Studio. Le Studio also has Yoga and Pilates classes as well as a full medical staff that monitors the performers.

The campus is eighteen acres in size and the main building has 180,000 square feet of floor space. It is the most sophisticated performance training facility in the world. All equipment is of the highest quality and, often, is cutting-edge. In assessing the gyms one trainer says, “I think we’re the best in the world safety-wise” (“A Visit to Cirque du Soleil’s Studio”). Employees even call themselves “Ali Baba’s treasure cave” because they have any

and all materials that could be desired and everything is top of the line. The goal is to make creators think anything is possible.

The costume workshop at Cirque headquarters is over 4,180 square meters (Babinski 280). The vast square footage is necessary because Cirque builds all elements of all costumes for every show at this location. In 2003, Cirque documented that the Costume Shop manufactured more than 15,500 individual pieces for use throughout the world. In order to create a costume for a performer, not only does Cirque take over 1200 measurements, they trace and measure the feet and make a plaster cast of their head. Keeping all of this information in one centralized location like the studio in Montreal means that the performer will not have to come back to Canada to have a new costume made. The costume shop employs specialists in all areas of costuming from wig making to costume construction to millinery to shoe making to textile creation and manipulation. As an annex to the costume workspace, there is also the “shoe workshop” where specialized cobblers work making custom shoes for every performer from the thousands of foot blanks created from anyone Cirque has ever cast. Additionally, Cirque employs wig-makers and milliners to work in the “hat and wig” department. Cirque uses textile designers to create any unusual fabrics that might be required for a production. For these artists, Cirque has provided a textile design studio where fabric is created to the specification of the show. The property department is also housed within the costume studio. The workshop houses not only the work spaces themselves but a multitude of storage areas including “the store” which houses fabrics on bolts stacked from floor to ceiling, some which have been used and are being used in previous and current Cirque productions and others which are just

potential costumes waiting to be created. In addition to the fabric stockpile, there is any and every notion needed.

The make-up department is adjacent to the costume workshop. In addition to the supplies needed for make-up design and manipulation, the make-up studio is also the repository of plaster casts of every Cirque performer's head. Keeping a record of the exact physiognomy of each of the performers allows the make-up designers to create necessary materials for any performer at a moment's notice. It is in this area that special make-up can be designed and created, such as prosthetic appliances. The make-up studio is also a training facility itself, for it is here that performers are instructed on the process of make-up application so that each can apply their own make-up for their show. Keeping the costume and make-up studios physically proximate allow for design collaboration in these two very closely related fields.

The facility is largely glass with all the training gyms; studios and build areas open for all company members to see. Cirque believes that this helps the employees to see the bigger picture of which they are a part. Corporate offices are housed here as well. Another factor in the design of the facility that is not heavily advertised is the fact that the entire complex is completely accessible to ambulances. Although Cirque does not like to speak of this need, it is a reality to be considered. All areas were designed to be flexible to an extent. The growth of the company through its nearly thirty-year existence dictated the need for flexible use, so with the exception of the training gyms, no area is built for a solitary purpose.

The compound has lush gardens, playful lounges, pubs and restaurants in which the employees can interact regardless of the specific production area where they are employed.

Additionally, Cirque holds social gatherings such as cocktail parties, athletic events and gallery openings for all to attend. Costume maker Marie Denise Bain says, “It’s special here. It’s like a big family, in a village” (“A Visit to Cirque du Soleil’s Studio”). In order to serve this large diverse family, the compound’s signage must be clear to all. Signs are posted in multiple languages including English, French, Russian, and Chinese. Regardless of the signs, Cirque requires that all company members learn English, for English is considered the “official language” of Cirque du Soleil.

The facility was opened in the Saint-Michael neighborhood of Montréal because the area was very disadvantaged and opening there fit with Cirque’s mission to give back to the world, making them “partners in urban revitalization” (Busch 50). Cirque spokespeople do not like to mention the fact that this location was also fairly cheap in comparison to the more expensive and densely populated downtown, ten minutes away, but this fact was also a consideration in selecting the site. So, too, was the ability to utilize working class employees for the considerable labor needs of the large complex. The facility consolidates the work of more than sixteen other facilities around the world that are either leased or owned by Cirque (Busch 50). Cirque attempted to create the “city of circus arts.” They remain and continue to be as green as possible, banning plastic bottles, reclaiming rainwater for use, and composting.

On site is also a school where performers are educated in the Canadian system regardless of their nationality. Class is from ten am to five pm for all students even ones on tour (Hughe 1). Cirque states

Cirque du Soleil’s undertaking to provide an education for its young artists dates back to 1989 . . . when the first teacher joined the *We Reinvent the*

Circus tour to teach the children of the artists on the show. But a program of instruction wouldn't be officially established until 1994 . . . And the program has been constantly evolving ever since! A team of 25 employees, made up of teachers, administrators, and representatives of parental authority, oversees all facets of education for children enrolled in Cirque du Soleil's schools . . . In Québec, as in most countries around the world, education is required by law. If they want to be professional artists at Cirque du Soleil, young people are obliged to attend school. But an education program on tour has some special features. For instance, the travel in itself opens the students' minds to the multicultural context and gives them a better understanding of other nationalities and cultures . . . Each of Cirque du Soleil's classrooms is a true microcosm of the organization itself: a community representing a diverse range of ethnic, cultural and linguistic environments. The students come to Cirque from various social settings and have different educational backgrounds. What they have learned in their home countries varies depending on the age group. Education at Cirque follows a one-room-schoolhouse model, with an emphasis on close, often individual student-teacher relationships . . . Teaching is in French or English, and follows the curriculum laid out by Québec's education ministry. In addition . . . a strong informal support network has developed on each tour to help with the young people's education. Adult artists, technicians, and other staff members often play an active role . . . The task of recruiting the best teachers for this demanding educational setting is not an easy one. Given the large number of

students who speak neither English nor French when they arrive at Cirque, the teachers must be able to teach linguistic immersion and literacy as well as the regular curriculum . . . They must enjoy traveling, be able to teach several grades at once, and deploy tremendous creativity . . . Most of the time, the student-teacher ratio in Cirque du Soleil 's schools allows each student to get individual attention. The teachers note that their students are highly motivated and quickly become self-generating. The children have no limits. The greater the demands made on them, the more ably they measure up. They will go as far as we ask them to go...and much farther! (“Press Room” *cirquedusoleil.com*)

When artists arrive at the facility, they are told to forget the rules they learned in their respective disciplines.

Cirque's goal is to strip them of all the vestiges of competitiveness and get them to tap into their creative sides. Most Cirque performers have typically spent ten years at the elite level of their sport and are hired because of their unique abilities. “The big part of our work here is to reshape their performance perception,” says training coordinator Patrice Aubin. “If they can only perform as an acrobat or gymnast, like they did in their sport, the audience won't get the feeling that we try to project here. They have to connect with the audience so we put them into acting, movement and dance classes” (Hughe 1).

Cirque does perform locally, but not at Le Studio. In fact, all of the tour shows premiere in Montréal in Cirque's “trademark” blue and yellow tent in Montréal's Vieux-Port

(old port). Cirque claims that beginning a tour in Montréal has two purposes. First is practical: Vieux Port is close to corporate headquarters, a mere ten minutes away. Second, and perhaps more important to the group that desired to create a national circus for Canada, is that it gives the people of Montréal the first chance to see a new show

Most of the resident Las Vegas productions have proved to be phenomenally costly to mount, ranging from \$100 million to over \$220 million. Richard Ouzounian quotes Daniel Lamarre saying,

all of the shows have recouped within a year or two . . . except for *Kà* which took a little longer. After recouplement . . . all shows are budgeted to break even at 50% capacity. It means that on weeks when ‘*O*’ or *Love* is selling out (as they frequently do) more than a million dollars of profit from each show could come back to Cirque. Take *Mystère*, which has been running since 1993. (Ouzounian, “Cirque Looks Hot to Trot” 51)

This being said, one has to question what it means when Lamarre says that Cirque is having its best year ever. Ouzounian posits, “how many times over the show has repaid its original \$20 million cost” (“Cirque Looks Hot to Trot” 51). Karen D’Souza of the *Oakland Tribune* says, “Fans of the Cirque oeuvre . . . hail the troupe for pushing toward reinvention every time out. They say the company harnesses the talents of artists as diverse as Robert Lepage and Elvis with as much imagination as marketing muscle” (n. pag.).

It is important to note that although Cirque posts huge profits each year, the cost of producing and continually performing any Cirque du Soleil show is tremendous. All the productions that Cirque has in performance at this time have a collaborator. Each of these partners offers something that Cirque needs for that particular production. Whether it is

access to the music to score the show, the headliner, or “a discussion of the physics of acrobatics” between Cirque trainers and AT&T Bell lab scientists (Temin B1), Cirque has sponsors and knows how to get the most of them.

CIRQUE’S COMMITMENT TO GIVE BACK TO THE WORLD

Cirque has dedicated much of its work to giving back to the world. Founded in October of 2007, the “One Drop” foundation is dedicated to providing safe water to all as a means to help fight poverty world wide. The opening gala for the 2009 premiere of *Ovo* was a fundraiser and donated all proceeds to the One Drop foundation. Cirque says,

the One Drop Foundation makes use of the circus arts, folklore, popular theatre, music, dance and the visual arts to promote education, community involvement and public awareness of water issues. Technical projects in developing countries will improve access to safe water, ensure food security and promote gender equality in communities.

(“One Drop” *cirquedusoleil.com*)

One Drop is not the only charity with which Cirque has been involved. They are also involved in Cirque du Monde, a group who teaches circus skills to at risk children in over fifty countries. Additionally, Cirque is striving to be green at both its facility in Montréal and on the road. Due to the theme of the show, *Ovo* has led the charge in environmental action, by attempting to reduce its footprint. It is reported that,

the environmental footprint of a \$25-million show has to be akin to that of a dinosaur . . . The main innovation is the switch to low-voltage LED lighting. Other changes include low-flow sanitary facilities and the use of

biodegradable soap. Plastic water bottles are now banned from Cirque tour sites, while fair trade coffee, recycled paper and front-load washing machines have become de rigueur. Protective packaging on merchandise has been reduced and every show will have its “green Committee.” Production Manager Benoit Mathieu says, “we won’t pretend to be green . . . there’s all sorts of shades of green . . . what we’re trying to do is to lessen our footprint, lessen our impact, as much as we can” (Pat Donnelly, “The Greenest Cirque Yet” D1).

CONCLUSION

Just like the little engine in the famous story, Cirque du Soleil is the little circus that could. A group of street performers with a passion for circus arts no longer live in tents, sleep on park benches and beg the government for subsidy. They are now a real circus, albeit one without animals. They have redefined performance on a grander scale than they could have predicted. They are a household name with thirty productions running throughout the world. They have done all they had hoped and more. Additionally, they achieved their dreams; they have become the national circus of Canada and have brought lauded notoriety to their home of Québec. Québec has publicly applauded their native sons and claimed some credit for their notoriety. In a November 1997 press release Louise Beaudoin, Québec Minister of Culture and Communication said, “we ought to be proud of the successes Québec has known, like those that the Céline Dions, the Cirque du Soleil, and the Robert Lepages win on a global scale” (Harvie and Hurley 302). The government has gone so far as to consider Cirque du Soleil as a cultural international attaché, featuring

Cirque as “the representative Québécois circus on the province’s worldwide web homepage under the rubric ‘La Vie culturelle Québécoise’ (Québécois cultural life)” (Harvie and Hurley 302).

Although Laliberté and company always dreamed of being the public face of the Canadian national circus, they have pulled away from their tight affiliation with Canada and Québec following their enormous success. They now consider themselves more from a world that they themselves have created. Cirque calls it “a non-territorial realm of imagination, populated by an international cast of performers and financed to sell-out crowds and corporate investment” (Harvie and Hurley 309). They like to think of themselves as part of the “imagi-nation” which is a world they have created for themselves through their art and connection to their audiences through performance (Vial and Dufresne 24).

Ste-Croix does still believe that the members of Cirque and Cirque itself are spiritually connected to Canada and Québec in particular. He says, “the Cirque’s ‘Québécois spirit’ is located in its audacity and ability to change, to call into question” (Labreque 30). That is exactly what both Ste-Croix and Laliberté believe that Cirque does. However, do they succeed in this mission in Las Vegas, or are these shows merely moneymakers for a very profitable entertainment corporation? The following chapters will discuss the seven resident Las Vegas shows and their retention of “Cirque’s Québécois spirit” on a larger, more spectacular scale.

CHAPTER V

MYSTÈRE:
THE LAS VEGAS GROUND BREAKER

This was the first show I ever watched in Vegas . . . it was absolutely magical & breathtaking . . . Such a beautifully crafted show and totally worth every dollar . . . I was on the edge of the seat, it was that beautiful!! But Mystère is AS GOOD AS IT GETS . . . it has raised the bar for any performance I plan to watch in the future! It is a must, must, must, watch . . . I was speechless! (Blogger Monica M)

As a “Christmas gift to Vegas,” Cirque du Soleil marked its tenth anniversary as a performance organization with an offering of a kind it had never before attempted: a non-touring show (Donnelly, “Cirque Flies High” C 13). On December 25, 1993 Cirque du Soleil premiered *Mystère*, its first resident show in Vegas. This was not the first time that Cirque appeared in Las Vegas; they had been performing for the previous year in the Mirage parking lot under the full sized blue and yellow striped circus tent they called the “Grand Chapiteau” (literally “large big top”). At the time Cirque was traveling with its fourth touring show entitled *Nouvelle Expérience*. *Nouvelle Expérience* had been on the road worldwide since 1990, but finally wrapped up its international tour in the Mirage parking lot before returning home to Canada. The tour had proved very successful with both rave

reviews and sold-out houses, but had seen only about seventy-five percent sales at the Mirage location. On tour, reviewers such as Hap Erstein of the *Washington Times* said, “Montreal’s Cirque du Soleil – the circus of the sun – really does do the Ringling Brothers one better, transforming an age-old entertainment tradition into a contemporary performance art” (D 2). Helen C. Smith of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* called the show, “an extraordinary spectacle that has redefined the meaning of circus” (3). David Whiting of *The Orange County Register* said, “*Nouvelle Expérience* makes its mark in many fans’ hearts as one of the best Cirque shows” (F 11). The less than capacity sales did not concern the people involved in the creation of a new resident show for Las Vegas, in fact, Gilles Ste-Croix of Cirque du Soleil admitted, “the *Nouvelle Expérience* show, which closed Nov. 22 after playing for a year in a tent behind the Mirage, didn’t exactly sell like wildfire” (Donnelly, “Cirque Flies High” C 13).

The tour’s success and different performance style of Cirque Du Soleil caught the attention of the Mirage Resorts, Inc. CEO Steve Wynn, who contemplated the idea of producing a Cirque permanent show in a Wynn property in Las Vegas. He was not the first. Cirque had already begun exploring the idea of finding a permanent home in Las Vegas but at Caesars Palace, which was not a Wynn holding. In addition to the usual needs of any production-- performers, music, crew, etc.-- Cirque du Soleil determined that they would need a specialized performance space: a theatre to house their first resident Las Vegas production. Babinski says, “Cirque responded to the challenges of setting up a permanent home in Las Vegas with a creative mission statement. With *Mystère* . . . they would “plant a flower in the desert” (145). The show at the root of *Mystère* was already growing. Originally, this production was planned to be a part of the entertainment for Caesars Palace,

meaning it would have a Greco-Roman theme in keeping with the casino itself. In January of 1991, Guy Laliberté, founder of Cirque du Soleil, and Patrick Bergé, president of the design firm Sceno Plus, Inc., travelled to Las Vegas to meet with the Caesars Palace board of directors to present the designs for a renovation of the casino's theatre for the Cirque project. According to all accounts, the meeting did not go well. Some even state that the contingent from Canada stormed out of the twelve-hour meeting, slamming the door behind them. The idea was scrapped and Laliberté believed that his group would remain a touring company residing exclusively in Canada. "Las Vegas was not yet ready for what Cirque du Soleil had to offer," he believed (Babinski 146).

The failed meeting gave Steve Wynn an opening. He flew to Toronto, where he saw *Nouvelle Expérience* which had returned home to continue its run. Wynn met with Laliberté at intermission, and stated that he would provide Cirque with a theatre that met their specifications. David Johnson in *Theatre Crafts International* says, "Wynn saw in Cirque a perfect complement to Treasure Island, a show that would appeal to its international guests, but more importantly, one that would appeal to Vegas' newest target audience: the family" (n. pag.). Laliberté and Bergé returned to Vegas to meet with Wynn and discuss the project that was now being called "Vegas 2."

CREATION

"Vegas 2" closely resembled the project that they had been envisioning for Caesars Palace, but without the Greco-Roman theme. Wynn arrived to the first meeting with a stack of plans and said, "Okay, guys, you can go back home, I've designed you're [sic] whole theatre" (D. Johnson 41). Laliberté and Bergé explained their vision for the space. The

vision included a “1,525 seat theatre that would retain the feel of a big top, feature a [sic] 80’ by 120’ stage, a 36’ by 36’ thrust with a revolving turntable that can rotate up to 10rpm, a computer-controlled hydraulic rigging system, four onstage elevators, and no proscenium arch” (D. Johnson 41). After several months and several counter designs, the project was finally approved. The players would be Guy Laliberté serving as the representative of Cirque du Soleil, Patrick Bergé of Scéno Plus as the theatre designer, Joel Bergman of Atlandia Design, Wynn’s in-house design firm, as the project manager, and Marnell Corrao Associates of Las Vegas as the architects and the building contractors. “Vegas 2” was granted a ten-year lease at MGM Mirage’s Treasure Island Resort and Casino. Completing the theatre was not easy. The first hurdle came from the fire marshal who was not willing to approve any venue on the strip without a proscenium arch, as there would be no fire curtain. Bergman echoed the fire marshal’s concern about the lack of the proscenium for another reason: what if Cirque were to flop and Mirage Resorts Inc. would have to replace the show with something more traditional? Because the show was planned to be at least fifty percent aerial, Bergé insisted that a proscenium would be impossible. The final solution was to design a space that had a catwalk system easy to convert to a traditional proscenium arrangement if the show were to fail. This and innovative fire dampening measures appeased the concerned parties and the project moved forward to its next hurdle, which arose from its very location. The plan to have elevator lifts required very deep digging into the Nevada substrate but Treasure Island is located over an aquifer, which in the Nevada desert is worth more than the entire strip. The answer came from Sceno Plus who suggested Spirolifts that would allow the stage to be lifted around the trapped areas rather than the trapped areas being dropped deep into the ground. The final result is “part

big top, part high-tech underbelly, with four custom-made stages rising and falling on massive hydraulic columns” (Fiorito 55). These scenic machines allow performers to seemingly materialize from thin air as they descend from the rafters or rise with the stage floor. Ste-Croix described the entire space as “a very high tech thing with a classical bent” (Donnelly “Sun Comes Up” D.1.BRE). Pierre Parisien, head artistic director of Cirque du Soleil Las Vegas at the time of *Mystère*’s creation, oversaw the preservation of the creative and artistic integrity of all Vegas productions. He observed that the biggest difference between the touring shows in “big top” tents and the permanent one is technology. “For the first permanent show, *Mystère*, we created huge moving structures in the air that allowed us to install heavy acrobatic equipment rapidly” (Looseleaf, “Cirque du Soleil’s Magic” n. pag.).

While battles continued with respect to the physical space, the production side reported smooth sailing. This group was eagerly working on the needs specific to the show back in Canada while the theatre was being completed in Nevada.

Michael Crête has commented about his hesitation concerning this project. Although the theatre was constructed to the specifications of the show, it was still the first time Cirque had performed in a true theatre. Furthermore, it was the first time that there was an outside private financial investor, meaning an outside source who was also considering the costs involved. Babinski reports that there were “clashes between the team’s freeform methods and Mirage’s more traditional business structure” (157).

Timothy Gray of *Variety* has commented, “Soleil really is not about the spectacle of stagecraft” (n. pag.). His words may be true with Cirque shows that were performed in the Grand Chapiteau, but this is not the case with the scenic design for *Mystère*. Knowing what

the production space was capable of doing allowed scenic designer Michael Crête to create a playing space that would allow the performance to shine. He says the set design was heavily influenced by Greek mythology and the story of Charybdis and Scylla: “for me, the sky . . . is an archaic sky. And there is Caryb and Scylla” (Babinski 157). The characters to which Crête refers are two rock formations on either side of the playing space. They were named for the Greek monsters Scylla and Charybdis who were reputed to live on either side of the Strait of Messina between Italy and Sicily, and were blamed for the sinking of Greek ships. Crête says, “there is a saying ‘to go from Caryb to Scylla’ which means to go from bad to worse” (Babinski 157). In her blog dedicated to the show, Lauren Mietelski quotes Crête: “The *Mystère* set actually suggests Ulysses, and the mythical obstacles he had to overcome on his own journey. The two towers represent Scylla and Charybdis, two of the perils Ulysses faced. The true journey of life is never easy” (n. pag.). The stage space appeared to have retained the Greek origins of the original Cirque idea for Vegas. The stage itself is a semicircle surrounded by stadium style audience seating. Connected to the stage is a long rectangle flanked on either side by two large structures, which are the “rock formations” to which Crête refers. The rear of the stage houses a large cyclorama-like structure comprised of a series of translucent scrims. Overall the look and shape of the playing space and the seating area that surrounds it is very much like the early Greek theatre. The majority of the action of the work is concentrated in the center semicircle. This central disk can be raised and lowered as needed throughout the show. The areas surrounding the semicircle can be raised by means of the spirolifts. Over the stage are positioned angled panels that gave a circus tent like feel to the whole space. The theatrical space appears to be the crossroads between a classical Greek theatre and a high tech circus

tent. The paint technique applied to the entire playing area creates a flexible performance space which offers the opportunity to experience the questioning of the mystery of life; this is the theme that *Mystère* creators Michael Crête and Franco Dragone wanted to explore with this work.

Musical composer René Dupéré also drew from Greek mythology for the original score. “For me, *Mystère* is the most ethnic music I wrote for Cirque” (Babinski 157). He further says, “for me, *Mystère* is about mythology, influences from Balkan and Greek music. You won’t find Ulysses or any gods in the show, but it has a unifying, mythical idea behind it. So, in my music, I put an accent on Greek music and percussion” (Mietelski n. pag.). Dupéré was not able to compose the entire finished performance score, however. Once the work was in rehearsal, nuances were added that required additional music and Dupéré was not available. Enter Benoit Jutras, Cirque’s bandleader up until this point. Jutras is responsible for moving the music in this show from Cirque’s standard “new age” sound to more of a world beat sound.

As with all of the Cirque shows that preceded it, *Mystère’s* musicians perform live. The training and rehearsal for these gymnastic musicians is just as intense as the training for the aerialists. The band of *Mystère* consists of six to eight instrumentalists and two singers. As the show and the music are intimately intertwined, each relying upon the other for forward movement, the music and show tend to remain somewhat fluid in performance. Drummer Aaron Guidry says, “the format and layout is similar every night, but musical phrases can be extended, shortened, or even cut altogether as cued by the action onstage” (52). Guidry says that this is part of the freshness of the work, the constant change. In

order to keep the aspects of the show on track, cues are given to the drummers through a “click track” sent via a small earpiece worn by each musician onstage.

The show was blossoming from its original working title of “Vegas 2” toward its final incarnation as *Mystère*. Director Franco Dragone said, “Our sources of inspiration for each show are always threefold: social and political life, our artistic heritage and quotidian lives, and the institutional life of Cirque du Soleil. *Mystère* was about our preoccupation with the universe” (Babinski 148). He went on to add that “it’s the story of the universe through all the mythologies . . . it helped us construct images that came from the plant world” (Babinski 153).

PRODUCTION

The show begins with two babies, one male and one female. The boy weighs two hundred pounds and wears a droopy diaper and a bonnet, while the girl is dressed in footed pajamas. He is chasing his ball while she is floating through the air on a bunch of balloons. Their innocence brings the audience into the unfolding story of discovery, taking us back to our own youths as we rediscover the wonder of the world in which we live. The characters also represent humanity as a whole, Clément says, “*Mystère* traces the progress of Man from infancy to adulthood” (28).

The world of *Mystère* is populated by a cast of seventy to eighty international artists from sixteen different nations performing a variety of specialized acts in addition to dance and more general circus techniques. The specialized acts may at times change for a variety of reasons. Some of the most frequent specialized acts in *Mystère* are Chinese poles performers, hand-to-hand balancers, aerial high bar performers, bungee jumpers and, of

course, the ubiquitous Cirque clowns here in the form of Benny the clown and an iconic human sized red bird: the firebird. The figures are surreal and dreamlike, both flora and fauna and yet neither as well. Babinski calls these figures “the monsters of childhood . . . [the babies are] confronted by these things that are titanic in size, because, sometimes, things are too big for us to understand” (153). As the story progresses through the ninety-minute show, the babies are introduced to a number of additional characters, drawn from both specialty acts and “house troupe” members. The “house troupe” members are Cirque performers playing multiple character-driven roles, and “invited guest artists” are the specialty acts who are brought in with a preexisting act that is retrofitted into the show. These invited guest artists can change. These performers were found through a worldwide search. The result is a group of performers from different types of backgrounds.

The primary clash came between the performers trained in the French circus tradition and the gymnasts who had trained to be athletes. The differences in training styles and performance desires were most pronounced early on in the rehearsal process. Nordine, one of the performers from the French circus side, said, “I can’t work like a gymnast . . . I feel like I am in the Army, or the Air Force or something. It’s too regimented! That’s not how the circus arts evolved’ (Babinski 158). It was the gymnasts who are reported to have evolved the most. Given the opportunity to bring their athleticism to a greater artistic level, they rose to the occasion. As the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* wrote shortly after the work’s opening, “*Mystère* never fails to impress us with the way it balances a sense of spectacle with intimate human moments of derring-do or artistry” (“*Mystère*” *cirquedusoleil.com*). After experiencing all manners of beings including those who perform acts of great daring, the babies’ story ends with the arrival onstage of an enormous snail

that has been inflated beneath the stage during the previous act. The snail represents the slow pace of life in the grand scheme of human existence.

Regardless of the statements by Dragone regarding plot and story, most reviewers say that the plot is thin; what all agree on is the quality of the performance. “The acrobats shine on their own without the need for context though if you look for it, there are themes of birth and innocence, and society’s need for ritual--flying off a teeter board to a triple-stacked landing, or shimmying up a pole upside down speaks for itself” (Weatherford, “Cirque Du Soleil’s *Mystère* Never Disappoints” J6). Nonetheless, the Cirque website claims the goal of *Mystère* is to “challenge limits and explore imagination.” The combination of circus antics, as performed by the clown-like babies, and the spectacle of the specialty performers combine with the advanced technology of the designs to create a performance that does indeed achieve the goal Cirque set for itself with this production.

The show really begins with the preshow. Cirque turns to its circus roots by first introducing a classic European style clown, Brian Le Petit Clown. This is a role originated by the man who, nineteen years later, is still performing it, Brian Dewhurst. He plays with the entering audience, taking tickets and seating patrons, eating concessions carried in and even stealing a sip of their drinks. He wanders through the audience, making himself at home and bringing a general sense of happiness to those viewing the action. He is followed by a troupe of weird duck-like creatures that imitate his actions. The ducks are joined by other clowns who closely follow unsuspecting patrons, sometimes sitting in their seats before they do: another way to bring the audience into the action. Just prior to the stage action beginning, Brian Le Petit Clown cautions the audience against photos by stealing a patron’s camera. He is caught with the camera by Moha-Samedi, the Man in Pink, who is

dressed something like a circus ringmaster all in magenta and shades of pink. Moha-Samedi enters performing an odd ventriloquist act with a strange bird or worm-like puppet, and seemingly does not notice Brian. Moha-Samedi and his bird friend have an interaction in what seems to be a mix of French and just plain gibberish. The interaction between the two concludes when the bird tries to strangle Moha-Samedi and is thrown off stage. In sending the puppet flying, Moha-Samedi's attention is caught by Brian's photo shoot, using the patron's camera. He strides angrily toward Brian and begins another French/gibberish exchange, indicating that photography is prohibited, Brian tries to convince Moha-Samedi that he merely has the camera to take Moha-Samedi's photo. With reassurances accepted, Brian runs through and around the audience and finally offstage, chased by the angry Moha-Samedi and still holding the patron's camera.

As Brian runs off, the house lights dim and two oversized baby prams with florescent wheels are rolled onto stage. The sound of multiple babies crying is heard in the distance. Then the drums begin. A heavy percussive beat fills the theatre and enormous drums are lowered from the ceiling with their drummers seemingly floating along side their enormous heads. Cirque describes the opening action in this way,

the adventure begins with the Big Bang, symbolizing primitive man embarking on a never-ending journey. The opening also juxtaposes the characters and contexts in a way that creates the timelessness of *Mystère*: the primitives on the drums, the Renaissance Archangels and the ultra-modern decor coexist seamlessly. ("*Mystère*" cirquedusoleil.com)

The tremendous percussive sound fills the theatre, engages the audience, matches a heartbeat, and builds in power and intensity. Then on a single loud beat, it all goes silent

and the stage goes dark.

Enter an enormous human baby with his ball. The figure of the baby provides another clown for the audience's enjoyment. *Mystère* performer François Dupuis describes the action: "it is a sharing process with the crowd" (*The Mystery of Mystère*). He gleefully throws his ball into the audience and eagerly awaits a response. He pouts if the ball is not immediately returned and giggles when it comes back. He further scans the audience for that one patron and loudly proclaims "PAPA." Because the stage is nearly continuous with the audience seating due to the absence of a proscenium arch, "Bébé" can reach out and embrace his newly identified parent. Bébé communicates his demands in much the manner of a real human baby: he cries, gestures and utters nonsense sounds to the audience. No one has to speak a common language to understand what he needs; all is loudly expressed through sounds and gestures. Another baby joins him onstage, a baby girl dressed in her footed pajamas with a bow in her hair. The two carry on an extensive dialogue.

Throughout the journey made by the babies in this odd world of discovery, they encounter eight of Cirque's specialty acts, which, as stated before, can vary from performance to performance depending on the availability of the performers. The first of these is the "Aerial Cube." Taken from one of Cirque's touring productions, *Solstrom*, this is a single performer's act using a giant skeletal cube both on the ground and in the air. The cube itself is in constant motion as is the performer who spins the cube on its axis and performs both inside and on the apparatus. The performer is suspended from the ceiling by two gymnastic rings that he holds in his hands or he supports himself by using his arms. He manipulates the cube with his hands and his feet. At times he uses the bars of the cube

much like high bars and revolves around the bars. He also runs over the surface of the cube, using the bars of the sides as a sort of stepping stone. Of this act Cirque says, “A virtuoso who can turn a simple cube into an object of beauty, he effortlessly turns and spins the cube while nonchalantly performing a gravity-defying ballet of aerial maneuvers. Fascinated observers hold their breath, wondering who is in control” (“*Mystère*” *cirquedusoleil.com*).

The next remarkable act the babies encounter is the “Chinese Poles.” This act is performed by a group of strangely attired aerialists who move up and down and across the space between four vertical poles that are lowered from the ceiling. These aerialists are called the “double faces” because of the polyester resin masks based on their faces that they wear on the back of their heads. No matter which way they are facing, upstage or down, they appear to be facing the audience. According to costume designer Dominique Lemieux, “the double faces [are] in constant search of their own identities . . . When they turn around to reveal their second, ghostly face, the effect is haunting” (Clément 33). This act is more than just a performance of acrobatic virtuosity; it also has a light-hearted almost humorous feel due to the double faces. The performers move up and down the poles using their hands, their feet or even a combination of the two. Additionally they move from pole to pole seemingly effortlessly. The performers do not actually touch the ground, except to run back up again and at the conclusion of the act, the apparatus and the performers are flown out as one unit. Cirque ties this virtuosic performance into the story in their description of the act “like sprouting vines, these artists are a symbol of organic life which feeds on itself as it grows” (“*Mystère*” *cirquedusoleil.com*).

The next act of remarkable strength and skill is the “Hand-to-Hand, performed by a pair of brothers on a rotating dome. In the *Mystère* chapter on the Cirque du Soleil website, Cirque describes the act:

two mighty physiques connect in gentle, fluid movements, exuding a strength that mystifies the audience. This act is an exhibition of strength and stamina. The two brothers who perform the increasingly difficult maneuvers demonstrate harmony while fusing power and grace. Developed through many years of intense training, the hand-and-body balancing act is performed on a rotating dome, demanding extreme precision of the artists.

The two men take the stage slowly and, in fact, the entire piece is performed slowly which only adds to its impressive effect. They begin the piece standing disconnected, one in front of the other. The leader reaches his hands back and his brother takes the offered hands and balances perfectly upon them as the first brother raises his arms and the two become one unit in perfect vertical alignment with one brother raised over the head of the other. The two men lock eyes and remain perfectly still as the stage slowly revolves. Hands clenched, the raised brother is lowered as the bottom brother lays backward, bending at the knees. The men end this transition still connected by their hands and completely parallel to the stage floor. Hanging again as if the air itself supported them, the audience cannot help but marvel at the power and grace displayed. Again the second brother is raised vertically into the air and, connected only by one hand, the men switch positions onstage, allowing the brother formerly on the bottom to be lowered to the stage floor. It is at this time the brothers momentarily release physical connection: the first brother lifts his legs high in the air and completes a backward shoulder stand upon which the second

brother then balances, using his hand to lift his entire body again vertically creating another breathtaking position. The act concludes with the brothers standing in close proximity, but no longer in physical connection, as the music and light fade out. Chloe Veltman of *San Francisco Weekly* says, “While I remember precious little about productions like *Mystère* . . . [I do remember] one intense, sculptural duet between two male acrobats that nearly stopped my breath” (n. pag.).

As stated previously, the specialty acts change as needed. Amongst the additional acts that are often included is the Bungee that Cirque describes as “majestic birds in flight, they dive in unison, creating a fantastically organized chaos. They drop from their trapezes in turn or as a group, their falls halted only by the elastic around their waists” (“*Mystère*” *cirquedusoleil.com*). There is the Aerial Tissu which is an act originated by performer Ginger Ana Griep-Ruiz in which it appears that the fabric from which she suspends is never ending as she moves up and down a single length of fabric suspended high above the playing space. Cirque describes this turn as “Descending gracefully from the heavens, her effortless beauty is part mortal, part Goddess; connecting the earth and sky” (“*Mystère*” *cirquedusoleil.com*). Additionally, there is a series of trampoline acts throughout the entire ninety-minute performance, which vary from death-defying to humorous. The last piece to be mentioned here is the Aerial High Bar, which was created by coach Andrei Lev and choreographer Pavel Brun. This act requires an apparatus flown forty feet above the stage. This act is intended to give a sense of the passage of time as evidenced by the pendulum like movement of the performers as they fly from section to section of the machinery on which they perform. At the time of this writing, the Aerial High Bar act is no longer being presented in this manner and has instead been replaced with a trapeze act. Artists from

Latin America who have become a sort of extended family through the act perform this piece. According to Cirque du Soleil, this is one of the most fast-paced trapeze acts ever performed (“*Mystère*” *cirquedusoleil.com*).

RESPONSES

This first permanent endeavor on the Las Vegas strip by Guy Laliberté and his company has been often credited with changing the face of Las Vegas entertainment. This circus-like performance combined with technical mastery and superb production quality has raised the bar for spectacles of all kinds. Critics have raved about this show from its opening and continue to do so even today. Steve Wynn first described the work as “you guys have made a German opera here” (Babinski 162). Critics may not have seen the work as a German opera, but they have been enthusiastic about the production. In his February 1994 review, Timothy Gray of *Variety* says,

Aaaooowww! The new offering from Cirque du Soleil is terrific, spectacular and all the synonyms for peachy . . . Unlike previous Cirque productions, “*Mystère*” won’t tour – perhaps because it has 70 performers . . . and features bigger-than-usual flourishes . . . with this show, which ranks with the best of Soleil’s offerings, [Soleil] really delivers. (n. pag.)

Jerry Fink of the *Las Vegas Sun* says, “perhaps one reason *Mystère* gained instant popularity is that it has universal appeal – there are very few spoken words. An international audience doesn’t need to understand English to appreciate what takes place. It is an evening of awe-inspiring action” (n. pag.).

Through the years the reviews have continued to be positive. At *Mystère*’s fifteen-

year anniversary, Joe Brown of the *Las Vegas Sun* said,

when it opened at Treasure Island, in 1993, *Mystère* established a new standard for Las Vegas – and anywhere –for an all-enveloping theatrical experience. A quantum leap for circus artistry and production shows in general, the surround sound-and spectacle unfurls with an elegant indoor interpretation of a classic Big Top tent. (n. pag.)

Las Vegas Review-Journal reporter Mike Weatherford said of the show in 2009, “*Mystère*, [at] Treasure Island [is] the first Las Vegas Cirque show [that] preserves the company's original vision, and is now a relative bargain” (“*Mystère* Never Disappoints” J6). The tickets for *Mystère* today are often available at discounted prices and even without discounts are as little as forty dollars per ticket for some seats, while other Cirque du Soleil resident productions begin ticket costs at ninety-five dollars each. Some Cirque followers consider this work to have a more basic feel than Cirque’s later offerings to the Strip. It is, in other words, classic Cirque. As Christopher Trela of *OC Metro* states, “Cirque du Soleil is known for fusing circus arts with the art of the theatre to create an imaginative world of beauty and mystery, and *Mystère* upholds that mandate” (n. pag.)

Franco Dragone, the director of the show, says, “*Mystère* was about our preoccupation with the universe”(Babinski 148). He continues, “*Mystère* was about how life came to the planet. . . It's the story of the universe through all the mythologies. . . . because, sometimes, things are too big for us to understand” (Babinski 153). It is clear that with *Mystère*, Cirque is attempting to create a story through wordless spectacle about a universal human question. Its uncertain beginnings lead to continued success. Looking

back, Joe Brown of the *Las Vegas Sun* describes *Mystère* in the following manner:

The first Cirque du Soleil spectacle to make a permanent home on the Las Vegas Strip, it's still No. 1 in many hearts. *Mystère* celebrates its 15th anniversary this month, and it hasn't been dated in any essential way. I'd go so far as to call it timeless. (n. pag.)

After all the reviews and the compliments Guy Laliberte said, "it really opened up things in terms of the type of show you could see in Las Vegas. . . That feels really good." (Babinski 163). The timing was fortuitous; the desire for more spectacle in the city of Las Vegas and the desire for a home for Cirque intersected. At this intersection of needs, Cirque du Soleil found a home in the desert and, from this home, began to change the face of Las Vegas entertainment.

CHAPTER VI

“O”:
BRINGING WATER TO THE DESERT

“Water is the memory of the world and theatre is the expression of this memory” (Flow)

How does a company like Cirque Du Soleil do something “different” for the newest and biggest Las Vegas resort? Something high end, something unseen, something with greater spectacle than previous shows? Take to the water! Even before *Mystère* was competed, Steve Wynn pursued Cirque du Soleil to create another production to open in his newest resort. At this time Wynn was in preconstruction planning of his most opulent resort to date: the \$1.6 billion Bellagio Resort. Believing that he had tapped an unseen winner with the Cirque Corporation in Las Vegas, he took a chance in planning another new collaboration, this time one designed specifically to complement this hotel at this location. Since he had such big plans for the new hotel, he also suggested that budget would be no object for the production, and that Cirque’s creative teams should reach for the stars. Inspired by the giant dancing fountains that were planned to grace the front of the new property, Cirque thought about water. They began with a title, “*O*”, a play on words. In French, the primary language of Cirque’s home, the word for “water” is “eau” which is phonetically pronounced “o”; furthermore, the sound is reminiscent of an exclamation of wonder, “Oh! ” Production Director Franco Dragone and Director of Creation Gilles Ste-

Croix, told Wynn that Cirque should create theatre with water to which he replied, “ok, but what would you do in it?” (*Flow*). The creators responded that they would have fountains and stunts, and Wynn responded with, “Yeah, but what’s the show?” (*Flow*). As with all of Cirque’s previous shows, the show was to be a mix of theatre and circus, this time played out on and in the water. “*O*” was planned to bring a new level of performance to the Las Vegas strip. In “*O*: *Cirque du Soleil at Bellagio*, director Franco Dragone says, “Inevitably, though, the theatrical machine began to overwhelm us. The more we tried to control the element of water, the more we risked denying its beauty, its grandeur. It became a battle between the man-made machine and nature” (Vial n. pag.).

Steve Wynn’s Mirage resort chain was willing to spend \$70 million to build a theatre to the exact specifications provided by Cirque. They were then willing to spend an additional \$22 million in preproduction costs to mount the extravaganza. After more than five hundred people had devoted more than 400,000 man-hours over three and one half years, the show premiered to a black tie audience on October 15, 1998, as a part of the launch of the new Bellagio resort. Combining air and water acrobatics, the production was created for its specially constructed theatre. One critic called it an “artistic triumph, a stunning and innovative combination of theatre, aquatics, and acrobatics” (Babinski 209).

CREATION

As with *Mystère*, Cirque again employed scenic designer Michael Crête for this project. Since the creator asked for a “real theatre” with water as the stage, Crête had his work cut out for him. He took the idea of water as a stage and expanded upon it. He wanted to offer the performers a different place to perform, to remove the expected

acrobatic elements and to offer them other structures to showcase their art. But water offered its own challenges. “We had to work with water, an element that by its very nature is not compatible with show business” (Babinski 220). Laliberté states, “the key to working with water was letting it dictate its own limits” (Babinski 212). Water became the primary factor to consider when designers were making choices concerning everything in the show, from performers to sets and costumes. Everything had to be tested against this element. The set is designed around an enormous pool—1.5 million gallons of water are enclosed in a twenty-five foot deep and one hundred and fifty foot by one hundred foot structure. Michael Crête states,

the pool represents a pond, like a sanctuary protected by a garden. An intimate place where the sunlight shines through the forest creating translucent, stained-glass colors as it shines through the leaves. The scenery depicts the coexistence between nature and man, between elements and the obvious technology used to bring them together. (Vial n. pag.)

In addition to creating an environment in which to tell this story, the scenic department had to find some type of flooring which would withstand constant acrobatic performance but would not hold water and create a slippery surface. After much trial and error the scenic department agreed upon a stage constructed of “steel and fiberglass combined with PVC and sports matting . . . The floor has thousands of small holes drilled into it to allow the water to flow through when the lifts are moving (Vial n. pag.). There is more to the scenery than just a pool; there is also an overhead carousel, created by the company Handling Specialty, which is positioned forty-eight and one half feet over the “stage.” This piece of machinery is referred to by the Cirque company as the “‘telepherique’ and is able to lift

over one thousand pounds at a speed of four feet per second” (Lampert-Gréaux, “The Wizardry of “*O*” n. pag.). Additionally, it can revolve at a speed of two revolutions per minute. Its purpose is to create seamless transitions between the four elements of air, fire, earth and water, all of which are used in the show.

The use of water dictated a certain amount of unique technical staffing. The technical staff is comprised of one hundred and fifteen people who rotate throughout the production week. Seventy-seven technicians are needed to run each performance. The seventy-seven crewmembers are comprised of “twenty-five carpenters, twelve on electrics, five for automation, twelve riggers, ten wardrobe, five scuba divers/aquatics, four for audio, and four for fluid effects” (Lampert-Gréaux, “The Wizardry of “*O*” n. pag.). All one hundred and fifteen technicians can swim and most are scuba dive certified. During each show an additional team of twelve underwater technicians are in the water throughout the entire performance. Their primary job is to run the show and watch for problems, as well as to hand off props and cue performers. This team is comprised of “three riggers, four carpenters and five aquatics specialists (Lampert-Gréaux, “The Wizardry of “*O*” n. pag.). The primary responsibility of the aquatics specialists during the performance is the refilling of air tanks for both performers and technicians. In addition to this critical job, the aquatics specialists help guide the performers to their marks in the pool during scenes when rain effects are being used above the water line, as the rain makes the water murky from below and makes it difficult for the performers to find their positions. They also help guide performers with hand signals during scenes while the underwater pumps are in action, as the pumps overpower the sound reinforcement underwater for cue calling. An additional two divers have the designation “dive safety officers.” They are fitted with

masks that have microphones built in which allow communication with stage management as well as other stage personnel. For maintenance, there is a small team of underwater welders, who can spot repair any areas in need of a “quick fix.”

The entire cast is scuba certified. Located around the underwater portion of the stage and its wings are eighteen breathing stations where performers can get air between actions if there is not time or reason to surface. Each of the dive technical staff members are outfitted with an additional breathing apparatus in the event that a performer is in sudden need of oxygen. They remain vigilant throughout the show for a performer in distress and monitor each performer’s time in the water and descent and ascent times through the use of underwater computers. Pierre Parisien, head artistic director of Cirque du Soleil Las Vegas says of “*O*”, “The telepherique carousel, positioned 49 feet above the stage, moves up and downstage at three feet per second in a circular motion, transporting performers, scenery and rigging, with 150 stage technicians pulling the metaphorical strings” (Looseleaf “Tech du Soleil” 49).

Longtime Cirque du Soleil collaborator Dominique Lemieux designed the costumes using the idea of east meeting west to inspire her. She drew from fashions from the fifteenth through the twentieth centuries and referenced commedia dell’arte, Indian traditional attire, and the *Arabian Nights*. In an interview with Melissa Inman of *Stage Directions*, Lemieux says, “her head was still filled with the impressions of Venice, a city she describes as “caught between two worlds.” She further says that the “*O*” script gave her a similar feeling, something she describes as a combination of the “Occidental and the Oriental, referring to the Asian influence that pervades the production” (32).

Lemieux began creating the design by drawing from the overall mood of the

production rather than using her usual method of beginning with specific characters. She felt the need to create the world first, then hone in on the specifics of character later. In a seemingly disconnected style the costumes range from frock coats and panniers to bodysuits and leotards, all working together to fill a world defined by water. The color scheme keeps the distinct styles and periods from being too disparate. All the costumes are heavily pigmented with bright colors and bold geometric prints.

The artistic look of the costume design was not the only concern for Lemieux. She also had to consider sustainability issues, the effect of the water and chemicals on the costumes. The costumes had to fit like a second skin, as they had for other Cirque productions, but they also had to do so both in and out of the water. Additionally, they needed to dry quickly, so that when performers were out of the water they were not wearing damp clothing. Furthermore, the costumes had to be tested and tested again for their colorfastness in water as well as performability while both wet and dry. The first fabric considered was Lycra, but it soon became clear that Lycra was too heavy in the water and weighed the performers down when fully saturated. Spandex was tried next, but it proved to be useful only on those performers who split their time between the pool and the stage. Performers, who spent a long time in the water, quickly found that the colors on their costumes were fading and some parts completely disintegrated. No amount of testing could actually give the same effect as a week of performance and at the end of the first week of continuous performance; the costumes had already begun to show wear from the harsh conditions. Irene Lacher of the *Hollywood Reporter* says, “costumers were dismayed to find that the suits . . . already had been ruined by chlorine, which had destroyed the elasticity of the hand painted sheer netting used to make the swimmer appear nude” (S16).

The final product chosen was a nylon mesh, much like the material used in heavy-duty girdles. Melissa Inman of *Stage Directions* states, “they discovered that while it looked like spandex, it was slightly thicker, had less stretch and allowed water to pass through the costume better” (32).

Another unique aspect of costume consideration with “*O*” concerned performers’ eyes. The performers would need to see beneath the water and be able to withstand diving into and splashing about the water. The solution was obvious: goggles. The problem was the look. The illusion of creatures that are one with the water would be destroyed by the appearance of performers wearing swim goggles. Several types were tested for durability, lightness and comfort before just the right style were found. These goggles were then incorporated into the costumes with the intent of creating “big-eyed” creatures rather than swimmers wearing goggles.

Additionally, Cirque’s resident make-up artist, Nathalie Gagne, was put through the paces to find a make-up that could withstand not only the water but also the chemicals used to keep it fresh. She had to find products that were both waterproof and colorfast. She says “Sometimes you’d find something that would stay on in the water, but then couldn’t resist the constant getting in and out of the water” (Babinski 220). She used a combination of products for the makeup in this production, but relied heavily on Ben Nye’s color wheels. She said, “I love to mix the Creme Wheel pigments. They always stay put throughout a performance” (“17 Hot List” 154).

Lighting a show that involves so much water is problematic. How can electricity and water be combined? Luc Lafortune, long time lighting designer for Cirque du Soleil, had to negotiate a learning curve. He was forced to reconsider each and every lighting focus angle

due to the high reflectivity of the surface of the pool. Additionally, each of his “go to” gel colors had to be tested. The reflection of the water often changed the color in the bounce back. Lafortune also has to consider what happened to the color and quality of the light as it entered and passed through the water. He had to take into consideration the fact that the surface of the area surrounding the water was lightly tinted and tended to give the pool a blue quality. Lighting positions became a great concern, not only for the angles they could provide but also to help solve the problem of illuminating the water from beneath without distorting the surface. Additionally, not all of the acts were actually in the water, and some had to be illuminated separate from it.

These design questions proved to be best solved through trial and error. Since Cirque has an extensive preproduction period, about three and one-half years, Lafortune had the luxury of time. One solution was to build a subterranean light tunnel on the same level as the pool to light the water in the pool. This feature was fronted with eleven four-inch thick plexiglass windows that run along the downstage perimeter of the pool (Lampert-Gréaux, “The Wizardry of *O*” n. pag.). The tunnel is lined with numerous lighting instruments each possessing a different lighting gel to allow for a multitude of light effects in the water. The telepherique supports an additional twenty lighting instruments, which help to illuminate the entire performance space. The majority of lighting is hung on the proscenium arch that provides the doorway to the pool itself. The lighting rig that comprises the proscenium is home to six hundred and forty two different lighting instruments, all of which work together to create highly saturated and expressive lighting effects that bring the work of designers Michael Crête and Dominique Lemieux and director Franco Dragone to life.

One additional consideration was of the highest concern to Lafortune and his team: the combination of water and electricity. According to Cirque du Soleil archivist Veronique Vial, “the production boasts the world’s first long distance GFCI (Ground Fault Circuit Interruption) protected dimming system spanning five hundred feet” (n. pag.). Furthermore, she states that over the playing area are a “total of 1,815 theatrical lighting instruments which are capable of delivering four million watts of light on stage” (n. pag.). The overhead lighting carousel is run by wireless technology, meaning that each instrument is operated by a separate radio frequency. The overhead lights are then enhanced with one hundred and eight incandescent underwater lights each of which has a custom designed gel cover.

Writer and director Franco Dragone, who has created ten of Cirque’s previous productions, including *Mystère* at Las Vegas’ Treasure Island, states that “despite the challenges, “*O*” came together quite easily” (Babinski 222), something he attributes to the fact that many of the key collaborators were artists who had created many of Cirque’s previous shows. Despite Dragone’s confidence, Cirque’s financial backer, Steve Wynn, was worried. Guy Lalibet  says, “in the end “*O*” became a show that set a new standard in live entertainment . . . With “*O*” we guaranteed ourselves a page in the history of the theatre” (Babinski 225). Dragone further says,

Water. We began with an idea, a transparent idea, an idea breathtaking in its overarching simplicity: to return to the dawn of time, to the primordial element in order to recount the human experience. Naively, like explorers, we embarked on a conquest without fully realizing our audacity, or the dangers of this endeavor. Water. Water. Without measuring the stakes, we

launched a challenge. We attempted to master an element that throughout history has defied human control. (Vial n. pag.)

PRODUCTION

The action begins, as many other Cirque productions do, when a member of the audience is selected to give the remaining audience members guidelines about the upcoming performance. A costumed cast member hands a small note to the selected audience member, obviously a plant, and wordlessly encourages the person to read the note aloud. As one would expect, the audience is informed that no smoking, photography or cellular phones are allowed. As the plant finishes reading the note, the cast member grabs him by the collar and shoves him behind a tremendous red curtain. The house dims, the music begins and Eugen, the costumed cast member, grabs the red curtain and pulls it back to reveal that something new is being presented. A giant red disc in the floor appears. Gracefully the red cover opens and a 1.5 million gallon, crystal blue pool of water, twenty-five feet deep and one hundred and fifty by one hundred feet in size and illuminated from beneath, becomes visible. Christopher Trela of *OC Metro* says, "The various acts in "O" use the water as . . . an essential companion." The house remains dark and the only illumination in the theatre comes from the pool.

Critics have accused Cirque of superimposing a plot on spectacle, but Dragone insists that the story is about theatre, a progression of theatre through the ages as experienced through the eyes of two primary characters, Eugen and Philemon (who is also called Guifá). It is the story of how theatre allows people to lose themselves for a time.

Eugen and Philemon meet at the edge of the water. Eugen is both a guide and a theatre guardian. On the show's website Eugen is described as "strong, yet vulnerable, this aging theatre manager knows all and provokes us to see the dark side of "O". His ghostly orchestrations take us on a timeless journey through different worlds as he makes his own transformation from dark to white. He embodies the cyclical part of life where everything old becomes new again." He is dressed in a tuxedo of sorts and very much resembles a European circus clown of days past. His face is entirely white with exaggerated eyebrows and black tear paths falling from his eyes. His head is adorned with a shock of lanky blonde hair. His performance is fluid and silent and yet he draws the young visitor, Guifá, into the world of "O" through gesture.

Philemon is a young Mediterranean boy who has a thirst for adventure. He meets Eugen at the opening of the work and is taken on a mystical journey through time as embodied by earth, air, fire, and water. Cirque du Soleil says, "He is a willing prisoner in this kaleidoscopic domain--the witness who is everywhere and every man" ("*O*" cirquedusoleil.com). He is dressed in yellow and orange Turkish inspired garb and seems very much the willing participant in this fantastical trip through the world of "O".

The remaining eighty performers, who are both specialty acts and house troupe members, populate the journey that Victoria Looseleaf describes as "a watery Versailles with synchronized swimmers, a quartet of world class high divers, aerial hoops, a floating barge, fire dancers, and two seaworthy clowns" ("*Tech du Soleil.*" 48). One house performer plays the role of Aurora, who is a young, beautiful and elusive woman upon whom Philemon lays eyes in the prologue and whom he pursues throughout the remainder of the performance. She remains just out of reach, until the epilogue when they are united

in the world of “*O*”. The specialty acts total eleven, and as with other Cirque Las Vegas shows, can be rotated in and out of the show as necessary.

The first element, water, is presented as mermaids, sirens and nymphs watch Eugen and Philemon from the deep. Of this first element, Franco Dragone says: “water, “*O*”. A human tale, I hope, somewhere between nature and the machine” (Vial n. pag.). The giant pool is crystal clear and beautifully refreshing. Its depth allows for performers to appear and disappear seamlessly. Furthermore, located within the pool are elevating platforms that provide performers a surface upon which they can “walk on water” or a lift raising them high above the water from which position they deftly plunge into the crystal liquid depths. Synchronized swimmer Katy Savoie says this production allows her to “explore weightlessness through both acrobatics and water . . . Under water your body just expands and it is a sense of freedom” (*Flow*). “*O*” features more Olympic athletes than any of the Cirque du Soleil shows (“*O*” Fun Facts” n. pag.), with the largest number of athlete/performers from the area of synchronized swimming. These swimmers make up the cadre of mermaids, sirens and nymphs who are ever present throughout the show. They appear as silent sentinels watching the unfolding journey. This element is punctuated with several specialty acts including the Barge, the High Dive, and Contortion. The Barge is performed by a team of eight female acrobats on and off a platform that floats on the surface of the water. Cirque’s “*O*” website describes the act as “combin[ing] innovative gymnastic performances with the traditional circus act of banquine and the balletic adagio. Showcasing these skills in a water environment completes this high-energy act, which also includes synchronized swimmers and Olympic divers.” The High Dive is a four-man act in which the divers leap from a position sixty feet above the stage into a twenty-foot deep

section of the pool. Cirque states that the performers are both exhibition and cliff divers. Four young Mongolian women perform the Contortion Act on the surface of the water. Their movements are lithe, graceful, and stretch the limits of human possibility. Cirque describes them as “underlin[ing] the balletic perfection of the female form (“O” *cirquedusoleil.com*).

Connecting the element of water with the element of air is the Solo Trapeze. The performer appears one with the trapeze as she executes graceful acrobatic moves high above the water. She begins by walking gracefully on the surface of the water while Philemon looks on. In one deft movement she mounts the trapeze and both girl and apparatus begin a slow ascent to a position high above the pool. She adroitly moves on and around the trapeze performing contortions that seem other-than-human. At the conclusion of her act she plunges dramatically into the water, thereby connecting the elements.

As they move along their journey, Philemon and Eugen encounter air. They see flying horses, angelic trapeze artists and a ghostly skeletal ship. This segment features some additional specialty acts, including a number of trapeze acts. The Duo Trapeze Act is performed by two women who represent angels soaring above the stage. The women use a single trapeze and are in constant physical connection as they move gracefully around the apparatus. A single artist performs the Trapeze Washington. This act is unique in that the trapeze is built on a fixed metal frame. It swings in a pendulum motion while also moving in a downward vertical pattern from the overhead carousel. The performer balances on and around the apparatus, even balancing on her head while being lowered at a rate of four feet per second to the surface of the stage (“O” *cirquedusoleil.com*). The act is a combination of tightrope and trapeze style performance. The bateau is an aerial cradle

floating high above the water shaped to resemble a skeletal two masted schooner. The boat supports a group of eleven performers called the “flayed ones” because of their costuming. They wear hand painted unitards that look to be the human body with the skin removed. The costumes are meant to give a sense of having travelled a long time over the seas of “*O*”. The show’s program asks, “have these tormented souls been battling the seas since the beginning of time?” The act is a combination of two traditional circus acts, parallel bars and aerial cradle. These acts have not been used in combination prior to this production. Cirque calls it a “unique display of acrobatic timing and strength” (“*O*” cirquedusoleil.com). Of this part of the show, fire knife dancer, Fua’au “Fiatasi” Faitau says, “air is the balance that connects earth, water and fire together” (*Flow*).

Next Eugen and Guifa encounter earth represented by an enormous plastic curtain behind which is seen shadow play of the African Serengeti complete with banyan trees and elephants. The element of earth is largely depicted through the performances of dancers from the house troupe, as well as a number of clown acts. The zebras are one of the notable clown acts that combine humor with acrobatics. Dressed in black and white concentric circle, hooded unitards, this group playfully performs on a larger than life jungle gym called the cadre.

The final element the two travellers encounter is fire. Fire is represented by the character of “L’Allume” who sits alone onstage engulfed in flames, and by another pair of specialty artists who are fire knife dancers. L’Allume is a clown of sorts. He is a pyromaniac dressed as a classic circus bum carelessly reading his newspaper while lit entirely on fire. Ray Wold, who performs this act with his wife, also a licensed pyro technician, says that for him fire is freeing: “it is the release of all that is animal within

oneself, it is primal" (*Flow*). The fire dancers are two men who perform an intricate dance while twirling flaming batons. They are dressed in tribal attire and represent the primal in man. They also represent danger and the antithesis of water.

RESPONSES

In retrospect, Dragone says of "O", "I think it crosses language barriers, element barriers" (*Flow*). The reviewers have agreed and have offered encouragement to the company for this work. "O" has received rave reviews on all fronts for the beauty and fluid grace it offers. Christopher Trela of *OC Metro* says,

"O" is an experience that defies description. It's performance art taken to a new level. It's a circus of the mind with imagination as its ringleader. It's a thing of beauty, and beautifully dangerous. "O" is playful, mysterious, exotic, funny, compelling, bizarre, and intoxicating. It's a watery world of wonder seen through the eyes of Dali as filmed by Fellini. (n. pag.)

Newspaper journalists from throughout the country have reviewed the show. *The Kansas City Star* says, "Here you can find a form of entertainment that defies categorization – a show so imaginative, so moving in a curious way, that it simply astonishes viewers. Simply put, Cirque du Soleil is attracting a mass audience to surrealistic art" while the *San Jose Mercury News* calls it "a wildly exciting show that combines the guts of daredevils with the soul of artists" ("*O*" cirquedusoleil.com). Artists who are involved in the entertainment industry have also heralded the work. Dominique Lemieux's hard work and trials with fabric samples paid off in 1998 when she received the *Entertainment Design*

“Production of the Year” award for “*O*”. The show has also been praised in the industry for design collaboration. Bill Sapsis, president of Sapsis Rigging, Inc. and co-chair of ESTA’s Rigging Certification Group, says, “Great designs come from great collaboration . . . The trapeze ship in Cirque’s production of “*O*” would not have worked on the Ringling Brothers show. But [it was a] showstopper because [it] worked so well with what is going on” (“Entertainment Design 35 Year Anniversary” n. pag). Numerous other sources and reviews have garnered praises since the work opened and continue to do so today. Victoria Looseleaf says, it is a work where “technology is king. And surprisingly, after more than four thousand performances since its 1989 opening, twenty-six of the eighty-five performers in “*O*” are still in the show” (“Tech du Soleil” 50). All in all, it appears this work from Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas will continue a long run into the future.

CHAPTER VII

*ZUMANITY AND ZUMANITY:
THE SENSUAL SIDE OF CIRQUE DU SOLEIL:
CIRQUE'S FIRST "MISS" IN VEGAS*

*A seductive twist on reality making the provocative playful and
the forbidden electrifying! ("Zumanity" cirquedusoleil.com)*

Zumanity is the third resident Las Vegas production and the fifteenth show created by Cirque du Soleil. It opened at the New York - New York Hotel and Casino on September 20, 2003 to mixed reviews from Cirque's growing fan base. Initially the idea of a sexually charged Cirque du Soleil offering titillated potential audiences. Richard Ouzounian of *Variety* says, "the idea of a sexually based Cirque show grabbed the public's imagination, and there was an intense buzz as the \$16 million show began full priced previews in mid-August" ("*Zumanity*" 35). The early audiences were not happy, however. This was not the Cirque they expected. Where was the Circus feel, the acrobatics, and the technical spectacle? Already Cirque's fans had been asked to wait for the show that was to make the audience "part of the experience" (Weatherford, "Cirque du Soleil Bringing In" 5E). Originally set for a late August, the opening was pushed back to late September after the show's choreographer, Debra Brown, stepped down. Cirque newcomer Marguerite Derricks immediately replaced Brown. According to Richard Ouzounian, Derricks, who came from a film, theatre, television and music video background, possessed experiences that prepared

her for “the cabaret style of the Cirque du Soleil show *Zumanity*” (“*Zumanity*” 35). Derricks joined the team during the summer of 2003 and remarked to the press in September that “she has until December to continue fiddling with it” (Ouzounian, “*Zumanity*” 35). The show marked a definitive departure from the family oriented circus style entertainment seen in Cirque’s previous productions. In *Zumanity*, Cirque aligned itself with another, seemingly darker, Las Vegas entertainment tradition: sex. Babinski says, “*Zumanity* reinvents the erotic cabaret for mature audiences. It sensually combines song, dance, burlesque, and acrobatics, and challenges the spectator to reconsider his or her own outlook on human sexuality” (325). In a pre-opening press release, Cirque spokeswoman Andree Deissenberg stated “this is not a topless show in that sense, but we will see some skin . . . But more important, what we’re attempting here is to take the themes of sensuality and eroticism, combine those with Cirque’s creativity, and infuse those elements with humanity and humor” (Ordine 5H).

CREATION

Zumanity is a merging of the words zoo and humanity, intending to reflect the show’s theme of “human zoo” (Kin n. pag.). It was the name planned for one of the two shows created by Cirque when the organization was asked to create an additional two shows for the Las Vegas strip. One of the new shows was slated for the new “Generation X” oriented property, New York-New York Hotel and Casino. Hotel planners thought that a more moderately priced resort with the fast pace of New York City would attract the twenty-somethings to the Las Vegas strip. The New York-New York casino floor would reflect the various neighborhoods of the Big Apple with gambling, restaurants, bars and

clubs all relating to the boroughs of NYC. The central casino area is “Central Park” while “Times Square” houses the dueling piano bar, “The Bar at Times Square,” and “the Village” is a group of shops and fast food joints, including the New York favorite, Nathan’s Hot Dogs. Located in the northeast corner of “Central Park,” not far from the scale replica of the Statue of Liberty, are the Staten Island meeting rooms. The idea was that this more frenetic paced hotel would appeal to the younger newcomer who might be discovering Las Vegas for the first time. Bill Ordine of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* says, “New York-New York . . . [is] making a bid for a younger market, with an ESPN Zone bar-restaurant and a Coyote Ugly saloon featuring minimally clad women bartenders. And . . . an Irish pub, called Nine Fine Irishmen” (5H). By representing all the aspects of New York City, the owners hoped that patrons could find all that they desired in a single property and Cirque could help.

Guy Laliberté was excited about the opportunity to create a show for this audience. He wanted a new direction for Cirque that reflected the tastes and experiences of consumers in their twenties and thirties. Laliberté says, “I thought the subject matter reflected who we are . . . We’re a generation that has lived through more permissive times, so our approach to sexuality and eroticism is different. We were excited about the possibility of working with sexuality” (Babinski 327). He also knew that he had to keep Cirque fresh if he was to have three, and eventually four, productions running simultaneously in the same city. Furthermore, he realized that Cirque had not yet captured the club crowd from the Las Vegas Strip. Bill Ordine reports, “adding a Cirque du Soleil show that holds out the promise of sensuality and eroticism could contribute to the high-

energy level that New York-New York hopes it's creating and, at the same time, deliver a touch of edgy class" (5H).

Revisions to the show continued until the media opening on September 20, 2003, but the outcome was unexpected. Reviewers and audience members did not care for the new "look" for Cirque. Failure is not an option for Laliberté's Cirque and *Zumanity* was considered for a full revamp. *Variety's* Richard Ouzounian says, "that's good, because although it has a lot of promise, *Zumanity* still doesn't deliver the erotic kick it promises" ("*Zumanity*" 35). Richard Abowitz of the *LA Times* states, "when 'Zumanity' opened in September 2003, the troupe's first erotic show seemed in dire need of change" ("The Moveable Buffet" D17). He quotes Cirque's then senior artistic director James Hadley: "people were coming away thinking the show was very dark, kind of crass and kind of vulgar. They were not enjoying themselves as much as we had hoped they would. We wanted to take the sensuality to another level, but we may have crossed a line" (Abowitz, "The Moveable Buffet" D17). Although, the show had undergone a number of changes prior to September 20 in an attempt to make the final product more mainstream while still pushing the envelope, entertainment columnist for the *Las Vegas Review*, Mike Weatherford, predicted greater changes for Cirque and *Zumanity*. He said,

The show will . . . not fail. It will not be allowed to. Just look at the custom theater and you'll see what I mean. It will, however, adapt. My guess is *Zumanity* may learn that audiences are more tolerant of female bonding than male. If you want to see the "death row" version, see it soon. ("Look for *Zumanity*" 1J)

It was not until 2007 that *Zumanity* added "the Sensual Side of Cirque du Soleil" to

the show's title. Abowitz praised the change saying "the show has now moved away from a niche show targeted to a gay and sexually adventurous audience" ("The Moveable Buffet" D17); it became a more couple-friendly offering that aligns itself more with the late night topless showgirl productions which are a part of true Las Vegas entertainment history. The changes to *Zumanity* made a difference not only to the reviewers but also to the audience. Today, reviews and responses are more positive than they were in 2003 and the production is now a "must see" for the sexually adventurous Las Vegas strip visitor.

Zumanity was co-written and co-directed by René Richard Cyr and Dominic Champagne. Cyr and Champagne had collaborated previously in Québec on various stage and television productions, but not previously on a Cirque production. This was Cyr's first time working with Cirque; Champagne had worked with them the previous year on the touring production *Varekai*. Additionally, Champagne brought a background in cabaret production. The hope was that this team would realize Laliberté's desire for a show that is darker and more sensuous combined with Cirque's strongest asset, the ability to entertain through acrobatic manipulation of the human body. Writers/directors Cyr and Champagne say in their notes in the *Zumanity* souvenir program, "since the dawn of time, the joining of bodies that thirst for each other has always been the highest rapture . . . eroticism is a cry of ecstasy, for freedom, and we have chosen to celebrate it joyfully, naturally, with splendor and humanity . . . a love letter from us to you" (n. pag.).

Drawing on Champagne's background, the production design and performance style referenced the cabaret of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To reinforce the idea, the theatre architecture and the scenic elements it contained were designed in an Art Nouveau style to reference feminine curves. Three-time Cirque set designer Stephané

Roy says, “I sometimes say that Art Deco is very phallic. Art Nouveau is more feminine, fallopian. In fact if you look at how the performance space itself is structured, you can see that it’s designed in the shape of fallopian tubes” (Babinski 338). The theatre follows the curves of a woman; at the center lies the playing space, as if the theatre is, as William Fox says, “modeled after the body parts of a women, the stage a womb and the twin spiral metal staircases on either side are meant to evoke fallopian tubes” (133). The carpet of the theatre is a series of abstract nudes. According to William Fox’s book, *In the Desert of Desire*, “the palette of the carpet, the seats, the costumes, the red snake-skin curtain—all of it evokes the lipstick nightlife of 1930s Berlin” (123). New York-New York hotel president Felix Rappaport describes the theater as “extremely intimate; a living, breathing experience with a variety of seating options” (Weatherford, “Cirque du Soleil Bringing In” 5E). The theater’s seating options are traditional theatre seating à la Cirque du Soleil with accompanying sound amplification; armless upholstered cabaret stools for obstructed view seats; and two person sofas (the most expensive seats) which provide a unique opportunity to enjoy the show in a more intimate way. Cirque describes the third option as “plush fabric and curvaceous lines make for a warm and sultry seating for two persons who want to indulge their senses with an uninhibited sweating opportunity” (“Zumanity” *cirquedusoleil.com*). Blogger Matt G. says, “the first row is made up of plush love seats that circle the stage . . . If you don’t mind spending extra money, it’s well worth sitting that close . . . You will most certainly be part of the show.”

Another consideration in the scenic design was the size of the theatre itself. The theatre in New York–New York is smaller than Cirque’s previous two Las Vegas venues, the *Mystère Theatre* and the *O Theatre*. What is now named the “Zumanity Theatre” was not

originally designed to house a Cirque show, but was instead planned to be a generic cabaret space. Once Cirque was selected to fill the space, the theatre needed a renovation. The resulting theatrical space reduced the seating to only 1,259 seats, a number that is small by Cirque standards, which usually performs in houses of 1,600-2,500. Additionally the Zumanity Theater is a small house by Vegas Strip standards; the space itself, then, forces a certain level of intimacy with the action.

Positioned high above the stage floor is a see-through metal grid. The aerialists anchor their various performance apparatus to this structure. This grate is high above not only the performance space but also the seating area. The technicians assigned to this “backstage” position are very tightlipped about what they have seen from this height, but they are willing to admit, “you don’t want to know [what they have seen]” (Elfman, “*Zumanity Still Dips*” A2). Apparently, the sensual side of Cirque has an immediate effect on some audience members.

The stage is encased between two scenic elements fondly called “the Waves.” Ellen Lampert-Gréaux describes “the Waves” as “two motorized pairs of Lexan panels that move via a system of pins travelling in a track. The Waves can rotate in both directions to create all kinds of configurations” (“Peep Show” 18). The Lexan was sand blasted to create the effect of milk glass that helps to keep the elements from feeling out of place in this nineteenth century cabaret world. The sand blasting also allowed the elements to be translucent, but not transparent; the panels can be lit from behind or from the front but do not expose the backstage space fully. The front of the stage is initially masked with an old fashioned red curtain. The curtain is rigged much in the manner of Austrian blinds; this allows the stage to be fully revealed or to have parts somewhat exposed through

automated pulleys that raise ruched sections. This effect creates a sense of voyeurism that reinforces the titillation of the show itself.

The costumes, created by French fashion icon Thierry Mugler, are closely connected to the style for which Mugler is best known: lingerie as outerwear. *Zumanity* is Mugler's debut with Cirque. He was wooed to the production with the promise of cabaret style and all that it entails. Early in the design process, he was cautioned about the laws in Nevada regarding nudity. The laws allow for bare breasts, but state that all genitalia must remain covered. Considering the law, Mugler created costumes that both expose and reveal, but are still well within what the law allows.

His design combines the style of the early cabaret with ostentatious bird feathers and his own creative forte in human body manipulation: Mugler provides glimpses and outright reveals of perfect human forms in motion. Dima Shine, who performs a hand balancing contortionist act in the show, is clad only in a pair of very brief black vinyl bikini briefs. The sides and the back are adorned with peek-a-boo cutouts. The combination of the vinyl and the briefness of the costume allow for the perfect strength of his male form to be observed as he performs seemingly unachievable poses and balances on a six-foot tall metal pole. In the act "Straps," performer Louise Yorath appears to be clothed in little more than the straps she uses to perform aerial acrobatics. She is actually clad in a nude body stocking with accurate female genitalia airbrushed onto the garment. Her only other accessory is a black leather mask. The entire effect is one of great beauty combined with disturbing bondage imagery. Cirque du Soleil describes the act a

an exercise of self-inflicted pleasure and pain, [Louise] uses the leather to tease and torture herself, and slips seamlessly from one auto-erotic aerial

figure to the next, trapped in her bonds all the while. To the sounds of heavy breathing, gentle moans of ecstasy and the friction of her straps, Louise's self-pleasuring bondage flight draws to a climactic finale ("*Zumanity*" *cirquedusoleil.com*).

Richard Ouzounian of *Variety* raves, "Thierry Mugler's costumes in particular, are a triumph, bringing out the best in every performer" ("*Zumanity*" 35). Many of his costumes are nearly architectural in construction, and all offer a glimpse or even a straightforward view of the human form. The intent is to meet everyone's desires. Mugler's fabric choices range from rubber to silk and lace. All fabrics reinforce the idea of touch; the sensuality of the body is accentuated by fibers that cling and reveal. Head of *Zumanity* wardrobe, Jack Ricks says, "there is a real sense of luxury to the show" (Lampert-Gréaux, "Peep Show" 21). Ronald Clément describes the design as "both flattering and audacious, the costumes show off the figures and natural assets of the artists – of all shapes and sizes – who wear them" (74).

The lighting and sound are dimmer, cooler and more sexually driven than in other Cirque shows. The lights create images from what is not seen as much as from what is seen. Longtime Cirque collaborator, lighting designer Luc Lafortune, has created an adult game of "peek-a-boo" with his audience, leaving room for the imagination to fill in the spaces. Lafortune says, "it's a titillating show so you can't give it away too soon. You have to tease, reveal shapes, and contours but not the entire body right away" (Lampert-Gréaux, "Peep Show" 20).

The sound design and original arrangements from Simon Carpenter walk a fine line between Cirque's beautiful and standard instrumental offerings and an underscoring for

adult films. Richard Ouzounian calls the music “sensuous” (“*Zumanity*” 35). Sound designer Jonathon Deans says that the show is louder than other Cirque shows. Deans wanted to play on the sensuality of sound by using abrupt changes to the levels of the music. At times, he takes the mood from intensely personal sexuality to the collective ecstasy of a rave. He felt that the juxtaposition of sound levels with the sensuality of the original music did much to reinforce the shock factor of the adult styled production.

PRODUCTION

As with all of the Cirque productions in Las Vegas the show begins before the show. The lobby of the *Zumanity* theatre suggests a high-class peep show. In, *In the Desert of Desire*, William Fox describes the experience of entering the Zumanity Theatre:

The wall separating the lobby from the 1259-seat theatre is covered with plush fabric with peepholes set into it. I press up against the soft barrier to take a look. A wickedly made-up eye zooms in to gaze back at me while heavy breathing plays in my ear, a wordless invitation to enter the showroom. (124)

The theatre itself has been described as “moody, velvety, dimly lit- perfect” (Matt G.). It is dark and cool and sensual as you enter from the peep show inspired lobby to take one of the plush single or double seats. The stage and house darkens, whispers begin, and slowly the stage lights reveal the cabaret-inspired stage and performers.

Unlike its Cirque du Soleil precedents in Las Vegas, *Zumanity* does not even pretend to have a plot. Richard Ouzounian calls it a “highly eroticized, cabaret-style spectacular [which] has an array of unique characters whose performances are each themed by

different elements of sexuality” (“Zumanity” 36). In its original incarnation, *Zumanity* began with a handsome piano player and a Marlene Dietrich wanna-be, dressed in a topless, corseted, fishtailed gown. Seemingly tastefully covered, she titillated the audience by turning her back to the audience and revealing her nude derriere through a cutaway section of the back of her garb. Tony Bentley of the *LA Times* states, “it is an epic image: dramatic, naughty and suggestive” (E.1). As *Zumanity* evolved into *Zumanity: the Sensual Side of Cirque*, the master of ceremonies also evolved. She is now “Edie, Mistress of Seduction,” a transgendered man, who invites the audience to watch the action to come. The action that follows is more dance than gymnastics and cabaret than new age. Bruce Steele of *The Advocate* describes the show as “100 minutes of limber, muscular, fat-free cast members-- men and women-- performing suggestive, remarkably imagined gymnastics to throbbing music. It’s amazing. It’s fun. It’s hot. But its not entirely hip. It knows its audience” (54). A cadre of scantily clad cast members soon joins Edie onstage. They range in size and shape from the long and lean to the short and round; providing any, and all types in this “human zoo.”

Zumanity shows its burlesque influences and at times even moves into the arena of the sideshow. As in other Cirque shows, the work combines house performers with specialty acts. The first act is a dance piece with choreography drawn from the courtship behavior of animals as suggested by early-twentieth-century sexologist, Havelock Ellis, who believed “all dance was based on the courtship behavior of animals from insects to birds to apes” (Fox 124). The show progresses from a history of erotic and cultural dance to a five hundred gallon champagne glass filled with water and two topless women performing water ballet. This playful yet erotic scene references the days of Vegas’ port holed lounges

where patrons could view scantily clad women performing a type of water ballet while they enjoyed cocktails in the bar. Doug Elfman of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* describes the act as “a slippery combination of sexuality and athleticism, a pretty possibility of what the human body is capable of physically, artistically and sensually” (“*Zumanity* Still Dips” A2).

The show becomes progressively rawer as the performance moves forward through its fourteen acts. With elegantly choreographed numbers miming various types of sexual acts including bondage, autoerotic asphyxiation, homosexual and heterosexual pairings and multiple partnering, *Zumanity* leaves its audience either titillated or mortified.

RESPONSES

Many have questioned why Cirque felt the need to pursue an adult theme and why they needed nudity in their show. Of course, nudity and the display of the human form is a part of Las Vegas strip entertainment of long standing. Cirque has managed to combine what it does well in performance with that for which Las Vegas is known, sexuality. Doug Elfman of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* supports Cirque’s decision by saying, “in other Strip shows, nudity is a beauty unto itself. But in *Zumanity*, by stripping away the curtain of clothes behind Cirque’s athlete-artists, you see the stretch of a body, the extreme bend of a back, the naked physicality of stars” (“*Zumanity* Still Dips” 1A). Laliberté admits that he conceived the show with the intent of pushing the envelope, “*Zumanity* emphasizes what makes us human first” (Babinski 340). It considers the human animal and our physical and emotional perceptions of love. “Laliberté hopes the subversive aspect of *Zumanity* will open minds, and hearts. Babinski says, the idea behind *Zumanity* . . . is . . . when people leave the theatre, that they’ll want to experience love with their partner, or partners, or

friends” (337). In Lewis Cohen’s *Zumanity* documentary, *Lovesick*, the show’s Director of Creation Andrew Watson says, “I hope it’s a show about issues; if not then we are just doing entertainment” (n. pag.). Cohen then poses the question of Watson, “Is there a purpose?” And Watson’s response is,

We wanted the public to feel . . . they wanted to go off and they wanted to fuck, maybe they are not doing that anymore, they look at each other and they remember those times. Or maybe someone who doesn’t feel good about themselves, when they leave the show they feel good about themselves, that they could be romantic, that they could be a sexual person also. This is what the show should say. (*Lovesick*)

Doug Elfman of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* disagrees, “call this ‘enlightened sexuality’ if you want, but it’s really just the art of lust, presented exquisitely, without shame and never crossing the line into porn” (“*Zumanity* Still Dips” A.2).

Right or wrong, liked or not, approved or disapproved, Cirque stands behind its third resident offering in Las Vegas. It meets the desired outcome for its creators, it fills a niche that, as yet, had not been captured by Cirque: the seedier side of Las Vegas, the sexual side. Cirque has taken sexuality and embraced it as only Cirque can, with spectacular bodies and a desire to push the entertainment envelope. The show makes the audience ask, “Can I go with the company as it pushes boundaries this time?” Cirque hopes to have a show for each and every audience type. *Zumanity* certainly captures an audience looking for erotic stimulation.

CHAPTER VIII

Kà:
IN PURSUIT OF PLOT

The most lavish production in the history of Western theatre.

(Swed)

With *Kà*'s premiere on February 3, 2005 at the MGM Grand, Cirque du Soleil moved in a new direction: they told a conventionally structured, vaguely Shakespearean story of separated twins who find romance and, eventually, each other. Entertainment reviewer Mike Weatherford of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* called the show "an epic," and it certainly is. The show is entitled *Kà*, referring to the ancient Egyptian word for duality. For Cirque, *Kà* also represents "the fire that has power to unite or separate and the energy to destroy or illuminate" ("*Kà*" *cirquedusoleil.com*). The audience may not always perceive the dualities underlying the show but they certainly are treated to an all-encompassing ninety-minute performance. Angela Mitchell of *about.com* says, "*Kà* brings to life a story that transcends place and time with an intensely dark and theatrical landscape" ("Behind the Scenes"). In this short span of time, the audience sees twins who are separated, travel the world, challenge death, kill the bad guy, are reunited and regain their throne and, of course, fall in love with their soul mates. The story is told spectacularly through music, light, costumes, sound, staging and the ubiquitous Cirque du Soleil spectacle.

The narrative centers on a pair of youthful imperial fraternal twins, Brother and Sister, who are separated from each other while escaping an attack upon their home and family. They flee the scene with their nurse, Nursemaid, one of the standard Cirque clown figures, and board a ship, but the Brother is flung overboard and the ship sails away leaving the Sister grieving for him. The ship is caught in a terrible storm and soon wrecks on a seemingly deserted beach. Meanwhile the Court Jester rescues the Brother. Hiding from the storm in the aftermath of the attack on the imperial palace, the Jester and Brother are attacked by Spearmen who are working on the orders of the evil Chief Archer who was responsible for the attack in the first place. While imprisoned by the Chief Archer and his men, Brother meets the evil man's Daughter and an amorous spark ignites between the youths. Meanwhile, the Spearmen attack the Sister and the Nurse who, assisted by the Mountainmen, escape into the forest where Sister catches the attention of the Firefly Boy. The Chief Archer and his ally, the Counselor's son, introduce an enormous contraption with the power to ignite war throughout the world. War begins and the twins, along with their newfound love interests, are reunited in battle. The battle concludes and peace is restored. The production ends with a tremendous fireworks display that suggests fire can be both a destructive and a healing force.

The well-developed plot is not only a first for Cirque du Soleil but also much of the production's technology broke new ground. In an interview by Angela Mitchell for *about.com*, *Kà* company manager Jeff Lund says, "*Kà* is a show of superlatives. There are a lot of 'first', 'only' and 'one of a kind' elements. The Gantry Crane, Tatami Deck, and Projection systems were all essentially prototypes" ("Behind the Scenes"). With *Kà*, a new

standard for Las Vegas entertainment was set and the bar for spectacle in future productions was raised.

With powerful spectacle and technological innovations comes cost, and *Kà* is certainly costly to produce and to see. The ticket prices for this Cirque offering broke a new high for Las Vegas resident productions with the most costly seats breaking the two hundred dollar barrier in 2005. Jerry Hirsch of the *Los Angeles Times* reports, “when its fourth Las Vegas production opens next year at the MGM Grand hotel, Cirque will account for three of every four dollars -- or about \$300 million annually -- spent on entertainment at the five strip hotels owned by MGM Mirage” (n. pag.). Today, *Kà* remains the most expensive Cirque show on the Las Vegas Strip, and the least commonly discounted option, but the house still sells at over ninety percent for every performance, 2 shows per day, five days each performance week.

CREATION

In this show, the technology equals or even overshadows the spectacle of the acrobatic bodies. The process of creation involved over two and one half years of preparatory work involving a multitude of meetings with the creative team and countless ideas, some of which became *Kà* and others of which were discarded. Cirque claims all its projects to be completely collaborative in nature but, as with any team, there must be a head. Guy Caron is credited with being *Kà*'s director of creation, a position much like an artistic director in American regional theatre. It was Caron's job to approve the final design and thus the final production set for Las Vegas. Renowned theatre artist Robert Lepage is credited with being the creator of this work. He is described as having moved the idea

from conception through to performance. Marie-Hélène Gagnon, show resident director of *Kà* says that Lepage “has always been very interested in Asian culture, and has a profound knowledge of Shakespeare’s work, as the structure of the storyline proves. He also has a strong interest in architecture, which is the basis of the scenic treatment” (Mitchell, “Behind the Scenes). Lepage also served as the original staging director of this production.

Québec born Robert Lepage is described by Cirque du Soleil as a “multidisciplinary artist” (“*Kà*” cirquedusoleil.com). He has worked as a director of film, stage and opera, a playwright and an actor throughout North America and parts of Europe. He studied his craft in Canada and France and has produced works in both places. He moved from more traditional theatrical practice to rock and roll concerts, creating and directing two of musician Peter Gabriel’s world tours in the 1990s and 2000s. In 2008 he served as the director for Québec City’s 400th year anniversary celebration which is where he became connected with the creative founders of Cirque du Soleil. *Kà* marks his debut with Cirque du Soleil. (“*Kà*” cirquedusoleil.com).

Kà was scheduled to open in the theatre at the MGM Mirage which had previously housed *EFX* starring Rick Springfield. After much consideration by Lepage, Caron and MGM executives, the theatre was deemed unsuitable for the yet to be conceived show. One aspect of the production was known at this time: it was to be their biggest show to date. The theatre was gutted for the production and a reputed \$135 million was spent on its renovation. As with previous shows that Cirque had opened on the Strip, both the auditorium and performance spaces were created by architect Mark Fisher. The idea was to create an all-encompassing world, to make the audience a part of the action, immersing them in the world of the story. Mark Fisher says, “think of the movies coming out of the

'90s like 'The Matrix' . . .Hollywood started to use the digital media to create an artificial gravity for the performers. Think of those great martial-arts fights in 'The Matrix.' It's zero gravity in the real world. This is what Robert connected with" (Lowman T1).

Fisher was a new addition to the Cirque design stable but had already achieved renown as a master of spectacle in the world of rock and roll scenic design. Fisher was trained as an architect, but his interest in inflatable, temporary structures caught the interest of Pink Floyd's Roger Waters who brought him into the world of technical spectacle through the rock and roll concert world. He has designed several of Pink Floyd's concert tours including "The Wall" as well as the "Steel Wheels" tour for The Rolling Stones and the "Popmart" tour for U2. He calls the *Kà* design concept "Industrial Baroque" (Lampert-Gréaux, "A Lexicon for Light" 42). The completed theatre boasts continental-style stadium seating with speakers built into each of the 1,951 plush seats. Rob Lowman of *The Daily News of Los Angeles* calls the theatre "cathedral-like" (T1) while Canada's *North Bay Nugget* likens the theatre to "Zion" ("Cirque Launches" C6). Positioned throughout the space are pillars, each with multiple platforms and unique lighting. Metal catwalks, all of which connect to the primary performance space, interconnect these pillars. As the show begins, the importance of these overhead features becomes evident: the musicians start the show by taking their positions high overhead the audience.

Even the orchestra pit is involved. As the audience is seated, it is smoking and regularly shoots flames high into the air. The smoke and fire help set the stage for what is to come. Pyro technique designer Gregory Meeh of Jauchem & Meeh says, "fire is one of the main themes of *Kà*, and it is used in a primal, primal way" (Lampert-Gréaux, "A Lexicon for Light" 42). The pit is not used in this production as a standard theatrical orchestra pit

holding the musicians, but as an open area into which the performers fall. Looking over the edge and into the pit, one can see that the bottom is lined with inflatable pillows for catching performers. It's all part of the story to come.

The story is a big part of what Cirque du Soleil has sold as innovative with *Kà*, but the real star of the show is the stage. Victoria Looseleaf of *Dance Magazine* claims, "theatrical wizardry reached its apotheosis in *Kà*" ("Tech du Soleil" 48). Theatre and scenic designer Mark Fisher has truly created a wonder with the set for *Kà*. He used a combination of hydraulics, pneumatics, and electromechanical technologies to create a playing space on the stage that is nearly cinematic in its ability to seamlessly transform from one locale to another. Richard Corliss of *Time Magazine* describes Cirque du Soleil as "the gold standard for live entertainment. Like a circus, *Kà* showcases jaw-dropping acrobatic feats, but cradles them in outsize theatrical wizardry: a huge stage space with many scene changes and a theatre designed to suit the show, with side balconies from which the performers can fly over the audience" (52).

To describe the playing space as a "stage" in the traditional sense is a misnomer. The playing space, created by Fisher, is actually a void into which seven different stages move and interact. Each of these stages can be operated independently, requiring a stage crew of more than thirty-four technicians, of the one hundred reported to run each performance. (*Kà: Cirque du Soleil*. Souvenir program n. pag.). The primary stage is fondly referred to, by cast and crew alike, as the "sand-cliff deck." It is so named for the sand-like cork substance that covers its face in the shipwrecked beach scene and for the cliff feeling it creates while in its vertical position. The 1,250 square foot sand-cliff deck weighs more than one hundred and seventy five tons and measures fifty feet wide by twenty-five feet

deep and six feet tall (Corliss 52). Aside from its amazing size, it can reach a height of more than seventy feet when its unseen hydraulic gantry arm is fully extended. Additionally, this behemoth piece can be rotated three hundred and sixty degrees and be positioned vertically thus creating a wall, or a cliff, as opposed to a floor. It can move at a rate of two feet per second to assist in the fast paced nature of the action. Having achieved a fully vertical position, performers can jump from its top edge for a free fall of sixty feet into the air bags hidden in the pit below (Corliss 52).

This set piece is also a projection screen while in its vertical position. The surface of the stage is akin to the touch sensors on a computer track pad. Holger Förterer created the technology. He describes his work as “midway between art and technology. All of my efforts seek to use technology to the point where it becomes art . . . if art cannot bring machines to feel emotions, who or what can? I am going to try” (“*Kà*” cirquedusoleil.com). The technology he created for this production uses an infrared camera that captures the movement of the performers and tracks them. This information is then fed to a second computer system that determines the precise location of each performer and uses those movements in the same way that a personal computer follows its user’s fingers on a trackpad. The result is a surface that relies upon the touch of the performers to be activated, thus allowing the rock wall to move with the performer as he climbs up or falls down.

Another of the moving decks is a nine hundred square tatami deck, which weighs a mere 40-tons as compared to its big brother, the sand-cliff deck (Corliss 52). The tatami deck functions as the B-stage, as it is the location of much of the secondary action. It too can rotate and revolve like the sand-cliff deck but its most important feature is the fact that its

surface slides open in three panels, much like a set of dresser drawers. The sliding enables scenes to slip in and out of each other, again allowing a seamless transition from one part of the story to another.

Each of the remaining five stages, also known as stage lifts, have different functions within the show so no two have exactly the same technology. Angela Mitchell of *about.com* describes the purpose of the stage lifts as a means “to create the performance space and move props and artists during the show” (“*Kà* by the Numbers” n. pag.). One aspect of the seven stages is consistent, and that is that each is controlled by its own computer and primary operator, along with an assigned team of stagehands.

Additionally there is a 1,800-pound boat that flies over the action to create the illusion of a storm at sea. Initially it glides smoothly into the playing area, but soon a storm takes control of the giant unit and the ship is whipped about. Eventually it sinks, with Sister and Nursemaid onboard, while Brother is flung out into the raging sea. This unit is manipulated entirely by the performers onboard.

Properties and puppets heavily augment the scenic design. *Kà* property designer Patricia Ruel made her Cirque debut with this production. She was trained in both scenic and property design and has received several awards both in her home of Québec and abroad. *Kà* has one hundred and thirteen different types of props, most of which had to have multiple copies constructed to meet the needs of the numerous performers. Any performance of the show boasts over six hundred props including the arrows which are shot throughout the various fight scenes by the archers, many of which are actually shot over the audience’s heads onto stage (Mitchell, “Behind the Scenes of *Kà*” n. pag.).

Puppet designer Michael Curry and property designer Patricia Ruel worked closely with Fisher to enhance the stage and space. Curry was trained as a production designer but has worked with many designers who specialize in large-scale puppetry, such as Julie Taymor. *Kà* was Curry's first collaboration with Cirque du Soleil and marked the first time Cirque used puppets in one of its shows. This collaboration also made the first use of subcontractors by Cirque. Curry met extensively with the other production designers and the director but the actual execution of the design was completed in his studio, Michael Curry Design, Inc. in his home in Portland, Oregon. His past collaborative experiences allowed him to work seamlessly with the designs of Fisher and the rest of the *Kà* team. He described his work as "somewhere between puppetry, costuming and stagecraft" ("*Kà*" cirquedusoleil.com). There are thirteen creatures which Curry created in this show, each with its own personality, from the slow-moving turtle who appears from the sand at the shipwreck site to an eighty-foot slithering snake seen in the jungle of the forest people. Each puppet is designed to be worn by one or more performer and to be lightweight and flexible enough to allow full movement. Contortionists who actually walk upside down in a backbend as they perform their crabwalk on the sand-cliff deck play the crabs, which appear from the sand. Curry says, "I wouldn't give the performers anything I couldn't do, except the crabs" (Lampert-Gréaux, "Curry's Creatures" 7).

The costumes have been described as everything from post-apocalyptic to Mad Max to Beijing Opera. Each of those descriptors is correct as are a multitude of others. Just as Michael Curry did, Canadian costume designer Marie-Chantale Vaillancourt also marked her debut with Cirque du Soleil with this design. She has designed world wide both sets and costumes and has collaborated with Lepage on numerous occasions; it was Lepage who

brought her to this production. She said, “my costumes draw on a wide variety of sources of inspiration: everything from graphic novels, the paintings of Gustav Klimt, Baron Münchhausen, the Mad Max movies, time travel movies to India and Eastern Europe” (“*Kà*” *cirquedusoleil.com*). For the imperial twins’ coronation ceremony garb, Vaillancourt’s design references Japanese, Korean and Indian ceremonial robes and incorporates numerous sumptuous silk brocades. The forest people’s costumes are influenced by ceremonial costumes of Africa. Ronald Clément identifies the scars on the “skin” of their costumes as “a throwback to the ritual marking of Maasai warriors” (83). The archers come from Japanese artistic representations of warriors. Each warrior is clad in a flesh tone body stocking on which tribal tattooing is silk screened, with warrior garb worn over top. The spearmen wear shoes that appear to expose their toes but this is an illusion; in fact, the shoes fully encase their feet. In *Cirque du Soleil: Twenty-five Years of Costumes*, author Ronald Clément describes the Counsel’s Son as “the most contemporary in the *Kà* universe” (84). He is tattooed like the archers but his tattoos have a more geometric and contemporary feel than the tribal styles of the archers and spearmen. His wig is a cross between the punk rock world of the 1980s and traditional Samurai warriors. Eric Wood, head of wardrobe for *Kà*, states, “there are 10,385 total active costume pieces, including 1,600 costume pieces and sixteen wigs actively used in each performance” (Mitchell, “Behind the Scenes of *Kà*” n. pag.).

Long time Cirque lighting designer Luc Lafortune designed the production. He added lights to the constructions within the theatre space as well as the stage in a further attempt to unite the playing areas with the seating areas. He said, “I worked closely with Fisher to get a scenic finish that would take on different personalities” (Lampert-Gréaux, “A

Lexicon for Light” 42). Of the lighting, Fisher says, “the theatre looks as great as it does because of Luc’s lighting . . . It was designed to be lit” (Lampert-Gréaux, “A Lexicon for Light” 42). Although Lafortune was a bit intimidated by the idea of working with an actual script, he took the challenge in stride. He observed, “the story is Shakespearean with twins, separation, conflict between groups of people, the fight for survival, and coming of age . . . I wanted to define the two different worlds: that of the protagonists in the emperor's court and the antagonists who are the rival archers” (Lampert-Gréaux, “A Lexicon for Light” 42). He also expressed a desire to help the audience identify the locations of the two worlds quickly. He used color temperature to accomplish this mission. Scenes involving members of the emperor’s court were illuminated in warm, almost incandescent, tones, while he lit the antagonist’s scenes in cold, harsh hues with sharp focus angles. Since fire was a predominant theme in the show, Lafortune says that he used red judiciously. He reserved it for the battle scenes where it could be not only fire, but also blood and thereby visually connect fire with life. As with the scenery, the lighting relies heavily on technology. Nils Becker, the Lighting Director for *Kà* says, “there are more than 3,300 light fixtures in the show, and I would guesstimate that we use over nine hundred gels per year” (Mitchell, “Behind the Scenes *Kà*” n. pag.).

PRODUCTION

The production is comprised of approximately eighty performers on any given night. The casting was done worldwide and there are more than sixteen different nationalities represented in the cast. The show’s artistic director, who is responsible for attending every performance to maintain quality, holds the show to standard production content. The

eighty performers are augmented by a production run crew of over one hundred and a day maintenance crew of over fifty (Mitchell, "Behind the Scenes of Cirque du Soleil's *Kà*" n. pag.).

Richard Corliss of *Time Magazine* described the action as being "like a Hong Kong action film" (52). The performance begins with Archers taking their positions throughout the theatre and the musicians ascending their perches above the audience. The theatre is filled with ominous percussive music; the drums seem to drive the story and the lives of the characters.

Although the work was conceived and is marketed as a new step for Cirque du Soleil, there is one major aspect that is consistent: the production combines house artists and specialty guest acts. The difference is that the specialty acts are fewer and farther between and more closely integrated into the show. The action is divided into conventional narrative scenes. Guy Laliberté has described the show as "scripted with a strongly defined, almost cinematic narrative with clearly identified characters and story arcs" ("*Cirque du Soleil Reveals*" n. pag.). He wanted Robert Lepage to write and direct the work, because Lepage has such a strong background in film and television.

The production begins with the scene entitled "The Pageant" ("*Kà*" *cirquedusoleil.com*). The royal barge glides into the playing space with the imperial twins onboard. The royal family is reunited and a courtly celebration begins as the twins show a daring display of swordplay, followed by solo swordplay by the Court Jester. The celebration is cut short by an attack on the royal family by Archers and Spearmen. During this scene, the twins witness their parents' assassination.

A scene entitled "The Storm" follows "The Pageant" scene. Here the twins escape

and are separated as their ship sinks in a massive storm at sea. Sister and Nursemaid appear to drown while the Court Jester saves Brother as he is wounded by an Archer's arrow. Seamlessly "The Storm" transitions to the scene called "The Deep" in which some of the dramatic spectacle of the sand-cliff deck is presented. The performers who had populated the sinking ship are invisibly harnessed to the edge of the sand-cliff deck, which moves into its vertical position. As the performers slowly descend into the abyss below, their actions are punctuated by air bubbles that are "created through interactive video projections triggered by infrared sensors that react to the movement of the artists" ("*Kà*" cirquedusoleil.com). The scene is slow and sweet, underscored by piano and cello, and in the final moments of the scene, Sister swims to the surface clutching tightly Nursemaid and bringing her to safety.

The lights shift, indicating that daylight has returned. With the day, "The Archer's Den" is revealed. The Spearmen and Archers celebrate while the Counselor's Son introduces a model of his newest creation, a machine that can grind bones into a magical powder that will release the destructive power of *Kà* (fire).

The scene shifts to "The Wash-up on the Shore" where the Nursemaid and Sister are reunited with other members of the court who had escaped on the ship. The scene is bright and whimsical. Just as the named characters relax, thinking they have survived their perils and are now alone, creatures begin to appear from beneath the sand. They encounter a crab, a blue potato bug, a turtle and a starfish. Cirque uses this interlude to present some contortion acts, performed by the actors portraying these characters. It is also in this scene that Cirque presents the clown humor common to many of their shows. The scene concludes with the characters exiting in search of other survivors of the attack and the

storm.

In the following scene, “Shadow Play,” the wounded Brother and the Court Jester have taken refuge in a cave. Seemingly safe, they engage in shadow play which Cirque calls “the earliest form of storytelling” (“Kà” *cirquedusoleil.com*). They are not safe, however. The Jester hears a sound and leaves to investigate. While Brother is left alone he spots a beautiful young woman: little does he know this is the Chief Archer’s daughter. While they are wordlessly locked in a glance, Archers leap out and capture Brother and carry him away.

The scenes that follow focus exclusively upon Sister and Nursemaid. They scale a mountain during “The Climb” in which the sand-cliff deck is again returned to vertical. The artists’ movements are choreographed to follow the movement of the stage as it rotates at twelve degrees per second. Besides showing off the stage’s lifting motion, this scene also includes performers making spectacular sixty foot falls into unseen air bags (“Kà” *cirquedusoleil.com*). Archers, who fire arrows at the Sister and Nursemaid in an attempt to stop their escape, pursue them. The fired arrows appear to stick to the surface of the stage now in its vertical position, but they are actually extendable pegs that rise from the surface of the stage in conjunction with the performer’s choreography. Nursemaid and Sister narrowly escape with the help of a Mountain Tribe who appear at the top of the vertical deck in “The Blizzard.” The tribesmen show off their climbing prowess by manually ascending 50 feet to join their fellow tribesmen on the mountaintop created by the Sand Cliff Deck in its upright vertical position. The accompanying video projection of the frozen cliff face reacts to the performers’ movements to create the illusion of falling rocks (“Kà” *cirquedusoleil.com*).

The Mountain Men then transform their tent into a man-powered flying machine, which represents one of the few specialty acts of this production. The Mountain Men in “The Flight” are a troupe of acrobats who fly high over the audience and the performance space and save Sister from certain death. Their contraption, reminiscent of a Transformer toy, supports a dozen performers while flying fifty feet over the audience’s heads.

The action shifts to Brother in “Twin Brother in Captivity.” He is imprisoned in a large wheel from which he is unable to escape. The Chief Archer’s Daughter enters and the two engage in “conversation” through the sharing of a single flute. She sets him free after a brief kiss through the cage. He escapes and she is left alone onstage. Looking on is the Counselor’s son, who was not seen through the Brother and Archer’s Daughter’s interactions. The Counselor’s Son is clearly fraught with jealousy over the kiss and he, too, exits the stage to enact his revenge.

The story shifts back to Sister who is now in the forest, having been dropped there by the Mountain Men’s contraption. She is met by Firefly Boy, and the two perform an aerial duet while the Forest People, a bungee act, fly through the trees surrounding them. A singer positioned high in the trees vocally underscores this scene, “The Forest People.” She performs a melodious song of love while Sister and Firefly Boy fall deeply in love.

In the next scene, “The Slave Cage,” the twins are reunited. The Counselor’s Son has constructed his machine in human scale and it is rolled forward on the stage. Five men, slaves, whose lives are owned by Evil Counselor, operate the machine, the Wheel of Death. The specialty act is a stunning moment of acrobatics performed by the Alegria brothers of Mexico, who remain in synchronized motion during the entirety of the movement of the apparatus, as it spins over a pit of fire. Las Vegas theatre reviewer, Mike Weatherford on

reviewjournal.com called this moment “One of at least three show stopping sequences people will remember more than the story” (“Tough Act to Follow” n. pag.).

In “Battle Begins,” Fireboy leads the Forest People into the Archer’s den and launches an attack on the Evil Counselor and his son. Fireboy, Forest People and the twins win the day as the Counselor’s son is killed in battle. The Wheel is destroyed in the final scene, “Aftermath,” in an explosion of pyrotechnics. With evil destroyed, the twins are reunited with each other and with their newfound loves. The Chief Archer breaks his bow over his knee and bows down in servitude to the twins. Peace is restored in the kingdom.

As with all other Cirque offerings in Las Vegas, the show is entirely wordless. The story is told through music, swordplay and action; it is entirely pantomimic in its unfolding and climax, but most importantly, the story is clear. The actions of the performers in their environments make the story real and true, but also fantastical. Audience members are able to see the story unfold regardless of the language that they speak . Mike Weatherford of *reviewjournal.com* disagrees. He believes the story is difficult to follow, leaving the ending anticlimactic. He says,

the mildly confusing and anticlimactic result is understandable, given the absence of words, lyrics or video close-ups to aid the storytelling, or a familiar work to base the saga upon. But it's an amazing journey, showing what's possible when Las Vegas' ability to provide cutting-edge stagecraft and long-term financing is combined with the vision of an innovative director, Robert Lepage. (“Tough Act to Follow” n. pag.)

RESPONSES

Kà is reported to cost about one million dollars per week to operate. *Los Angeles Times* writer Mark Swed believes the show to be “the most lavish production in the history of Western theatre” (n. pag.). *Kà* Company Manager, Jeff Lund says, “Vegas is the entertainment capital of the world, with over 30 million tourists a year . . . Vegas’ ability to draw that many tourists is a huge advantage to sustaining long term success with regards to *Kà*” (Mitchell, “Behind the Scenes of *Kà*” n. pag.). Being the most expensive show in Cirque history to date does not seem to hold the company back. The houses are at ninety percent capacity or better for each performance. Gamal Aziz, MGM Grand President and COO says, “the arrival of *Kà* is the crown jewel in the renaissance of MGM Grand” (“Cirque du Soleil Reveals” n. pag.).

Guy Laliberté has described *Kà* as “the most theatrical show we’ve ever done” (“Cirque du Soleil Reveals” n. pag.), and Richard Ouzounian of *Variety* says, “it’s safe to say there has never been a more visually spectacular piece of theatre than *Kà* (“*Kà*” 47). Dan Glaister of *The Guardian* comments, “indeed, it is probably the most grandiose piece of live theatre ever undertaken” (16). Richard Corliss of *Time Magazine* says, “Like a Broadway show, *Kà* has a plot, a dozen or more characters and a sonorous score. It blends them with the company’s determination to create something new under the Las Vegas sun - a spectacle of burly martial arts contained in a tender love story” (52). Angela Mitchell of *about.com* calls the show “the most dramatic and intriguing of the bunch.” She continues in saying, “*Kà* brings to life a story that transcends place and time with an intensely dark and theatrical landscape. The show combines a staggering amount of production and creative

risk, and features an innovative blend of acrobatic feats, Capoeira dance, puppetry, projections and martial arts” (“Behind the Scenes”).

Critics seem to agree that *Kà* is worth every penny of its ninety to two hundred and twenty dollar ticket price. They also agree that the use of a linear story is new and remarkable for Cirque. They even agree on the high-end spectacle the show presents. If for no other reason than seeing agreement of worldwide critics, *Kà* marks something special. It raises the bar of Las Vegas entertainment and is a hard act to follow. It is the fourth Cirque production on the Las Vegas strip and the fifteenth ever produced by the Canadian company. As we shall see, Cirque continues to attempt to top itself with the productions to come.

CHAPTER IX

ALL YOU NEED IS *LOVE*:
AN UNPRECEDENTED CIRQUE COLLABORATION

A marriage of popular music icons and theatrical superstars.

(Jeter 51)

When The Beatles released “All You Need is Love” in 1967, it was impossible for anyone to know that the song would become an anthem for popular culture. Obviously, they could not know that the title would become the catch phrase for a Cirque du Soleil Las Vegas production nearly forty years later. In April 2006 Cirque launched its newest offering for the Las Vegas strip, simply entitled *Love*. This production premiered in its two thousand seat theatre at the Mirage Resort and Casino on June 30, 2006 to a sold out invited VIP audience which included representatives from the four organizations that brought this show to life: The Beatles, Cirque du Soleil, Apple Corps, Ltd., and MGM Mirage Resorts and Entertainment. This auspicious group included the surviving members of The Beatles, their wives and families as well as the families of the band members who had passed. Representatives of the Cirque du Soleil Corporation included the show’s concept creators Guy Laliberté and Gilles Ste-Croix and associate director of creation Chantal Tremblay. Bobby Baldwin (CEO of Mirage Resorts) and George and Giles Martin, musical directors for *Love*, rounded out the creative team. *Love* is the sixth offering from Cirque du Soleil on the Strip. The work is based on a collection of thirty songs but is not intended to

represent the chronology of the Fab Four. Instead, in the words of the show's director and concept creator, Dominic Champagne, "I wanted to create a Beatles experience rather than a Beatles story, taking the audience on an emotional journey rather than a chronological one, exploring the landscapes and experiences that have marked the group's history" (Jeter 51). Creating a show that used already popular music produced by a well-known band marked a distinct change in the approach to a production on the part of the Cirque organization. How could a creative consensus have been reached between a band known for never granting performance rights of their music to other performers (The Beatles) and Cirque du Soleil, which is known for never allowing anyone other than their members to have creative control of production?

CREATION

The idea behind the show came from a meeting at a party during the 2000 Montreal Grand Prix attended by Cirque's Founder and CEO Guy Laliberté and former Beatle George Harrison. Laliberté credits Harrison with the idea for the collaboration. He says that it was Harrison's hope that a creative endeavor might get the remaining band members together. For the next three years negotiations took place between the other three members of the Beatles and/or their representatives, the Beatles' holding company, Apple Corps, Ltd., and MGM Mirage. After the negotiations were completed, Dominic Champagne and Gilles Ste-Croix were licensed to begin the process of bringing the Beatles collected works to life in the style of Cirque du Soleil. Guy Laliberté proudly states that Cirque is the first company to partner with the Beatles in thirty-five years. It would be the first Cirque enterprise to start a show with music. The music, however, came with a restriction required by Neil

Aspinall, then CEO of Apple Corps: it had to come from the sound recordings made by The Beatles. The parameters were finally agreed upon and the work could begin--a collaboration between the Beatles and Cirque du Soleil. According to the *Love* documentary, *All Together Now*, "Love marked the first time the music of The Beatles was authorized for use in theatrical production" (*n. pag.*).

At this time, Sir George Martin, long time Beatles' manager, was brought onboard as the musical director of the show then entitled "The Boys," a reference to the nickname given to the band throughout their career together. He was first tasked with collating ninety minutes of music from the Beatles' archives located at Abbey Road Studios in London. Martin states, "the brief that I was given said that you've got to have ninety minutes of music and you create that from anything you recorded with the Beatles since 1962" (*All Together Now*). Under pressure from Cirque and Apple Corp to bring in something "new and hip" to the project from the old tapes, Martin turned to the one person he felt he could trust with this project, his son Giles. Giles says, "God, I've been given a Beatles' tape and they want me to do something to it and people are going to hate me for this" (*All Together Now*). Alan Light of *Rolling Stone* magazine explains that the creative team was certain about one thing from the very beginning: "we were adamant that it not be a *Mamma Mia!* - type thing" (22). Using only session masters from Abbey Road Studios, George and Giles selected some preliminary tracks for consideration and turned to Dominic Champagne for his input in making final selections regarding the music. Champagne states, "I felt like un imposteur [sic] . . . Who am I to be there sitting in studio two with George Martin and dreaming of which tracks, which music we would play with" (*All Together Now*). Light says that Champagne knew his mission was to "tell the Beatles' story without the

Beatles" (22). Once the tracks were selected, the elder Martin presented them to the creative heads of the project. He said, "this is a tightrope of taste that we're walking because once you start tampering with Beatle material, you're tampering with the Holy Grail" (*All Together Now*). The group felt the selections were sound and at this time George turned more fully to the expertise of this son. Giles produced the music using a computer to stretch sounds or place them in a different key, speeding them up or slowing them down. The final result was that he updated the old vaulted tracks to make them more conducive to the Cirque's style of performance. The goal was to create "a multilayered soundscape [to] inspire Cirque du Soleil to celebrate the legacy of the Beatles" (*Flowers in the Desert*). This soundscape was demo-ed in 2005 to Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, George Harrison's widow, Olivia Harrison, and John Lennon's widow, Yoko Ono Lennon. Guy Laliberté was on hand for the presentation to the assembled group. He said, "this is more a musical than a Cirque show" (*All Together Now*). What was presented was "a fifteen-minute demo, which demonstrated the approach they had in mind; most notably, a mash-up that put Ringo's propulsive drums from "Tomorrow Never Knows" under George's serene vocals from "Within You and Without You" resulting in a track instantly ready for twenty-first century dance floors" (*All Together Now*). According to Olivia Harrison, "that was really what sold everybody" (*All Together Now*). In amassing the music for consideration, the two Martins wanted to get representative tracks from each of the band members. The result was seventeen songs written by John Lennon, twelve songs written by Paul McCartney, seven songs written by George Harrison, one song written by Ringo Starr and excerpts from ninety-three additional Beatles' songs, which were melded together to make the final

twenty-six tracks, the foundation of the twenty-six “movements” that compose the ninety-minute show.

It was the track of “While My Guitar Gently Weeps,” by George Harrison, that proved the most problematic for the Martins. Director Dominic Champagne had found a very early recording of the song, more like a demo, made by George Harrison before the final version was recorded and placed on albums. It was this version that Champagne wanted. He was drawn to the heartfelt, personal quality of the track, and he knew this would be the overall feel for the show. Unfortunately, the sound quality of this version would not be suitable for a space as large as the Siegfried and Roy Theatre, which was soon to become the Love Theatre. It was for this one song only that George and Giles Martin were given permission to create a live orchestration in the manner of Harrison’s original song. By this time Harrison had passed away and his widow, Olivia, was serving as his voice in the collaboration. The Martins scoured the tracks of music in the archives but were unable to find any that could be laid into this one song to bring it to the level of the others selected for the show. With the help of Olivia and Giles, George and an assembled string ensemble went into the studio to create an orchestration that would pay homage to the original Harrison track. Martin’s orchestration was then overlaid with Harrison’s vocals, and the final product was produced for use. Since the music had to retain its particular Beatles sound, the music was recorded at Air Studios in London.

Kelly Jane Torrance of the *Washington Times* calls the music “the real star of the show” (D 01). She is correct in that assessment and it was the music that allowed *Love* production director Dominic Champagne to begin his journey of production creation. Once the music was selected and recorded, Champagne could begin auditioning and casting

performers, while the design team could begin exploration of the show's visuals. For initial inspiration, members of the design and production teams travelled to England to visit locations in Liverpool that they identified as part of the Beatle "mythology." Amongst the places they visited were Penny Lane, Strawberry Fields and The Cavern Club. Champagne stated that he felt "like a pilgrim" (*All Together Now*). Inspiration in hand, the group headed back to Cirque creative headquarters in Montreal to begin the process of creating the production itself.

The music that was roughed in by the Martins and approved by Champagne inspired the show that was now to unfold. From the onset, the show was planned to open at the Mirage Hotel and Casino in the former Siegfried and Roy Theater, vacated due to a tiger attack on performer Roy Horn in 2003. As with all of the previous permanent projects by Cirque in Las Vegas, the theater and its scenery were conceived and designed by a single artist, scenic designer Jean Rabasse. Rabasse had previously designed *Corteo*, a touring show, for Cirque du Soleil and collaborated with the company again for this production. Algerian born Rabasse is known for his scenic work in theatre, film and dance. His ability to cross media styles is what made him attractive to Champagne for this particular project. Rabasse says,

I don't make a distinction between the various disciplines I work in; I bring theatrical, mechanical effects to cinema and cinematic techniques to the stage. I like to mix things up. My signature is to pay very close attention to the details, the colors, the surfaces, the textures. To be very meticulous about these things, and to never repeat myself. ("*Love*" cirquedusoleil.com)

This collaboration between the Beatles and Cirque du Soleil made for an excellent opportunity for Rabasse to showcase his ability to cross media styles.

Rabasse began by gutting the existing fifteen hundred-seat proscenium arch theatre and creating instead a 2013 seat circular space costing over \$125 million to complete. In Adrian Wills' documentary on the creation of *Love, All Together Now*, Rabasse says, "I remember very clearly when we decided with Dominic Champagne to work in 360 degrees. For me it was impossible to see the show in an Italian way of seeing a show. I mean, from being outside the frame of the theatre." In a first for Cirque, the stage was placed at the center of the seating with six entrance and exit points evenly spaced around the stage inside the audience's viewpoint. Located within these points are four tracks on which platforms and scenic elements move into and out of the playing space with each track separately controlled from its own production booth. In addition to the track system, the playing space is also trapped, allowing performers, scenic elements and enormous projection screens to rise from beneath the stage floor. "There are nine lifts, as well as eight automated tracks and trolleys that can move props, set element or performers simultaneously" (Jeter 52). The round playing space is a visual reference to the circus big top, which Rabasse said was a feeling he got from the music as well as a reference to Cirque itself. Due to the specific needs of the acrobatics of the performance, the theatre is also constructed with as much space above the audience seating as there is below it. Even with this amount of scenic technology, the space itself is the most intimate of any of Cirque's Las Vegas shows aside from *Zumanity*. The furthest row of seats is a mere ninety-eight feet from the stage. Rabasse says he is "giving the audience the opportunity to connect with the

performance at a childlike, emotional level through simple stage directions and transcendent music” (Jeter 51).

Because of the 360-degree space, the scenery had to be not only mobile but also, at times, opaque while at other times translucent. Creating a theatre in the round, Rabasse knew that no element of scenery could ever be sedentary, meaning that there was no option for a backdrop or permanent scenic unit. All the elements must be fluid and sight lines would be a major concern. To deal with this concern, he relied heavily on video projection designer Francis Laporte who, according to *Stage Direction’s* Geri Jeter, “uses the latest in digital technology to reinterpret the look and feel of the 1960s graphic techniques” (52).

Laporte had worked with Cirque since his debut in 1999 with *Dralion* in which he created a multimedia overture to open the work. His training at the Université de Québec allowed him to specialize in both direction and scenic design. He has combined this training with a love of video and multimedia production. His work has spanned both live and video work with pieces such as the opening ceremonies of the *Jeux de la Francophonie* and the awards ceremony *La Soirée des Jutra* (television), live concerts, including Québec singer-cellist Jorane and singer-songwriter Stefie Shock, and the scenic design for a stage adaptation of Homer’s *Odyssey*, directed by Dominic Champagne. He has continued to work with Cirque making video projection an increasingly large part of the scenic whole.

In *Love*, there are twenty-eight video projectors used to seamlessly create the numerous locations and eras that the Beatles music spans. At any given time as many as eight layers of projections can be mixed to create a nearly three-dimensional representation of the locales and people within. Many of the video projections are in and

on the audience itself, another way that the design team has tried to bring the performance and audience together. Rabasse says, "It is very important. It can give the audience the feeling that they are inside the show and can live an experience." Laporte responds, "the challenge is to use those screens as something that places you not outside of the scene, but inside the stage {sic}" (*All Together Now*). Laporte created the projections himself through both digital photography and computer generation. He prefers to create the images personally rather than to use stock files because he feels he can get more "handcrafted" images that truly fit the needs of the music and the moment. Scenes are also connected with "shadow scenes" of the Fab Four themselves. Laporte worked with comic audio clips designer François Pérusse to create the shadow images using bits of audio from the recording sessions between 1963 and 1969. The tracks include discussion and dialogue between band members. Pérusse used these dialogues to create an audio montage of "the boys" to which Laporte added shadows of the men. Upon his first viewing of these aspects of the show, Ringo Starr said, "I love the talking. It put us back in the studio and the fun we used to have before we made these records" (*All Together Now*). It is in the final images of the show where LaPorte makes his strongest artistic statement. *Love* is not really a documentary so much as a tribute, and he wanted to create images of the four band members that reflected that idea. He created huge moving photographs of each Beatle by splicing together small video frames. Each large image is created through a video feed of over ten thousand small images of that same person from the archives at Abbey Road Studio. He says that the effect is "like a kaleidoscope of their life" (*All Together Now*).

Lighting designer Yves Aucoin joins this production as his first Cirque du Soleil collaboration but with an extensive resume of theatrical lighting credits that vary from solo

performers such as Celine Dion and Elton John, to stage musicals like *Grease* and *Romeo and Juliet*, to the “Just for Laughs” comedy festival in Montreal. He is Québec born and trained. Of *Love*, he says,

The show is full of challenges. The biggest is the fact that it's in the round. A 360-degree stage means that one person's front light is another person's back light, and that all has to be worked out to the high, high standards Cirque has established with all its previous shows. But along with the challenges comes the opportunity for me to do my best work.

(“*Love*” *cirquedusoleil.com*)

Aucoin likens lighting this particular production to hockey. He says that he views the show as having a lot of action, but that there is “only one puck and I have to put the puck here” (*All Together Now*). He is referring to the need to focus the audience’s attention on a singular moment or action in much the manner that a puck focuses the attention of hockey players and viewers. “I have to put the audience in the place of the show, to help them to focus, to follow the story” (*All Together Now*). He continues, “after that I have to express myself artistically . . . with colors, with emotion in relation to the music with rhythm, with beat, with counter beat, with a big WHOO” (*All Together Now*). He says that his work varies in its approach, that there are some songs for which he creates a spectacle with the light and that, in other songs, lights take more of a backseat to the music. He worked closely with Rabasse to bring elements of the scenery into and out of the audience’s view in a seamless manner, never allowing the action to stop for set changes, but merely making the scenery seem to disappear with shifts in the lighting. When scenery is actually moved, Aucoin cleverly diverts the audience’s attention to another area of the stage with his light.

According to Geri Jeter, “he succeeds, especially in . . . “Octopus’s Garden” where glowing windsocks maintain the flow of the action while distracting the audience from the changing scenery” (52).

Sound designer Jonathan Deans returns to Cirque’s collaborative team with this production. He was brought into the project to bring the music created by George and Giles Martin into the Love Theatre. He was asked to bring a quality of sound that would allow the audience to feel as though they were attending a live Beatles concert, only better. He created eight sound system zones, each of which could work independently. His intent was to make the sound encompass the listeners, bringing them into the action as Rabasse does with the theater’s seating arrangement. President and CEO of Mirage Resorts, Bobby Baldwin says, “We did allow for the most sophisticated audio system ever devised. They had to have speakers everywhere. I had to pay for the speakers, too. They were in the seats and in the seat in front, and behind your right and left ear. . . . We have to give them the music as if the Beatles were in the room performing.” “This needs to be the best-sounding theatre in the world,” instructed Giles Martin (*All Together Now*). The theatre has more than 6,300 speakers, including ones built into the seats themselves.

Costume designer Philippe Guillotel makes his Cirque debut with *Love*. He is a Paris-born and trained theatrical costume designer. His long resume has earned him extensive accolades and has brought his work to the eyes of millions worldwide. He has a long-standing collaborative relationship with French choreographer Philippe Découfléfor. The first of his costumes seen worldwide were designed for Découfléfor’s opening and closing numbers for the 1992 Winter Olympics in Albertville, France. He claims he was drawn to Cirque because “Cirque du Soleil has the biggest costume workshop in the world. The scope

of the facilities here lets the creators go quite a bit further than they usually can” (“*Love*” *cirquedusoleil.com*).

He based his work on the music like other members of the design team. He felt that the images referenced in the Beatles’ songs were so real that bringing them to life would be his greatest challenge. His biggest concern was that people worldwide had listened to the music for years. He knew that each and every listener had conceived a different, but very specific, look for each of the referenced characters; no two people would likely agree on how the Walrus, or Eleanor Rigby, or even Sergeant Pepper should appear. He states that he felt “enormous responsibility in portraying these characters in the show” (*All Together Now*). Phil Gallo of *Variety* states, “the costumes deliver the wow factor rather than acrobatics . . . [the show] was clearly character-driven” (“A ‘Love Letter’ to the Fab Four” 53). Guillotel worked to combine the reality of the Beatles’ youth in war-torn World War II England together with the fun of Carnaby Street and the style of Cirque du Soleil. No one costume is truly historically accurate but neither are they completely fantastical. The elements come together in the middle, connecting the reality of London with the Beatles music re-envisioned for today. The colors are bright and the fabrics new, but the lines look to the past. Ronald Clément says, “the costumes of *Love* evoke the time and place of The Beatles’ career. Traditional and Victorian designs were juxtaposed with colorful, lively and imaginative creations reflecting the inventiveness, vision and creative energy The Beatles brought to all their endeavors” (99).

Working closely with Philippe Guillotel, Nathalie Gagne returns again to create make-up designs for this endeavor. As with all of her other designs, she attempts to bring a sense of character to each of the looks she creates: “at Cirque du Soleil makeup works with

the costumes to establish the identity of each character. I like it that every artist is proud of this second personality that emerges from their makeup” (“*Love*” *cirquedusoleil.com*).

After her successful collaboration with Cirque on *Kà*, property designer Patricia Ruel returned to the fold with *Love*. She says that director Dominic Champagne is very concerned with props.

He is very specific about the needs of the show, and feels strongly that fewer truly representative props are better than a multitude of near misses. He is known throughout the Cirque organization as one who rejects finished props because they detract from the piece . . . I heard in previous Cirque shows a lot of things were sent to the Cirque warehouse. (*All Together Now*)

Love has over six hundred props that are not just carried, but are truly integrated into the show. One such integration is seen in the members of Sgt. Peppers Lonely Heart Club Band who are fantastically represented through the use of costumes and props. Dressed in bright garments that represent a long history of musicians, these performers also use props as costume elements, such as a concertina as a hat and trumpets as stilts. The cast members seem almost more a conglomeration of musical instruments and parts than human beings. This look is the brainchild of Patricia Ruel. The song “Octopus’ Garden” features her work strongly. As the opening strains of the music are heard, the nearly dark stage fills with white, iridescent floating worm-like objects. They give a sense of the deep ocean as they float about the stage and are soon accompanied by large illuminated jellyfish that float among them. As the stage lightens, the jellyfish are revealed to be large umbrellas held by dancers and the worms are tubular kites floating gracefully on the ends of long poles held by other dancers. It would not be a reference to the “mod” sixties without the appearance

of a Volkswagen Beetle and, Rabasse and Cirque deliver one. For the fifth movement, entitled "Rock and Roll Run" which includes "I Want to Hold Your Hand," "Drive My Car," "The Word," "What You're Doing," and "Grik Nus," the early Beatles are represented with screaming fans, London Teddy Boys, and a full scale rolling VW Beetle with a working horn to underscore the song "Drive My Car:" beep, beep. The Groupies and the Beetle help to set the stage for the era of Beatlemania when the Fab Four offered something new to the youth of England.

Ruhl also worked closely with Cirque puppet designer Michael Curry. His puppets were selected to highlight key events in the Beatles' lives or characters from specific Beatles songs, such as the creatures that live in the Octopus' Garden, and Lady Madonna's children as represented by bright yellow dancing rubber boots.

Enter the performers. Director Champagne gathered talent from around the world to bring this offering to life. An international troupe of sixty actors, dancers, acrobats, gymnasts and exotic acts attempt to "capture the essence of love that John, Paul, George and Ringo inspired" (*Love. Souvenir program n. pag.*). Champagne states that he was told from the beginning "this was an impossible show" (*All Together Now*). He felt the pressure of trying to stage the comeback that never happened but always strove for "evocation more than duplication" in the words of Alan Light (22).

Staging rehearsals began three hundred days before the premier at Cirque headquarters in Montreal. Each section was worked individually in rehearsal spaces that could accommodate the needs of the particular piece. After five months of staging rehearsals in Montreal, the entire company moved to its new performance home in Las Vegas. Here the cast was able to see what the other elements of the production would be.

They were presented with the theatre and scenic designs and with the capabilities of the space itself including all of the tricks of the stage. Lincoln Hudson, who plays “Mr. Piggie,” had a positive reaction to the first presentation of the stage and scenic designs. He said,

My first reaction was, I know where we are now and the world we’re in. And that is the most important thing to me. For the first time, it went, Oh it’ll be nice to come to work tomorrow. It’d be nice to come in and say, I see what you want. That makes sense, that makes sense, that makes sense. Because we have had five months of not really knowing how to navigate through this.

(All Together Now)

Seventy days before the premiere, Paul McCartney was given an opportunity to come to Las Vegas and hear the finalized show music. At this time Martin suggested that as much of the show as possible be performed for his benefit. The idea of presenting the show in its current unfinished state terrified Champagne. He feared that McCartney would give the show a “thumbs down.” Guy Laliberté concurred and further feared that such an event would slow the forward progress of the show. The two men were overridden and the show was performed in its unfinished stage for the former band member. McCartney states,

My only problem was that nobody knew what we were gonna do. I’d say, well, what is the show? They’d say, don’t worry. It’s OK. It’s OK. The Cirque will be good. The Cirque and the Beatles, very good. I’m going, No, No, No. And finally they came up with this idea that the show is based on. Ladders, World War II and Eleanor Rigby coming through. And I figured that is enough.

(All Together Now)

The shadow sequences were both McCartney's and Ringo Starr's favorite part. Starr says, "I love the talking. It put us back in the studio and the fun we used to have before we made these records" (*All Together Now*). At the conclusion of this first "performance," McCartney expressed his pleasure with the work. Both Champagne and Giles Martin were relieved as they were unsure what they would do if the work were to be rejected at this late date. Paul was the only original band member who would have the opportunity to hear and see the work in this early state. Harrison and Lennon were dead, and Starr was unavailable until the day before the premiere. In essence the approval of the band came from only one source: McCartney.

Yoko Ono had a mixed reaction at first. She said, "I think the show has to have some gritty or sad moments too because that was life, that is life, you know? And it can't just be happy-go-lucky from the beginning to end" (*All Together Now*). Her overall analysis of the finished work is that "the Beatles were like acrobats of the mind, and Cirque du Soleil are acrobats of the body" (*All Together Now*). As Ono so succinctly states this is a marriage of the Beatles and Cirque du Soleil; each partner is asked to present what they do best, and the best is then married to make a whole. Ono says, "it will be a reminder to the old fans and an eye-opener to the young fans of how beautiful the Beatles' music was and is . . . Their music is something that should be heard now" (Light 22).

First dress rehearsal: April 2006. Called the "lion's den," it has a public audience. It is this performance that is essential to the Cirque process. It is only public in the sense that all Cirque employees are invited to the performance at that time. They are encouraged to offer their opinions either in French or in English. It is named as such because the show is being thrown to the "lions" who are allowed to tear it apart. This is the only time that

Cirque allows its employees to speak openly in a negative sense about a Cirque production. For this production, the “lion’s den” occurred 49 days before the premiere. The response at the “lion’s den” was much as the response at other Cirque show’s “lion’s dens:” “wow,” and “what more can we do?” The work at this point continued to be honed and perfected with minor adjustments made until the official VIP opening on June 30, 2006.

PRODUCTION

Although the show does not possess a linear narrative in the manner of *Kà*, it does tell a story. It provides an overview of the work and the lives of the Beatles, serving more as an homage to, instead of a linear telling of the rise of, the Fab Four. *Variety’s* Phil Gallo confirms this idea,

but while all the creatives are effusive in their praise of one another’s work and the Beatles in general, in private interviews they seem united in their desire to describe what *Love* is not rather than get specific about what exactly it is. They all agreed *Love* is not, nor was it ever intended to be a Beatles songbook; a Beatles best-of; a rock and roll show; an opera, a symphony; a play; a nostalgia piece – or a typical Cirque du Soleil show. (“A ‘Love’ Letter to the Fab Four” 47)

Love begins with a montage of music and images that references the span of the Beatles years. The stage is bathed in an eerie blue light, a platform carrying Sgt. Pepper rises high above the stage floor and he melodically conducts the movement of projection screens into place. A voice-over of chatter by the band from an early recording session at Abbey Road is heard, “this is a live show. 1, 2, 3, 4” (*Love*. Performance), immediately the

sound segues into the Fab Four playing “Because.” As the song ends and “Get Back” begins, the stage becomes a London rooftop on which are four enormous screens each bearing a silhouette of one of the four band members playing their final concert. Huge curtains drop from the ceiling and disappear into the floor as brightly dressed hippies dance to the song. Bungee performers dropping in and out from the ceiling accompany them in their celebratory dance. After this whirlwind of images, the work moves again back in time to a war torn, post-WWII London and Sgt. Pepper emerges as the host for the evening. He functions as both an emcee and a bandleader, and seemingly, as conductor for the show. Russia’s Rodrigue Proteau originated the role. He says that the character is a “mix . . . of George Martin . . . and the father of Paul McCartney because he played the trumpet in a band” (*All Together Now*). Sgt. Pepper rises from the floor on an art nouveau-inspired brick and iron staircase bathed in cool blue light and shouts as if to wake the Beatles music from its “Golden Slumbers.” He elegantly conducts the mournful opening strains of “Eleanor Rigby.” Champagne did not want to just create a chronological narrative of the Beatles’ rise to fame and eventual breakup: “Instead of just dully telling the Beatles’ story: . . . I tried to touch the main emotions that went throughout their experience, building the show as a rock-’n’-roll poem” (*All Together Now*). The work then takes the audience through songs that mark the years of the Beatles’ life as a group. From this point, the audience is moved through many of the iconic figures from Beatles’ discography such as “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,” “Julia,” “The Walrus” and an “Octopus’s Garden”. Finally the show wraps up with a celebratory “All You Need is Love” featuring layers of images of “the boys” in video montage and all of the characters who have brought the Beatles’ songs to life on stage in an atmosphere of light, sound and dance.

As with the Cirque predecessors, *Love* is populated with an international cast of character performers and specialty acts. The character actors appear throughout the work, many of which are representation of characters from Beatles' songs. There is Eleanor Rigby who shuffles about the stage representing the resilience of post-war England. Appearing in the same production number is Father McKenzie who is referenced in "Eleanor Rigby." He represents the resistance to the new world order in England as the Beatles begin their rise to fame. The character of Julia is seen in the number of the same name. She is the distant character who appears to the young representation of John Lennon. She performs an aerial act in which she is mostly just out of the reach of the young John. She represents the loss of his mother at a young age and the pain he is reputed to have felt throughout his life because of her death. Krishna appears to represent the time in the Beatles' lives when the Beatles began an exploration of Eastern religions. Mr. Piggy represents more of the old guard of English society who believe the music of the Beatles is destructive to the youth of the 1960s. Of course, The Walrus must be present in the show. According to *cirquedusoleil.com*, the Walrus represents "the spark of change from the old guard to the new era of music and dance. He spreads his contagious energy and breathes new life into the stodgy world of the Old School English Establishment" ("*Love*" *cirquedusoleil.com*).

The show is produced ten times per week by a cast of sixty who are supported by a crew of one hundred. Included in the performance are specialty acts such as the Korean Rope, the Russian Swing, Bungee, trampoline, and the Spanish Web. The unique element in this Cirque offering is the lack of an onstage band. The music is all prerecorded by the Beatles themselves.

RESPONSES

This work represents the collaborative effort of three mega conglomerations. It is the union of Cirque du Soleil, Apple Corps, Ltd, and MGM Mirage Entertainment. Aside from the financial backing, MGM remained primarily a silent partner, at least artistically. The work shows the combined artistic efforts of Cirque du Soleil and Apple Corps. The exploration of the music of the Beatles is presented through the artistry of Cirque du Soleil. The component that was new and different for this work was the creation of the music and the music as the driving force for the performance. Never before, or since, has Cirque not produced the music themselves and never before or since has the music been played from recordings. Because it is an homage with actual Beatles' music, Cirque engages the idea of the Las Vegas headliner performer (e.g. Elvis or Frank Sinatra,) at the same time calling to a new audience. *Love* draws people in their 30s and 40 s who love the music that the Beatles produced. The show is true to the music and brings the audience to the world of Cirque du Soleil. With this work they have tapped a group of musical fans that may not have yet been exposed to Cirque du Soleil. Kelly Jane Torrance of the *Washington Times* says,

In tapping into a cultural phenomenon still growing strong after more than four decades, Cirque finally has a show with a heart – and a guaranteed audience. The greatest rock band ever broke up in 1970. John Lennon was shot in 1980; George Harrison died in 2001. But Beatlemania never completely disappeared. (D 01)

Torrance continues her praise of the work by saying that “*Love* brings the Beatles’ songs to life” (D 01), but she also cautions that although the work features recordings of the Beatles, it is not the work as heard in the 1960s. She discusses the re-mastering of the original

works by George and Giles Martin and points out that audiences seem to appreciate the update to the works. She is not exclusively effusive in her praise of the work, identifying specific areas in which the show falls short. In her analysis, the acrobatics do not smoothly meld with the music presented. She asks, “how can a group of acrobats and rollerbladers . . . compete with music this iconic?” She continues saying, “they can’t, although they do an admirable job trying” (D 01). She praises Canadian acrobat Evelyn Lamontagne who performs an acrobatic aerial routine to “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,” and Natasha Jean-Bart who performs an “exhilarating gumboot sequence” (D 01) to the song “Lady Madonna” accompanied by a number of Michael Curry’s puppets who represent her children as dancing rubber boots. Torrance identifies the “man-birds” who perform in the song “Blackbird” as a “travesty” in that the performance entirely ignores the music. Even though she expresses a few doubts about the show, her overall review is that the work should be seen for the combination of the artistry of Cirque and the power of the Beatles’ music.

Ann Powers of the *Los Angeles Times* quotes George Harrison’s widow, Olivia, in describing *Love* as “a big sensory overload” and identifies that as the “weakness as well as [the] strength” of the show (E 1). Powers herself says, “driven to match the vivid energy of the Beatles’ songs, the Cirque team throws more into its mix than ever” (E 1). According to Bobby Baldwin, President and CEO of Mirage Resorts, the show was costly. He says, “The aggregate investment in the Beatles’ show approaches \$180 million” (*All Together Now*). Powers concludes her review positively by saying that Cirque has successfully embraced the music and the legend of the Beatles while retaining their circus roots.

Melissa Ruggieri of the *Richmond Times Dispatch* had seen the work three times before she wrote her August 2007 review. Each time she fell more in “love” with the work.

She says that the music draws the audience in and the performance is what holds the audience's attention. She describes how the music makes the fantasy of the performance work. "Somehow, watching a stilt walker with trumpets for legs march in the "Sgt. Pepper" parade makes perfect sense, as much as the "Clockwork Orange"-like faceless masks and gasp-inducing aerial feats of a devilish acrobat capture the LSD influence of "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite" ("*Love Keeps Getting Better*" F9). She identifies the music as the show's "secret weapon."

Both professional critics and lay people alike have praised this work. It is heralded on "YouTube" as the best of the Cirque shows. It is definitely a work that cuts across the boundaries of age with Beatles fans from the Fab Four heyday reliving their youth and newly forged alliances with "the boys" formed through the draw of the Las Vegas phenom Cirque du Soleil. All in all, the work has stood the test of time, playing to sold out houses since its opening in 2006 and selling record numbers of CDs and DVDs, putting a band that has not recorded since 1970 back on the Billboard Top 100. It was a risk for Cirque to enter into this creative arrangement, but it is one that helped to accomplish what is always their goal, creating something new, foraying into a new venue and successfully creating another Cirque du Soleil property on the Las Vegas strip. As Alex Markels of *U.S. News and World Report* says, "the resplendent result is *Love*, an audiovisual kaleidoscope that has both reaffirmed the Beatles' elevated place in musical history and cemented Cirque's status as today's hottest live entertainment company" (83).

CHAPTER X

CRISS ANGEL BELIEVE:
COLLABORATION WITHOUT ARTISTIC CONTROL

There's just no wonder in it . . . That — among its many, more obvious failings - is the fatal flaw at the heart of "Criss Angel: Believe" (Brown n. pag.)

Criss Angel is billed as the “most watched magician in television history” (“*Criss Angel Believe*” *cirquedusoleil.com*), so a collaboration with the Las Vegas mega hit makers, Cirque du Soleil, seemed to be a sure success. This show marked the second collaborative effort on the part of Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas. This collaboration was different from *Love* in that it involved not one aspect of the show (the music) but the content as a whole. With *Criss Angel Believe*, Cirque entered what reviewer Pat Donnelly called “the risky domain of the star vehicle” (“Director Believes in Show” C 11). The self-proclaimed “master of street magic,” Criss Angel functioned not only as the headliner but also as the creative center of the production. He was the writer and co-director with Cirque appointed director, Serge Denoncourt, who made his Cirque directorial debut with this production. *Believe* was a departure not only because Cirque did not have complete creative control but also because the show did not feature dancers, gymnasts and acrobats. Instead, it centered on Angel (though Cirque performers surrounded his illusions). Lastly, this show was different in that it was a foray for Cirque into the world of magic and illusion. Chris Jones of *Variety*

said, “Criss Angel Believe’ is dominated by magic, not circus disciplines. And is toplined by a bona fide TV star – something that Cirque has avoided throughout its history to date” (“Acrobats!” A 13). The collaboration premiered at the Luxor Hotel and Casino on October 31, 2008, and is scheduled to have a five-year run with the option for an additional five-year extension if the ticket sales warrant. The production is the sixth offering for Cirque on the Las Vegas strip and seems to be focused toward another demographic, the lovers of magic. “And that’s the new story about Cirque’s Vegas strategy. The Criss Angel show has brought us a whole new audience,” says Jerry Nadal, Cirque’s senior Vice President for Resident shows (Jones, “Acrobats!” A 13). Of the collaboration, Cirque’s President and CEO, Daniel Lamarre says, “we’ve done circus and cabaret and other things. But we really wanted to get into magic and we needed a partner” (Jones, “Illusionist Angel” A 3).

After the failure of *Hairspray* at the Luxor Resort and Casino, MGM Mirage Resorts was looking for a new show to place in their sixteen hundred-seat theatre. Angel, riding the success of his television show *Criss Angel Mindfreak*, was looking for another showcase. He had approached several Broadway producers, none of whom had interest in the show. At this time, Cirque was also looking for a new production to bring to the Las Vegas Strip and specifically to place in the Luxor’s theatre. The partnership between Angel, Cirque and MGM Mirage Resorts was formally announced at a press conference on March 22, 2008. The title and focus of the show were announced later the same year, on April 17. Although announcement of the collaboration brought impressive advance ticket sales, the show was not well received in its initial performances, including its star studded premiere. In attendance were critics of all kinds, from the press corps to individual bloggers and even Angel fans. Zeke Quezada posted a negative fan review on *about.com*: “this is the worst

show ever!! Complete waste of time and money.” Reed Johnson of the *Los Angeles Times* called it a “gloomy muddle of a show” (“Cirque’s Artistry” D 6). Mike Weatherford of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* wrote, “five weeks of ticketed previews have generated some hostile audience reaction and spread opinion that “Believe” is a big bore and/or short on magic” (“Criss Angel” 1 B). All agreed that neither Angel nor Cirque lived up to their potential. Angel was frequently cited for poor behavior and ill treatment of his audience including celebrity blogger Perez Hilton on April 17, 2009 when, at the conclusion of his show, he announced: “Perez Hilton, please stand up . . . We have the world’s biggest douchebag asshole in the house” (*thehollywoodgossip.com*). Angel’s actions prompted a public apology from Cirque du Soleil speaking on behalf of themselves and MGM Mirage Resorts who stated:

Cirque du Soleil does not condone disrespectful behavior toward any audience member at any time. Cirque management will address such behavior privately with any artist to ensure it will not happen again. Along with our partner, MGM Mirage, Cirque du Soleil wishes to extend an apology to any audience member that may have been offended by Criss Angel’s inappropriate and disrespectful remarks at Friday night’s performance of Believe. (“Cirque du Soleil Contretemps” WP 5)

CREATION

Angel and director and co-writer Serge Denoncourt wanted to take a chance with the style of the show. Denoncourt observed, “we went on a risky way” (Weatherford, “Criss Angel” 1B). The world is a darkly twisted combination of gothic Victorian and “Alice

Through the Looking Glass” sensibility, what Denoncourt calls “Weirdtorian.” Deep rich tones are featured in all design elements, from scenery to costumes to sound to performance. It is a Victorian illusionist dream or nightmare, and is definitely geared to an audience who wants a darker look into the arts of magic and illusion. Denoncourt has been quick to caution, “it’s not ‘Mindfreak,’ [Angel’s A & E network television program] and we never said it was” (Weatherford, “Criss Angel” 1B). He says the packaging makes this show different: “there are six famous tricks in the world . . . What makes a big difference is the envelope, what’s around the illusion. That’s where the show is different” (Weatherford, “Criss Angel” 1B).

Working closely with director Serge Denoncourt was Australian-born and American-trained choreographer Wade Robson. Robson was a dancer who choreographed music videos and rock stage performances by Britney Spears, NSYNC, The Backstreet Boys, Usher and Pink. He also choreographed for the Fox network’s hit show “So You Think You Can Dance,” winning an Emmy Award in 2007 (“*Criss Angel Believe*” *cirquedusoleil.com*). *Criss Angel Believe* marks Robson’s debut with Cirque du Soleil.

Robson brings to the show a style of dance that is less classically influenced and more street smart. Dance is an integral part of the production as a whole. Dancer Logan Schyvynck describes the style as “Wade” in much the same manner that people refer to Bob Fosse’s work as “Fosse.” He says, “if it was just straight technical stuff, you could fake what you couldn’t do, . . . But you can’t because it’s ‘Wade,’ which is off-center, full-bodied, rhythmic and character-oriented” (Levinson 134). Robson says, “there’s nothing Vegas-y about the dancing in *Criss Angel Believe*, . . . It’s organic, in your face and dirty. It’s raw and rough” (Levinson 134).

Apart from Denoncourt and Robson, Criss Angel was the third member of the creative team. Lauren Levinson of *Dance Spirit* dubbed them “a trio of geniuses” (136). Expressing an opposing view, Reed Johnson of the *Los Angeles Times* called the group, “less an artistic marriage made in heaven than a shotgun wedding of clashing sensibilities in which the shotgun messily discharges en route to the altar” (“Criss Angel” E1).

As in previous Cirque productions in Las Vegas, the entire theatrical space was redesigned to house the new show, with one markedly different aspect. The theatre did not change from its original proscenium configuration, used previously by *Hairspray*. The shiny, happy elements of the decor were changed to better reflect the style of the show and more specifically the show’s headliner. The entrance is dark, almost shabby, totally unlike the splashy, bright, colorful entrances of the other Cirque offerings on the strip. Chris Jones stated in *Variety*, “The lobby is dark and the grungy ambience is closer to a blue collar rock club than circus chic” (Jones “Acrobats!” A13). Cirque hired Ray Winkler from Mark Fisher Studios in London as the production designer to meld the worlds of Criss Angel and Cirque du Soleil.

This production was Winkler’s first design for Cirque du Soleil but he came highly recommended by long time Cirque scenic designer, Mark Fisher. Because he is based in London, Winkler hired Los Angeles freelancer Tamlyn Wright as his assistant production designer. He felt that he needed someone in the States who could be in Vegas at a moment’s notice. Winkler also worked with Kirk Phillips of Las Vegas based Hamilton Anderson Associates, who designed and revamped the box office, entrance, retail space and theatre bar.

Winkler considered numerous options for the space and the environment of the show itself and decided to go theatrically “old school.” There would be no giant pool or flying stage, instead he created a gilded theatrical space that included a classic proscenium arch. The arch has an enormous clock at its center and a border of the show’s fetish animals, rabbits. The arch helps create a sense of Victorian theatre but also provides much needed disguise spaces in which key elements for the creation of illusion are hidden.

In keeping with the story and style of the performance, the theatrical space is best described as “twisted Victorian.” It fuses some Victorian aspects, such as the proscenium arch, with more modern gothic elements such as the post industrial feel of the décor. Jacob Coakley of *Stage Directions* interviewed Winkler about his design.

When you first walk in it looks rather cozy and kosher, Winkler says. Its elaborate and beautiful, but it warrants a second look because the more you look at it the more that cozy kosher appearance gets undermined by a slightly darker and sinister force that runs not only through the set and the scenery, but the whole show. (Coakley, “Twisted Victorian” 29)

In further discussion of the theatre space and the scenic design, Winkler says, “We are trying to establish the mood of the theatre That was very important, so that when the audience first comes into the house the theatre takes possession of the space that it sits in” (Coakley, “Twisted Victorian” 29).

Originally, the space was designed like many other Las Vegas showrooms: huge with a central focus drawing the audience to a solo performer. It was remodeled first for Blue Man group and then for the failed adaptation of *Hairspray*. These changes produced poor sightlines. Additionally, there was not enough space onstage or offstage for Cirque’s

technical and performer needs. In renovation, the stage was raked and the proscenium erected. Both elements direct the eye to a framed center area where Angel creates his illusions. Additional fly lines were added for use by Cirque performers, and the sound system was upgraded. Winkler says that he is proud of his low-tech approach to this marriage of Cirque and Angel. He says “Traditional staging . . . puts the focus on the performers, as opposed to the technology, so all eyes will be on the magic of Criss Angel, to see if he can amaze as much as the set does” (Coakley, “Twisted Victorian” 29).

While Winkler was creating a Victorian theatre to house the magic, Kirk Phillips was creating entry spaces that could transition the audience from the loud, bright, high-tech world of the casino to the dim, mysterious world of Criss Angel. Phillips thought of the project as “Alice through the looking glass.” He wanted to give the audience the feeling of falling through a tunnel into the world of Criss Angel, much as Alice fell through the rabbit hole. He divided the spaces into three stages beginning with the box office. The box office was the transition from the din and glamour of the casino. He made it clean and contemporary--the box into which you entered was not of the casino world and not yet of the show world. Brad Goldberg, vice president of marketing for the Luxor Hotel and Casino says, “the box office itself faces out into the casino floor so that as you’re walking by, it pulls people in and is easy to find. It’s a much more intuitive set up than before” (Weeks 50). After passing by the box office and through the retail area, the audience progresses into the second phase of the transition between worlds. This area is fondly called “The Next Room.” Phillips says, “we dimmed the lights and made it a little eerie to transition from the lobby to the theatre, as you walk along, you see yourself reflected in the mirror, and you see these trees obscuring the imagery behind them” (Weeks 51). This area is really just a mirrored

corridor, but the dim lighting helps to produce a strange unearthly feeling. Audience members then progress into a darker room whose walls are lined with gilded Baroque style portraits of Criss Angel and an odd looking white rabbit. The portraits appear more painterly than photorealistic and, crafted with some old fashioned trompe l'oeil techniques, seem to watch people as they pass. This space also has strange underscored sounds much like one might find in the entrance to a fun house. The final transition is the theatre bar and the lounge, which then open into the performance and seating spaces of the theatre itself. This area resembles a theatre lobby of old--perhaps Victorian, perhaps something from the Addams Family. The chandeliers are festooned with cobwebs and the tables arranged around the perimeter glow with ever-changing colors. Patrons can order a show themed cocktail such as an Illusion, a Hallucination, or a Mystic. Goldberg states, "all of these components really add to the excitement of the show" (Weeks 52). After the show, audience members exit the way that they entered thus retracing their journey back out of the rabbit hole and into the world of Las Vegas reality.

In creating this "Weirdtorian" world, Winkler also collaborated closely with Cirque veteran projection designer Francis Laporte who had designed several previous Cirque shows including *Love*. Laporte created fantastical projection images to support the show's narrative. He says that the projections exist more to "create a mood, with one image per scene, changing and evolving. The images are in your focus at almost every moment and they create much of the décor on a fairly empty stage" (Lampert-Gréaux, "Believe It or Not," 26).

Canadian costume designer Mérédith Caron took the dark "Weirdtorian" world further through her design. Caron had worked previously for Cirque on several unfinished

projects that are considered still “in development” but *Criss Angel Believe* marks her first completed project with Cirque. She is a well-known and respected costume designer throughout Canada, having worked in the areas of theatre, film, opera and circus worldwide. She has been a member of the teaching faculty at the National Theatre School of Canada in Montreal for twenty years. Although this is her first public design for Cirque du Soleil, she designed several previous projects for Serge Denoncourt (“*Criss Angel Believe*” cirquedusoleil.com).

Caron relied heavily on velvets and brocades, fabrics that resonate with the Victorian and Baroque world created by the scenic design. Caron also used Angel’s wardrobe as inspiration, meshing it with the show’s world. She underscored the work’s theme of desire and seduction through her use of intense, dark colors. Caron also brings modern gothic elements to her design through the use of silver and leather in the costumes’ detailing. “Although the costumes in this world of night are mainly black, it is a ‘lively’ black made so by skillful use of leather and silk alongside the velvet to create scintillating highlights and hues” (Clément 136). Knowing that a large chorus of dancers populated this “Weirdtorian” world, Caron created designs that allow for movement. Lauren Levinson of *Dance Spirit Magazine* says the costumes are “layered and heavy, [but] Caron worked with [choreographer Wade] Robson to tailor the outfits in a way that would allow the dancers to move” (134). This can be seen in the costumes for the rabbits, for example, which combine human clothes and heavy structural heads with long white ears. The result is an odd sort of half human, half rabbit creature dancing upon the stage. These odd animal hybrids fit into the strand “Wierdtorian” world while still allowing complete freedom of movement for the rabbit/ human hybrid dancers.

Many of the costumes walk a fine line between costume and puppetry. Few of the characters onstage appear entirely human, with the exception of Angel himself. Cirque called upon master puppeteer Michael Curry who also designed for both *Kà* and *Love*. The show is heavily populated with a large number of puppet creatures, including rabbits of many sizes, birds and hostile giants. Some of Curry's creations are friendly but many are downright creepy, including a giant rabbit costumed in a Victorian-era ball gown wearing a bondage mask. In an interview, Angel says, "the bunnies remain a universal symbol of a magic act, but they control me. They pull me out of the hat" (Weatherford. "Angel Seeks to put Emotion into Magic." 3J). Curry adds, "this gallery of phantasmagorical characters puts forward odd, quirky and avant-garde concepts that we would probably expect to see in a contemporary opera or a fantasy film festival" (Cope 64). Additionally, Curry created a cadre of bright red poppies, which seem to appear magically from the projected image of a poppy field created by Laporte.

The lighting is by Jeanette Farmer who makes her Cirque du Soleil debut with this production as the lighting designer but has been a member of the Cirque lighting team for over seventeen years. She began her association with Cirque du Soleil when they were still performing *Nouvelle Experience* in a tent behind the Mirage. She was a local theatrical electrician at the time and assisted in getting the touring show open. She says, "I met all these crazy French Canadian artists and amazing creators and fell in love! . . . I knew I'd found my home" ("*Criss Angel Believe*" cirquedusoleil.com). After *Nouvelle Experience*, Farmer assisted lighting designer Andrew Bridge on *Siegfried and Roy* at the Mirage. When it closed due to a tragic accident, Farmer moved back to the fold of "crazy Canadians." She joined Cirque's Las Vegas resident company as an electric consultant, lighting director and

master electrician, working on all of their Las Vegas productions in some capacity. (“*Criss Angel Believe*” *cirquedusoleil.com*). She finally got her opportunity as the lighting designer with this production. She said,

I've been challenged with the lighting design for *Criss Angel Believe* to create something that has an old world feel, . . . We'll be using all the latest modern technology to evoke a bygone era. We will challenge your senses by revealing through lighting that there is nothing up our sleeve and then take away your comfort by presenting the impossible. (“*Criss Angel Believe*” *cirquedusoleil.com*)

Farmer developed her sensibilities regarding lighting design and magic shows during her time with *Siegfried and Roy*. She said, “the lighting of illusions is actually a very technical and scientific process, . . . Part of the challenge is that once the foundation is built, it needs to be brought back into the story as an emotional component of what we are trying to show you visually” (Lampert-Greaux, “Believe It or Not” 26). She drew from a number of sources for inspiration for her designs, but, most centrally, she focused on the look of theatre lighting for the Victorian era. Additionally, she drew upon her knowledge and experience in dance lighting. She says, “dance is also a key element, as this is not an acrobatic show” (Lampert-Gréaux “Believe It of Not” 26).

The show has a cinematic soundtrack by Éric Serra who previously has composed mostly for film. Serra moved into the world of musical composition in the 1980s when he designed a score for French film director Luc Besson. The collaboration proved a success and he has designed the score for every Besson film since (“*Criss Angel Believe*” *cirquedusoleil.com*). He has been nominated for several César awards (the French

equivalent of an Oscar Award) for his work with Besson (“Eric Serra” *imdb.com*). Serra also has spent time as a musician in a rock band and as a composer for the French version of Disney’s Phil Collins musical, *Tarzan* (“Criss Angel Believe” *cirquedusoleil.com*). *Criss Angel Believe* marks his debut with Cirque du Soleil.

He claims to have written music that matches the mood and style of the show. “There are rock moments that reflect the Criss Angel we’re all familiar with, but other parts of the show are very classical, even symphonic in tone, and there are some ethnic, tribal passages too” (“*Criss Angel Believe*” *cirquedusoleil.com*). The mood created by the music is as dark and richly toned as other aspects of the design. He combines rock sounds with a more heavily mixed electronic musical production style to create the underscoring that matches the world of “Weirdtorian.” Lauren Levinson of *Dance Spirit* says, “[his] dramatic melodies contribute to the show’s eerie mood” (133).

Composer Serra had to collaborate with Cirque veteran sound designer Jonathan Deans who has designed eleven of Cirque’s previous shows both in Las Vegas and on the road, e.g. *Salimbando*, *Mystère*, *O*, *Corteo* and *Love*. Deans did not take the same approach to sound projection that he did in *Kà* or *O*; instead, he wanted the sound to emanate from the performers rather than encircle each audience member. Speakers in the Believe Theater are not built into the seats but are clustered at center front of the auditorium. Dean says, the “soundscaping has to create a global sound, not point-sourced away from the stage . . . The audience has to focus on the illusion” (Lampert-Gréaux, “Believe It or Not” 26). Dean wants the sound to reach out to the audience, wrap around them and bring them back to the central performer, concentrating their attention on Angel.

PRODUCTION

The show, which incidentally opened on the anniversary of Harry Houdini's death, is entitled *Believe*. The title plays upon the code word that Houdini supposedly gave to his wife: he would prove that it was he speaking to her from beyond the grave by uttering the word "believe." Jacob Coaklet says, "Criss Angel and Cirque du Soleil have teamed up to communicate their vision of what awaits in the limbo between life and death in their show *Criss Angel Believe*" ("Twisted Victorian" 28). Although some reviewers have suggested that the plot is thin and seemingly superimposed on the show, *Lifestyle* writer Matthew Cope remarked, "it's fantasy, it's allegory, a highly theatrical tableau of mood and reverie against a backdrop of darkness and light as the narrative explores the mind of a character who is both the real Criss Angel and a created persona" (63).

Like other Cirque Las Vegas offerings, the show begins before the show. As the audience is being seated, Angel's four assistants, Maestro, Luigi, Slim and Lars, enter the playing space and begin interacting wordlessly with the audience. They are dressed as Vaudeville magicians complete with bowler hats. Each attempts a few simple magic tricks intended to set the stage for "the master's" great illusions to come. The house is then darkened and the show begins with a video montage of Angel's greatest illusions. The video images melt away and Angel is revealed onstage dressed in the modern garb that most expect from Criss Angel, ripped jeans and a long sleeved graphic tee shirt. He banters playfully with the audience, a moment which marks a departure from the standard wordless Cirque production. While chatting with the audience, Angel is placed into a torturous-looking suit of what appears to be chain mail. A large tesla coil is rolled onto the stage; Angel struggles in his suit and is forced to enter a large cage. Enter Crimson, one of

two female characters who play throughout the show. Kayala, the other female character, is later introduced. They are meant to represent the two sides of the feminine ideal with Crimson the raw, sexual side of feminine love and Kayala the representation of the purity of love. Both are beautiful in their own way, one in a sexual and threatening manner and one in a pure and virginal manner. Crimson turns on the power to the tesla coil and electrocutes Angel, thus propelling him into the “Weirdtorian” world. Angel collapses to the ground with a piercing scream and his lifeless body is loaded onto a gurney by human-sized rabbits wearing doctor’s coats. They wheel his lifeless body offstage and the stage plunges into darkness. The lights slowly begin to return as a projection of the show mascot, Lucky (the white rabbit), takes the stage. The projected rabbit hops about the stage without a care. He finds a microphone and begins explaining that there is no eating, drinking or smoking allowed in the theatre and that flash photography is also prohibited. Just as he finishes telling the audience that no animals will be injured in the show, a lighting instrument falls from the ceiling and he is killed. The ushers and the human-sized rabbits rush to the stage and as the rabbits dance to mourn Lucky, the ushers take his lifeless body from the stage replacing it with the body of Criss Angel now dressed in Victorian-inspired garb. Crimson again appears and rips Angel’s body to pieces, which the rabbits fight to gather. They are shooed from the stage by the ushers, leaving only the pieces of Angel behind. The ushers then reassemble Angel as Crimson dances seductively around his lifeless body. The stage is engulfed in fog and Angel’s body levitates high above the stage floor in one of his signature illusions. His body is again intact and he is again alive.

Another rabbit enters the stage and begins juggling, while two members of the Cirque cast enter dressed as red poppies. They bring with them another poppy that opens

revealing Kayala. Kayala performs aerial acrobatics, as Angel is appears onstage from a trapdoor in the floor. He is enslaved in thorny vines. He is enthralled by Kayala's beauty and falls immediately in love with her. Crimson, watching jealously, cuts Angel in half and dances gleefully around his severed body halves. She runs happily offstage as Angel reassembles himself and runs to Kayala. To protect her, he covers her with a large white cloth. Crimson returns to stage, grabs the cloth, and reveals that Kayala has disappeared. She then covers herself with a similar red cloth. Angels yanks the cloth back to get to his nemesis but she, too, is now gone.

Angel brings Kayala back through a classic illusion, the De Kolta chair. The ushers bring a chair onstage in which Angel sits. Several human sized rabbits enter with a box and a lifeless Kayala. Angel stands and Kayala is placed in the chair. Angel commands her to move as he places a purple cloth over her and the chair. The movement of Kayala under the chair continues as Angel begs her to return to life. He pulls the cloth away, and Kayala is gone. He walks, dramatically to the box and opens it, revealing inside a very much alive Kayala. The two run offstage.

Crimson returns again to get Angel. When he returns to the stage she attempts to seduce him and throws him into a wooden crate. Thinking she will now possess him forever as her slave, she and her minions dance frantically onstage while securing the crate with Angel inside with lengths of rope. Crimson climbs on top of the crate to taunt her slave and the stage fills with smoke. Crimson, enveloped in smoke, disappears. The smoke begins to clear and Angel is revealed standing in the spot where Crimson had been. As the smoke clears further, she is shown straightjacketed in the crate, screaming furiously at her former slave.

Having escaped the clutches of Crimson, Angel prepares to wed Kayala; she is dressed in a white wedding gown featuring an enormous train. Angel suddenly appears standing on the opposite end of her train and walks slowly toward his love. The two are wed and kiss as the train of the dress begins to turn red, as if a train of blood is following her. Crimson and her helpers appear and Kayala drops lifelessly to the ground. Angel, overwhelmed with grief, is again captured by Crimson and her assistants.

Crimson and Angel return to stage for their final battle with Angel chained to a table and Crimson sporting a chainsaw. Angel is sawed in two and the two halves of his body are rolled offstage in opposite directions. A funeral for both Angel and his love, Kayala, is held, but Kayala is not dead: she appears onstage in a Victorian mourning dress and places a single white rose on Angel's grave. Other mourners appear, one pushing an empty wheelchair. The wheelchair begins to spin on its own and a shrouded figure appears to be seated in it. The shroud is pulled away as the spinning stops and Angel is revealed. He stands and looks around as the stage darkens. All of the figures of the past events are now gone and he is alone onstage. He turns to the audience and whispers a single word, "believe." The word echoes through the house and the entire stage and theatre go dark indicating the end of the performance.

Angel says, "*Believe* is intended to be an experience that truly represents the magic of emotion" (Cope 63). Angel is chain-sawed in two, narrowly escapes several death traps and walks down a wall of fabric, while Cirque dancers and aerialists frenetically spin, creating a nightmarish world of poppies. *Believe's* Associate Director of Creation, Christiane Barette, says, "we want to change the way people think of magic. The show is a fantastic journey, an out-of-this-world rollercoaster ride into the subconscious of a man

with magical powers” (Cope 63). Reviewer Mike Weatherford says, “both director and magician point out the classic illusions are staged in new ways, without boxes to conceal them” (“Criss Angel Believe” 1B).

RESPONSES

Angel, who has largely declined comment on the show throughout the run, was willing to speak about the show before its first preview. At this time he said,

the new show is challenging everything Cirque du Soleil is about and everything Criss Angel is about. We’re challenging each other to be vulnerable and go into areas where neither one of us has ever journeyed. The end result is art we haven’t seen in any Cirque show or any magic show. (Weatherford, “Criss Angel Believe” 1B)

Most think that Angel and Cirque fell short of their goal, that the magic is less than magical and that the Cirque is less than Cirque. Mike Weatherford, reviewer for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* says, “a more dominant opinion from previews is that “Believe” is light on astonishment; that the magic doesn’t hold up to Angel’s claims of revolutionary illusions” that “reinvent magic like Cirque did for the circus” (“Criss Angel Believe” 1B). Director Denoncourt defends the production by saying that people’s expectations were unrealistic. He says, “what was misinterpreted, I think, was everybody was expecting new magic. That doesn’t exist” (Weatherford, “Criss Angel Believe” 1B). Reed Johnson of the *Los Angeles Times* opens his review of *Criss Angel Believe* by saying,

if Criss Angel were blindfolded, straitjacketed, run over by a steamroller, locked in a steel box and dumped from a helicopter into the Pacific Ocean, he

still might be easier to salvage from disaster than *Criss Angel Believe*, the gloomy, gothic muddle of a show that officially lurched into being on Halloween night like some patched-together Frankenstein monster. (“Criss Angel Unbelievable” E1)

Many still “believe” that *Believe* is a mistake. Ticket sales have been mediocre and offered regularly at the half price ticket kiosks along the Las Vegas strip. This is a rare occurrence for any Cirque resident show; it is likely that a potential audience member could pay half or less of the regular box office price for a ticket to this show. Although Angel has not attacked other audience members as he did Perez Hilton, it has been suggested that his disdainful treatment of audience members continue. Cirque headquarters in Montreal has cautioned Cirque employees to maintain an air of professionalism regarding this show. *The White Tops*, a publication geared toward the circus community, quotes an unnamed Vegas businessman as saying, “early buzz is it’s a disaster. Criss had one hundred percent creative control over the show. It was a risky bet and, so far, it looks like it might backfire” (94). An early review by Doug Elfman of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* states the show “is a possibly unsalvageable ‘waste of time’ and a ‘dead end’ that literally bored some audience members to sleep . . . it’s a train wreck. On a scale of one to ten . . . a zero” (n. pag.). The advance sales of this show topped anything previous for Cirque, but the show may have run its time. In 2008, Guy Laliberté said, “it’s about time we recognize here that there’s not too many Cirque shows. Because at this point, the only entertainment in town that’s working is those six different Cirque du Soleil shows” (Weatherford, “Cirque Head Says” 1J). He is very quiet on the topic now.

In 2010, during the usual Cirque du Soleil production hiatus of six weeks, the show was reworked. After the hiatus, Cirque reported that over thirty new illusions were added to the show ("*Criss Angel Believe*" cirquedusoleil.com), but it seems that no amount of reworking will save this production. The reviews remain poor. Angel fans still flock to the show, more for their hero than for his collaboration with Cirque. They still love it, but ticket sales have not increased. No official statements have been forthcoming from Canada but the initial contract was written for a five-year run, with an option for five more years. This means that in 2013, Cirque could decide to close this work and perhaps move in another tour, as they have done with their other Las Vegas underperformer, *Viva Elvis*. At the time of this writing, the advance costs have not yet been recouped and the show's future remains unsure.

*CHAPTER XI**VIVA ELVIS
HAS LEFT THE BUILDING*

It has the torque, the “oomph” of Elvis when he reshaped the musical landscape between 1954 and 1958, but with a real 21st century twist! (Blaise n. pag.)

Risk-taking artists occasionally fail. It appears that this is the case for the newest, and first closed, Cirque du Soleil resident show on the Las Vegas strip: *Viva Elvis*. This production was as much anticipated, as the show's new home, the Las Vegas CityCenter complex. CityCenter is a 16,797,000-square-foot mixed use urban complex in the heart of the Las Vegas Strip (*citycenter.com* n. pag.). Due to the economic struggles in Las Vegas in the early 2000s, CityCenter underwent several construction stoppages but finally opened in 2009. According to the CityCenter website, this luxury Las Vegas community boasts

an energetic community of world class dining, sophisticated gaming, indulgent spas, seductive bars and mesmerizing nightlife, CityCenter is home to 4,004 room[s] . . . [the] ARIA Resort and Casino as well as . . . [the] Vdara Hotel and Spa . . . [the] Mandarin Oriental Las Vegas, and Crystals retail and entertainment district. It is a place of beautifully landscaped common spaces,

high-tech meeting spaces, brilliant residences and hotel rooms, modern art, and spectacular architecture. (*citycenter.com*)

The centerpiece of the CityCenter complex is the Aria Resort and Casino. Identified as “redefining luxury in Las Vegas,” the Aria boasts any amenity that a guest could desire (“Aria Resort”). *Yahoo! Finance* describes the property as

a modern resort. As you enter your room the curtains automatically open, lights come on and the TV greets you by name. It is called "The Welcome," a beautiful display using just a small portion of the amazing on-property technology. Other modern touches include one of the largest corporate collections of publically displayed art in the country, a state-of-the-art ventilation system to combat air pollutants and even a "liquid fireworks" show called *Lumia*. What truly sets Aria apart as one unique luxury resort on the Las Vegas Strip is the level of detail. No matter where you look, there is something worth seeing. (“Aria Resort” n. pag.)

Aria Resort and Casino president and chief operating officer Bill McBeath calls it, “a revolutionary destination designed to transform Las Vegas at its core . . . [it] is larger than life, just like Elvis himself” (“Cirque du Soleil Unveils” n. pag.). Cirque brought Elvis Presley to the luxurious Aria Hotel in the form of their twenty-seventh overall production and their seventh Las Vegas resident show, *Viva Elvis*.

The original premiere date for *Viva Elvis* was January 8, 2012, a date that coincided with Elvis’ seventy-fifth birthday; due to delays in completing the CityCenter complex, however, the premiere did not occur until February 19, 2012, a mere two days after the official opening of the Aria itself (della Cava 01d). MGM Resorts management asked Cirque

du Soleil to replace the show a mere six months later, citing low attendance and mediocre reviews (a mere 900 performances to over a million people). In an official statement MGM Resorts management said, “As attendance levels have not been meeting expectations, we have asked our partners at Cirque du Soleil to replace the show. We will work closely with Cirque as we explore future entertainment options” (Katsilometes and Leach n. pag.). Cirque chief executive officer Daniel Lamarre immediately sent a letter to the *Viva Elvis* cast and crew that read,

all of us are saddened we may have to bring *Viva Elvis* to the end of its journey. The artistic merit of the production is exceptional ... We were given the notice by our partners there. We respect the decision as ticket sales have not met expectations ... I am proud of our work on this show and understand that this is simply a business decision. (Katsilometes and Leach n. pag.)

The final curtain fell on *Viva Elvis* on August 18, 2012. Cirque du Soleil had the *Viva Elvis* Theatre built to their exact specifications and were loathe to leave a void at the Aria. On November 9, 2012, not quite three months after *Viva Elvis* closed, Cirque opened *Zarkana*, their former tour show, in the space.

Viva Elvis was a partnership between Elvis Presley Enterprises and Cirque du Soleil; the arrangement echoed that between Cirque and The Beatles’ Apple Corporation Ltd., which yielded the successful *Love* at the Mirage Hotel and Casino. According to Cirque du Soleil, the production was “a tribute to the world’s first superstar. Music, dance and acrobatics unite in celebration of a remarkable legacy, and that rebellious explosion of love, hope and freedom that is the spirit of rock and roll” (“*Viva Elvis*” cirquedusoleil.com). Cirque du Soleil senior vice president of creative content and new project development Gilles Ste-

Croix and *Viva Elvis* executive producer Stéphane Mongeau described the show as a “retro-contemporized” tribute that unfolds like a live concert” (R. Johnson, “Cirque du Soleil’s *Viva Elvis*” n. pag.). Mongeau further stated, “our responsibility was to develop something that would look like what Elvis might do were he performing now . . . It’s not a show about Elvis. It’s a show with him” (della Cava 01d). The show presented Elvis’ life somewhat chronologically, featuring specific songs that underscored key events in Elvis’s biography and in American history. Throughout the performance, Elvis was represented by the seventy-five artists who comprised the cast but at no time was The King impersonated: “as far as impersonations, the Cirque creative team is leaving those to the legion of side burned, rhinestone-studded guys who pop up in beery nightclub acts around town” (R. Johnson, “Cirque du Soleil’s *Viva Elvis*” n. pag.). Instead of using Elvis himself as narrator, the character of Colonel Tom Parker emceed the show with just enough factual details from The King’s life to maintain a thin chronology.

Elvis seems to be inextricably tied to Las Vegas; many remember the white jumpsuit clad, sweating man singing ballads to packed houses. Elvis’ Las Vegas history was much more than those last few years of the King’s life, however. He played in Las Vegas early in his career when he was merely a handsome boy with a velvet voice. His debut was in 1956 at the Venus Room of the New Frontier Hotel. As discussed in Chapter Two, Elvis was not an immediate hit. Bill Willard of the *Las Vegas Sun* panned his debut saying, “for the teenagers, the long, tall Memphis lad is a whiz; for the average Vegas spender or showgoer, a bore. His musical sound with a combo of three is uncouth, matching to a great extent the lyric content of his nonsensical songs” (McKenzie and Whitehair n. pag.). Elvis left Las Vegas after a two week run without having won the hearts of the Las Vegas audiences.

Elvis did not achieve fame in Las Vegas until later in his career. By 1969, he was a hit in Las Vegas, playing two shows a day for a month at a time. The fast-paced Las Vegas life proved to be his downfall, as he died a mere eight years after becoming a Las Vegas success. Although *Viva Elvis* provides a thin chronology of Elvis' life through his music, featured are the final Vegas years in the elaborate finale and in the marketing of the show itself.

CREATION

Cirque du Soleil hired director/choreographer Vincent Paterson as the writer, director and co-choreographer for *Viva Elvis*. He said, "my goal is to give Elvis a Vegas comeback" (della Cava 01d). Paterson made his Cirque debut on this production. His background was varied, including opera, theatre, film and music concert staging. He has worked worldwide, winning acclaim for his direction of the comic opera *Manon*, conducted by Plácido Domingo (in Canada), and for his direction of the play *Gangsta Love* in Los Angeles. His choreography credits include Madonna's "Blonde Ambition" tour and the "Bad World" tour for Michael Jackson. His film credits are in both direction and choreography and include *Dancer in the Dark*, *The Birdcage*, and *Evita* ("*Viva Elvis*" cirquedusoleil.com).

Paterson based the production on extensive research on Elvis' life. He spent so much time on this aspect that he felt Elvis actually spoke to him in a creative way. He said, "Elvis Presley was my fifth muse" (Dillon n. pag.). He recognized immediately that the draw of Elvis was his voice and that the show, above all, would have to capture that magic. According to Cirque du Soleil, "the power of Elvis was in his voice. With his originality and complexity of influences, he created a revolution" ("*Viva Elvis*" cirquedusoleil.com). Paterson knew expectations were high, especially in Las Vegas where the King still has an

enormous fan base. The success of *Love* by Cirque du Soleil had a reaffirming effect; he knew it was possible to create a tribute without offending die-hard fans. Along with Cirque du Soleil creatives Giles Ste-Croix and Stéphane Mongeau, Paterson made the decision that the music would be live, but that the performance of songs would not be by Elvis impersonators. The only voices other than Elvis's own voice would be female vocalists who would move the story along through their performances of Elvis's material. In describing his goal for the show, Paterson said, "what I'm trying to paint . . . is the show he [Elvis] might do today. I would be ecstatic if a new generation became Elvis fans" ("*Viva Elvis*" *cirquedusoleil.com*).

Like the less than successful *Criss Angel Believe*, *Viva Elvis* relies on dance rather than Cirque's signature acrobatics. Paterson co-choreographed the work with Bonnie Story. Story is a noted choreographer in her own right and made her Cirque du Soleil debut with this production. Her past credits include the *High School Musical* franchise and the closing ceremonies for the 2002 Winter Olympics. She also served as the Associate Artistic Director for the Odyssey Dance Theatre in Utah ("Bonnie Shares Her Story" n. pag.). Story and Paterson met in California and collaborated on many projects before *Viva Elvis* ("Press Materials" *cirquedusoleil.com*). *Viva Elvis* allowed Story to work not only with dancers, as she had done in the past, but also with highly trained acrobats. She said,

it's been amazing, . . . I don't get into the ins and outs of acrobatics with them, but I am able to bring elements of choreography to their numbers. The bottom line is always: 'What does this have to do with Elvis?' and in some way, or some form, everything we do has to connect to him. It's the basis of everything we do. ("Press Materials." *cirquedusoleil.com*)

Due to their long collaborative history, it is difficult to separate the works created by Paterson and those by Story but it is telling that neither takes credit for any specific element of movement in the show.

The venue was purpose-built for *Viva Elvis*, and *Kà* scenic designer Mark Fisher returned to design both the scenery and the theatre space. He said of the design, "Elvis has transcended reality and become a kind of mythic figure . . . So his reappearance in Las Vegas has to be done on a scale that reflects his status" ("*Viva Elvis*" cirquedusoleil.com). Fisher chose to design a more traditional proscenium space than he had with *Kà*. He created a theatre seating 1,840 with a vast backstage that boasted every imaginable bit of new theatrical technology available at the time ("*Viva Elvis*" cirquedusoleil.com). According to Cirque du Soleil, "Mark Fisher's designs illustrate many of the most significant events in the life and career of Elvis" ("*Viva Elvis*" cirquedusoleil.com).

The stage space that Fisher created pushed the theatrical technology limit. The stage housed sixteen platforms, each of which was capable of ascending and descending independently. The central platform was the largest, measuring eighteen feet deep by eighty feet across, and required four motors to move it ("*Viva Elvis*" cirquedusoleil.com). The maximum height that any of these platforms could safely achieve was ten feet above stage level. Each number required its own specific locale which was created by rearranging the configurations of these units. Some of the stand-alone scenic locales included the settings for "Blue Suede Shoes," "Got a Lot of Livin' to Do," "Jailhouse Rock" and "Viva Las Vegas."

For the opening act, "Blue Suede Shoes," a seventy-foot wide by twenty-two foot high jukebox dominated upstage center and provided a framework for a fifty-foot video

screen upon which images of Elvis were projected. The jukebox also provided two dance platforms. This scene, which was mostly a high-energy dance number with limited acrobatics, also featured a full-size pink Cadillac that drove from stage right to stage left carrying three dancers across the stage. At the mid point of the number, a twenty-nine foot long blue suede shoe constructed of steel and fiberglass rolled onto center stage and functioned as a slide on which the dancers could perform.

For the next notable scenic number, “Got a Lot of Livin’ to Do,” Fisher designed a carnival style, comic book-inspired fairground with seven hidden trampolines and a half-pipe. The scene was intended to show Elvis’ love of amusement parks and fairgrounds, and his passion for comic book action heroes. The structure filled the entire width of the stage and was twenty-three feet deep and thirty-two feet tall. It weighed over thirty tons and was garishly colored, complete with twinkling rope lighting (“*Viva Elvis*” cirquedusoleil.com). The entire design looked much like a modern day skateboard park, only with more flash. In a number that reviewer Ben Kaplan gleefully called “campy” and “awe-inspired,” six superhero-clad trampoline artists used every inch of the garish structure as they flew from one side to the other in synchronized chaos using the embedded trampolines.

With “Jailhouse Rock,” Fisher again synthesized the essence of Elvis with a design that referenced the film of the same name. Released in 1957, *Jailhouse Rock* is the third of Elvis Presley’s iconic films; it tells the story of young Vince Everett who saves a woman from assault by murdering her attacker. Convicted of manslaughter and sent to prison, Everett (Elvis) becomes a musician. Shot entirely in black and white, the film features Elvis singing and dancing such songs as “Treat Me Nice,” and the title song, “Jailhouse Rock”

("Jailhouse Rock"). The choreography of the title song in the film clearly influenced Cirque's scenic design. Fisher created a setting that resembled the main corridor the cellblock in which Elvis was imprisoned in the film, which was comprised of a series of levels and barred passageways. Additionally, Fisher included the technical requirements needed for "a circus act called "Marche Inversée. The structure incorporated ten tracks for acrobats to walk upside down attached by their feet, while dancers performed right side up on other levels" ("*Viva Elvis*" cirquedusoleil.com). The steel structure was sixty-feet wide, forty-five feet deep and forty-feet tall and weighed ninety thousand pounds (Dillon n. pag.). As the number is one of the anchor pieces in the show, the scenic unit could accommodate all thirty-six cast members at the same time.

Scenically, the show closes with reference to the iconic Elvis of Las Vegas. For the last acts in the show, "Viva Las Vegas, " Suspicious Minds," the rock medley of "Heartbreak Hotel," "All Shook Up," "That's All Right," and "Hound Dog," the same primary scenic unit was used, a giant golden ceremonial staircase with multiple side platforms. The unit had a *Folies Bergère* showgirl feel, and strove to bring the audience to the closing days of Elvis' career when he packed spectators into his performances in Las Vegas. Flanking the staircase were "two beautiful gold-leaf sculptures of Elvis in iconic poses from the peak of his popularity in Vegas" ("*Viva Elvis*" cirquedusoleil.com).

Also noteworthy was the enormous jungle gym for the gymnastically driven "Return to Sender." Cirque called this number "Boot camp as performance art" ("*Viva Elvis*" cirquedusoleil.com) due to the nature of the high bar and hip-hop moves that marked this piece. Intended to be a tribute to Elvis' time in the service, the stage was backlit with red and blue areas which, combined with a series of men's undergarments, created a full stage

size American flag. A square corner of the upper stage right portion of the cyclorama, lit in blue, contrasted the remaining space which was lit in red. In front of the cyclorama were a series of horizontal clotheslines bearing men's undergarments. White boxer shorts hung vertically created what appeared to be stars in the field of blue, while white long johns evenly spaced lengthwise on the clotheslines created the white stripes against the field of red light. Overall, the undergarments gave a sense of army barracks while the positioning of those garments against the red and blue lighting created an American flag that spanned the entirety of the stage's back wall.

Notable, too, were the act curtain and stage floor; both were embellished with repeating patterns of gold records. They reminded the audience that the King recorded one hundred and fifty-one albums, singles, and EPs that went gold, platinum or multiplatinum in the United States. In the *Viva Elvis* souvenir program, publicist Robbie Dillon says, "Mark Fisher's set design transforms the stage into a series of very different locations, with scenery that ranges from intimate to monumental, but always makes the artists the most important part of every picture" (n. pag.).

Patricia Ruel returned to collaborate again with Cirque du Soleil in *Viva Elvis*. Her previous Cirque productions include *Kà* and *Love*. She designed many larger-than-life props that crossed over into the realm of scenic elements. Working closely with scenic designer Mark Fisher, Ruel helped to realize the enormous blue suede shoe for the opening number. For the "Western Scene," Ruel created three oversized sculptures of Elvis as a cowboy. She looked to one of Elvis' lesser-known films for her inspiration, *Flaming Star*, as well as Andy Warhol's paintings of Elvis to create the final thirty-foot tall characterizations of The King as a cowboy (Dillon n. pag.). Unlike the larger than life moveable puppets seen

in other Cirque shows, the cowboys of Viva Elvis were stationary, standing in the background more as scenery than additional performers. That same number also required two-dozen ropes that always twirled in perfect circles, so that the cast did not have to learn rope tricks for the show. Even more representative of Elvis were the larger than life sunglasses and the foam pompadour wig, created by Ruel. These items became emblems for the show itself as well as emblems of The King.

Not all of the properties in the show were larger than human scale. Ruel assisted Fisher with the pink Cadillac from the opening number that carried several performers on stage. Ruel also included props that were antiques that she and her team of craftspeople found at local antique and junk shops. Once restored, the items were useable onstage. Some of these real and restored items included the barber chair from “Heartbreak Hotel,” the film projector from “Jailhouse Rock,” and the rotary phones from “Are You Lonesome Tonight” (Dillon n. pag.).

The costume design, by Stephano Canulli, focused largely upon the style of the eras of Elvis’ life rather than simply on existing images of Elvis. *Viva Elvis* was Canulli’s debut as a costume designer for Cirque du Soleil but not her first collaboration with the organization. In 2003, he was one of Thierry Mugler’s assistants on *Zumanity* and served as a rendering assistant to costume designer Phillipe Guillotel on *Love*. The costumes for *Viva Elvis* moved through the 1950s and the 1960s with custom-made blue suede shoes and more than one hundred and fifty pompadour wigs. Canulli continued to evoke these eras until the final numbers. In the finale, the entire company was dressed in some variation of the famous Elvis white jumpsuit. Varying the colors and detailing on each performer, Canulli effectively referenced the last iconic look of The King.

The music was a partnership between Cirque and Elvis Presley Enterprises. The aim was to create a sound that allowed the cast to bring their special performance magic to stage while still offering the unique sound of Elvis. As with all the Cirque Las Vegas shows, with the exception of *Love*, there were live musicians onstage providing the score for the action. The band consisted of nine musicians and four singers who at times interacted with a scene but also provided background music for the action. Unlike *Love*, which used Beatles' recordings exclusively, *Viva Elvis* featured a rescoring of The King's original music by Cirque musicians and singers. The show's website explained, "by creating a reinterpretation of the music of Elvis, Cirque du Soleil set out to present the songs of the King of Rock 'n' Roll in a contemporary form that evokes the spirit of Elvis in every way" ("*Viva Elvis*" cirquedusoleil.com). Sampling and incorporating over thirty of Elvis' songs, the score created an aural overview of the life of Elvis Presley. The songs combined the onstage female vocalists and recorded remasterings of Elvis' own work. The performance of "Blue Suede Shoes," "Burning Love," "Suspicious Minds" and "Heartbreak Hotel" used recordings by Elvis with additional scoring. Other songs, such as "Love Me Tender," were remasters of the original in which one of the onstage female singers performed live in a duet with the recorded King.

The show employed a musical director and arranger who created the soundtrack for the production. Erich van Tourneau made his debut with Cirque on this production but is no stranger to original musical arrangements. A musician by training, van Tourneau turned to music writing and arrangement to supplement his life as a freelance musician. He completed many writing and production projects which led him to "write advertising jingles in the United States and the theme song for Canadian Football League team. He has

[since] been nominated for and won awards from the Association Québécoise de l'Industrie du Disque (ADISQ) and the [Toronto] Indie Awards" (*"Viva Elvis" cirquedusoleil.com*). Along with his assistant, Ugo Bombardier, van Tourneau used tens of thousands of samples of Elvis' voice to create the arrangements. Von Tourneau says, "The only male voice is that of Elvis himself – on the grounds that only Elvis could possibly do justice to Elvis" (*"Viva Elvis" cirquedusoleil.com*). He continues, "Cirque is innovative, Elvis was innovative, so I think that's the correct way to approach it – to keep him moving artistically" (Weatherford, *"Viva Elvis" n. pag.*). The biggest challenge in creating the sound was that most of Elvis' music was recorded on the same track as the instrumentals, making it difficult to isolate only his voice. The process of lifting the vocals proved a not insurmountable challenge. The musical creation team hoped that with their new spin, classic Elvis music would not only suit the performance but also create a new generation of Elvis fans. Elvis' widow Priscilla Presley says, "I'm happiest about . . .the decision they made to let Elvis do the singing" (della Cava 01d).

PRODUCTION

Cirque describes the show as, "a tribute to the world's first superstar. Music, dance and acrobatics unite in celebration of a remarkable legacy, and that rebellious explosion of love, hope and freedom that is the spirit of rock 'n' roll" (Dillon n. pag.). The production follows the chronology of Elvis' life so loosely as to be confusing. As described by Elvis fan Anne-Marie Nichols in her blog at *Mom Central*,

the story arch and timeline was strange, . . . First, the show touched on Elvis' early influences, namely gospel, then we move to his rise in the '50s. Then to

his time in the US Army. Then to the movie Elvis. (He did movies before and after he was in the army.) Then cowboy Elvis . . . which was before he went in the army. Then Back to early Elvis. Then to '60s Elvis. Then to Vegas Elvis. '70s Elvis. As someone who knows about Elvis' life and when he recorded songs, I was confused by this.

Additionally, the work relied more on dance than that for which Cirque is best known, acrobatic spectacle. The show boasts "an emphasis on music rather than circus" (della Cava 01d). However, it does rely heavily on technical spectacle to propel the story forward.

As Elvis fans would expect, the show opened with "Blue Suede Shoes." The visual and aural references here suggested his early "Rockabilly" years. The music was heavily over-mixed creating a sound that referenced the King's original music and used his voice, but was more modern and more Cirque. Dancers filled the stage dressed in Cirque's version of the 1950s with correct period silhouettes on bobby-sockers and greasers but in colors and fabrics that were more contemporary. Additionally, the entire troupe wore blue suede shoes. The performers danced around the stage to the music as a large pink Cadillac drove on stage carrying three more dancers, one doing handstands on the trunk of the car. After the "caddy" rolled off, the giant blue suede shoe rolled onto center stage. The tongue of the shoe provided a slide for the performers and the shoe-top provided another level upon which they danced. The dance in this number was a combination of dance and acrobatics with some aerial work as greasers soared back and forth over the heads of their fellow dancers. Heavily punctuated with backflips and jumps, the choreography was as energetic as "Elvis the pelvis" himself. Although the number was intended to warm up the audience

and set the tempo of the show, some fans were disappointed. One stated, “[It is] *Grease* meets Branson dinner theatre and boy was I crestfallen” (Nichols n. pag.)

Another dance number “Don’t Be Cruel” followed “Blue Suede Shoes”. Again, the number was high energy and featured the Cirque dancers as greasers and bobby-sockers. Also featured in this number was the onstage band which consisted of a drummer, a saxophonist, a trombone player, a bass player and a guitarist, all clad in black pants and shirts, and gold lamé jackets. The number featured the onstage band, located up stage right, as much as the dance.

The dreamily evocative, “One Night with You” featured a single female vocalist standing on a nearly dark stage illuminated in a square of blue light with a twinkling star drop behind her. For this number, scenic designer Mark Fisher provided aerial rings in the shape of a giant suspended guitar. The guitar held two performers dressed in white. A door opened in the sky drop revealing an upright piano as the men began a complicated aerial acrobatic performance on and around the guitar. According to Robbie Dillon, the guitar was the icon of the early Elvis and the two aerialists “represent Elvis and his twin brother Jesse Garon, who was stillborn” (n. pag.). The number was smooth and melodious; the two performers moved in perfect harmony with each other much like the two soloists who perform the hand-to-hand act in *Mystère*. This is also the first number in the show which does not feature Elvis’ voice and is performed entirely live onstage. As fan Anne-Marie Nichols says, “cool and what I expected from Cirque du Soleil” (n. pag.).

Three more dance numbers followed on a nearly bare stage with the star drop remaining in the back of the playing space. These numbers provided the transition to the trampoline number, “Got a Lot of Livin’ to Do,” which returned the show to the high energy

and bright colors of the opening number, but seemed an awkward thematic inclusion. The amusement park set and the superhero costumes underscored what Mike Weatherford calls an almost “Zeppelin-esque guitar rock musical number [that] seems a stretch back to the King himself” (“*Viva Elvis*” n. pag.). The dance number “Heartbreak Hotel” followed and represented Elvis’ entrance into the army with “Love Me Tender,” a vocal solo.

Rounding out Elvis’ army time segments, “Return to Sender” returned the show to high energy. The backdrop of the American flag created by the combination of Luc Lafontane’s lighting and Mark Fisher’s whimsical clotheslines set the theme of the uneven parallel bar act that followed. The gymnasts performed in olive drab tank tops emblazoned with a single white star and army camouflage shorts or battle dress uniform (BDU) pants along with combat boots. The image of an energetic army locker room was produced.

The show then moved to a more melodic pace with “Are You Lovesome Tonight” and “Blue Moon,” both aerial pas deux numbers performed by aerialists high above a nearly bare stage. Their slow deliberate movements closely followed von Tourneau’s soulful treatment of the musical arrangement. Additionally, the numbers offered a welcome break to the driving beat and ecstatic energy of the previous number.

Maintaining the show’s alternating tempos, the next number returned the show to upbeat high energy with “Western,” a number that represented the beginning of Elvis’ time in films. Dancers and lasso artists performed on a stage embellished with property designer Patricia Ruel’s three 30-foot statues of Elvis as a cowboy and two additional smaller projections of the same image. Featuring again the omnipresent band, this time dressed in western attire, the number brought the pink Cadillac again to the stage. In addition to traditional rope tricks, most using Ruel’s specially-designed lassos, there were

some actual rope tricks performed including one that involved flame. As the show progressed through Elvis' film career, the numbers "Bossa Nova Baby" and "King Creole" moved the show through Elvis' film career. "Bossa Nova Baby" was pure Cirque featuring chair balancing. This part of the show represented Elvis' 1960s years; the cast were dressed as 1960s cage dancers complete with fringe but the bulk of the number was merely a set up for the Cirque chair performer. One by one, the yellow chairs of the set's bar locale were stacked one on another at odd angles creating a precarious looking tower. Once stacked three high, the performer climbed atop and spun on the stack using a single hand. Two additional chairs were added and the performer climbed higher and seated himself calmly atop a stack of over ten chairs. Once seated, he then moved from one challenging gymnastic position to another, sometimes balancing on a single hand or foot, sometimes in a handstand. As the number ended, the tower of chairs slowly descended to the stage floor while dancers performed variations of the bossa nova. Elvis' film career wrapped up with the spectacular dance and acrobatic number "Jailhouse Rock," considered by most the show's centerpiece, featuring Mark Fisher's apparatus for the Marche Inverseé.

The show moved into Elvis' later years with several Cirque-style numbers back to back. "It's Now or Never" was a Chinese pole performance and "Love Me Do" was a aerial hoop number, while "Can't Help Falling in Love" was a ballet on roller skates. After these three acrobatic performances, the giant golden staircase rolled into place representing Elvis' Las Vegas years. The final numbers featured classic Vegas iconography including showgirls in feather headdresses and Elvis in an elaborate white jumpsuit. The show ended on a high note with a celebration of the life of The King that included the entire cast

onstage dressed as Elvis. The music was upbeat and the costumes and scenery were bright; there was never an indication of the darker side of the legend's life.

RESPONSES

Viva Elvis had its final performance on August 18, 2012, and was soon after replaced by *Zarkana*. Why did this Cirque show fail when others of their Las Vegas shows have not? Even Cirque knew they were in trouble from an artistic point of view. Originally planned to go dark for an extended time in January of 2011 for a major revamp, Renee-Claude Menard, Cirque's senior publicist said, "*Viva Elvis* will get a makeover to make it less of a biographical representation of Elvis Presley and more of an acrobatic Cirque du Soleil spectacular production" (Weatherford, "Changes Coming to Cirque" n. pag.). As we have seen, a revamp of a newly opened or underperforming Cirque show does not bode disaster.

Zumanity changed from a somewhat seedy original version to the lighter *Zumanity: the Sensual Side of Cirque*. This revision proved a great success in terms of both reviews and ticket sales. *Criss Angel Believe* was also pulled and somewhat successfully revamped. The change in *Criss Angel Believe* was to remove some Cirque elements and create more of a traditional magic show. Some speculate that *Viva Elvis* was never the show that its predecessors were. It certainly was a smaller show with a smaller cast, less impressive spectacle, fewer technological innovations and most importantly, fewer "invited guest artists" to wow the crowd. Others say that Cirque was never as fully invested in this work as it was in others. This claim can be substantiated by the lack of promo materials available for sale, and the *Viva Elvis* gift shop that was mostly merchandized with souvenirs from other Cirque ventures. Additionally, Cirque was quite public in its projections of cost for

this production from the beginning. Mike Weatherford of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* quotes Guy Laliberté as saying “it will be very tight with the budget” (“Cirque du Soleil’s *Kà*” n. pag.). Reports are that most of the \$100 million cost of the show was spent on creating the theatre, especially in the area of sound, which is touted as acoustically perfect. Still others have stated that the European feel of a Cirque production does not quite match the Americana feel of Elvis Presley. This “Americanness” certainly underscores the entire production from the cowboys twirling lassos in “Mystery Train” to the bobbysockers in “Blue Suede Shoes”; it is most clearly illustrated in the number “Return to Sender” which was performed by what appeared to United States army recruits in front of an enormous American flag created with light and laundry.

Perhaps the biggest problem was with Cirque itself. Had it set too high a bar with shows such as *Kà*, “*O*”, and *Love*? Cirque invested large amounts of money in these productions; they did not do the same with *Viva Elvis* and it showed. Nothing in *Viva Elvis* compared with the sliding stages in *Kà*, the floating illuminated beds in *Love*, or the aquatic performance space of “*O*”. Furthermore, nothing in *Viva Elvis* had the fantastical human performance prowess seen the previous works. *Kà* provides the wheel of death where humans appear to be gerbils in a wheel powering the action onstage. “*O*” offers world class Olympic performances by high divers and synchronized swimmers. It is clear that the success of a Cirque du Soleil show in Las Vegas needs both high-end technological spectacle and fantastic human performance.

It can also be contended that the targeted audience for *Viva Elvis* is not a traditional Cirque du Soleil audience. Most of the Elvis generation is in their seventies and people in this age bracket do not regularly come to Las Vegas. According to the City of Las Vegas

Economic and Urban Development Department and Redevelopment Agency, the average age of tourists in 2011 was 53.2, with tourists over the age of sixty-five representing less than one percent of the total number of visits to Las Vegas that year (City of Las Vegas, *Tourism* 5). Cirque had hoped to create a new generation of Elvis fans in creating this work but Elvis as the King of rock and roll did not seem to resonate with the demographic that comes to Las Vegas and attends Cirque shows. Furthermore, the qualities for which Cirque productions are known, both human and technical spectacle, were not as well represented in this offering as in others on the Strip. In the end, these factors drove ticket sales down, the show was closed permanently, and there has been no discussion of it ever being revived for another venue for a tour.

FROM ELVIS TO ZARKANA

The new Cirque show now playing at the Aria Resort and Casino is a former road show that played to sold out houses, especially at New York City's Radio City Music Hall. *Zarkana* is a rock opera that the *New York Post* called "truly spectacular, awe-inspiring, gorgeous and stunning" (Leach, "Cirque du Soleil's *Zarkana*" n. pag.). Cirque du Soleil bills the show as "a visually stunning acrobatic spectacular" ("*Zarkana*" cirquedusoleil.com) and Las Vegas' CityCenter calls it "a visually stunning modern acrobatic spectacle where physical ability meets with the extraordinary" (citycenter.com). The show is much more in Cirque's comfort zone, being based in human and theatre spectacle. They call it "an acrobatic rock experience that blends circus arts with the surreal to create a world where physical virtuosity rubs shoulders with the strange" ("*Zarkana*" cirquedusoleil.com). Perhaps this is exactly what Cirque needed to put in the place of the failing *Viva Elvis*. This

show, which has already proven to be successful on the road, is a great place to lay low and lick their artistic wounds.

The show's style crosses into the Victorian. The lead player is Zark, the ringmaster of the show (circus?) coming to life. He seems to walk a fine line between being kind and demonic. He is clad in a red and black costume that appears to a traditional circus ringmaster's attire with that of a red-caped Victorian magician. Lia, a Victorian-inspired dream girl, assists him. European style circus clowns, dressed in white and wearing white-faced clown make-up, populate his circus. The work stands at the roots of Cirque du Soleil's performance history. The acts focus mostly on human spectacle and less on the technical "wow" of their other Las Vegas shows. They include juggling, aerial duet, Russian bar, high wire, cyr wheel and aerial hoops, wheel of death, handbalancing and banquine; these are feats of daring standard to any acrobatic circus. Tony Ricotta, *Zarkana's* company manager, says,

the show by no means relies on technology to impress. Rather, the show's focus on the performers and their physical feats marks a return to the craft of circus performance Cirque du Soleil built its reputation on more than 20 years ago. The show uses technology to its advantage, but this is not a technology-based show. This is a performance and we really stress the artistry and acrobatics as the main offering, . . . The content ... is so vast that you forget the technology, it becomes window dressing. It's expensive window dressing, but you appreciate what they're doing and you're back to that core moment with Cirque du Soleil. (Domanick, "Behind the Scenes"

n. pag.)

The style and atmosphere of the production is dark and Victorian in feel, as if a sideshow troupe formed in the 1890s has landed in Las Vegas. The style here of the theatre and the production within, are very much like that of *Criss Angel Believe*, but to date *Zarkana* has proven to be more popular with both critics and audiences alike. Is this, perhaps, due to the fact that with *Zarkana*, Cirque has remained true to its style of performance and production, while *Criss Angel Believe* is a star vehicle production in which Cirque did not have full creative license? I contend this to be the case, but time will be the telling factor here as ticket sales and reviews can be compared between the two shows over an extended period. The music is haunting and matches the visual elements of the show; it is seemingly from another place and time while at the same time having Cirque's signature electronic music.

The show closed at Radio City Music Hall on September 2, 2012, and began previews in Las Vegas on October 25, 2012. The show's official Las Vegas opening was on November 9, 2012. The last of the show's sixty-five trucks arrived in Las Vegas on October 6, 2012, with the former Viva Elvis Theatre barely ready for their arrival. Journalist Andrea Domanick reports, "the Zarkana Theatre at Aria is so new that the blue paint on aisle floors hasn't dried, and production manager Robert Lemoine nearly slips as he walks down to survey the scene" (Domanick, "Behind the Scenes" n. pag.). The load-in for the show began on October 13, 2012, and the first rehearsal in the space was only four days later. While that timeline might be daunting to other touring groups, Cirque was non-plussed saying,

this has been the best and easiest transfer we've done so far because of the seasoned technicians. The MGM team really knows what they're doing, so that's been a huge help for us, . . . Rather than the setup, the biggest challenge for the *Zarkana* team has been figuring out how to make the transition from a

traveling show to a permanent fixture on the Las Vegas entertainment scene. We've had 75 artists we've had to relocate in a 28-day time window, . . . Helping everyone get to know their new home after years on the road has been the biggest challenge by far. (Domanick, "Behind the Scenes" n. pag.)

Does Las Vegas like the new offering? The earliest reviews seem to indicate that the show will be a hit. *PR Newswire* reports, "*Zarkana* is a visually stunning modern acrobatic spectacular set in a world where physical ability meets with the extraordinary . . . Surrender to this spellbinding extravaganza that defies the possible and will leave you breathless! ("*Zarkana*" Souvenir program n. pag.). *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reporter Mike Weatherford was a bit more cautious. He indicated that the show brings nothing new to the Strip and that if you have seen other Cirque shows you have seen *Zarkana*. He says "if this is your third, fourth or seventh Cirque, . . . *Zarkana* is likely to inspire a bit of restlessness and may have you going back and forth like that fiery pendulum" ("*Cirque's New Zarkana Feels Familiar*" n. pag.). Time and more attendees to the "new" Cirque show may well tell the future of Cirque du Soleil's Las Vegas expansion project.

CHAPTER XII

PLANTING THE SEEDS, THEN PICKING THE FLOWERS

Like “flowers in the desert, “ both Las Vegas and Cirque du Soleil have grown from humble beginnings; both have experienced growing pains and setbacks as they have expanded. In 1993, the growth of these two entities intersected. This dissertation has considered the conjunction of Las Vegas and Cirque du Soleil. What does it mean that these two entities have become intertwined and what sort of symbiosis do they have? I argue that Cirque du Soleil contributed high-minded, family oriented acrobatic entertainment to the Las Vegas Strip (supplanting the glitz and tits shows). Meanwhile, to meet the high standards of spectacle in Las Vegas, Cirque added cutting-edge stage technology to its virtuosic bodily performances. This technology enhances the spectacle of the virtuoso bodily performances for which Cirque is famous. Cirque helped Las Vegas cater to an international crowd while Las Vegas helped Cirque become more adept at using stage technology.

Las Vegas and Cirque du Soleil are transformative in nature. Las Vegas strives to transform its visitors’ regular everyday lives, making them larger, richer, and more glamorous. In Las Vegas, time seems irrelevant, which is, in part, why there are no clocks visible in public casino areas. In Las Vegas, a visitor can be anyone they choose to be, for a price. As the slogan goes, what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. Las Vegas offers its visitors the ability to be freed from the cares of their lives at home; they are transformed

into high rollers, gourmet food connoisseurs and elite shopping mavens. People visit Las Vegas to be free of themselves for a while.

Cirque du Soleil has the same goal: to transform. In a Cirque du Soleil show, the audience can become fully immersed in the world of the performance. In the Believe Theatre, audience members “fall” through the rabbit hole into a theatre where Angel and his larger than life bunnies create the world of “Weirdtorian.” At the Kà Theatre, costumed characters that appear to come from a Mad Max movie greet audience members awaiting entrance to the show. The Love Theatre provides a kaleidoscope of the 1960s Beatles’ British invasion; it engulfs the audience in reconceived music of the Beatles. Each of the Cirque du Soleil Las Vegas resident productions strives to take individual audience members from their ordinary lives to a mystical, magical place. The living, breathing emblem of this place is the perfect human body performing impossible feats of bodily skill. Real life turns to Cirque life for a mere ninety minutes but during that time anything can happen and all is possible, much as it is in Las Vegas itself.

Cirque du Soleil’s success speaks to the current entertainment climate of the Las Vegas Strip. According to the last visitor profile study conducted by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority, 38,928,708 people visited Las Vegas in 2011 with the average length of stay being 3.7 nights; this represented an increase in the total number of visitors and length of their stay in Las Vegas from previous years (3). Visitors to Las Vegas not only have increased in numbers, but also have changed their trip focus. They are no longer just Americans who want an exotic-feeling vacation without having to leave the United States. Additionally, they are no longer senior citizens looking for a free buffet, especially when you consider the fact that less than 1% of the visitors to Las Vegas in 2011 were over 65,

and only 8% were aged sixty to sixty-four (City of Las Vegas Economic and Urban Development Department and Redevelopment Agency 5). . Las Vegas is not just a town full of high stakes gamblers; it is now a constantly evolving mecca for conventioners, foodies, gamblers, partiers, shoppers and entertainment junkies. Visitors come to Las Vegas for high-end shopping, gourmet dining, luxury spa treatments, and spectacular entertainment. Charles Higgins of *examiner.com* published the 2011 Vegas visitor study which shows that fifty percent of the visitors to Las Vegas in that year were there for vacation/pleasure and that only seven percent stated that their primary reason for visiting was gambling (Higgins n. pag.). The millennial Vegas visitor comes to Vegas for the experience of being in a place like no other on earth. It is loud, busy, and boisterous and, it has everything any visitor could need. It is a town of sensory overload, a place to forget your cares and yourself. Michael Ian Borer claims that visitors to Las Vegas as suffering from “neural intoxication,” which he identifies as “individuals . . . become psychologically and emotionally overwhelmed, developing symptoms ranging from anxiety and panic attacks to visual and aural hallucinations” (Borer 16). He calls this, “Las Vegas Syndrome” (Borer 17). As the marketing campaign says, “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.” Visitors to Las Vegas rarely come on a budget; they come to splurge and to indulge, and Las Vegas has every indulgence possible. Higgins continues his analysis of the 2011 visitor study, saying, “the results summary indicates that 2011 Vegas visitors spent more on nongaming activities than they did in 2010. Visitors in 2011 spent significantly more on food and drink, hotel rooms, sightseeing, entertainment, and package tours” (Higgins n. pag.).

The casinos struggle to keep patrons onsite. Yes, all-you-can-eat buffets are located on each property, each hoping to top the others by offering more crab legs or unique sushi

or tableside flaming bananas foster or the tallest chocolate fountain. These buffets are still popular and certainly something that the average visitor generally frequents once during a stay, but the buffets are no longer the sought after food option. Mile long buffet tables have been replaced with high end, celebrity chef dining. For every buffet, there is an offering by Mario Batali, Bobby Flay or Wolfgang Puck, to cite just a few.

But upscale dining does not generate the revenue that gaming always has and still does. In 2011, the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority stated that gambling generated \$6.1 billion for that year alone (61). And the declining United States economy of the last few years has not substantially injured that gambling dollar with the Las Vegas Strip reporting a 2.3% increase in gaming revenue and the city as a whole reporting a 10.7% increase in gaming revenue in 2012 (Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority).

Dining is not the only attraction to Las Vegas that enhances gaming revenue. Alcohol, too, increases the gambling spending in the Strip and surrounding casinos. Complementary cocktails were, and still are, offered to patrons of table games as well as slot machines. The free alcohol is intended to loosen the patron's pocket book. After a few drinks, gamblers tend to bet more than they had planned.

In the early days, entertainment was given free to the big spenders. Showgirl acts or comedian performances could be seen in the casino lounge where there was more alcohol, offered by scantily clad cocktail waitresses. Between the "free" food and entertainment, a few complementary cocktails and pretty, flirty servers, casino guests loosened up and, feeling that they had spent very little of their vacation money so far, headed to the tables. Over time, showroom acts evolved into headliners and showgirls have become less prevalent. At the fore of Las Vegas entertainment today are spectacular production style

shows such as those presented by Cirque du Soleil. In the 2011 statistics compiled by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority, the average trip total spent on shows in 2011 was \$119.92, up from \$112.92 the previous year (60). Interestingly, however, the same study showed a drop overall in the total percent of visitors that attended shows during a stay in Las Vegas; this number went from sixty-eight percent in 2010 to sixty percent in 2011. All types of shows reflected that decline, except lounge acts, which the study identified as free admission, and production or Broadway style shows which is the category of Cirque. High spectacle shows like Cirque du Soleil actually showed increased ticket sales during this period. Most of the increased revenue that is spent on production entertainment in Las Vegas is spent on Cirque du Soleil shows. The company's presence has grown from a single offering in 1993 to seven productions today, each with its own theatre, lobby, bar and gift shop. There are plans for more shows and nightclubs to come. Jerry Hirsch of the *Los Angeles Times* says, "when entertainment such as Cirque is successful, it produces a synergy with gambling and fancy hotels that distinguishes the city from other destinations" (n. pag.).

To date Las Vegas and specifically Cirque du Soleil has made nearly every top ten United States "attractions to visit" list, making Las Vegas and Cirque du Soleil a destination and not just an afterthought. In the summer of 2012, Sean O'Neill of *foxnews.com* identified twenty places every American should see. Number four on his list was the Las Vegas Strip. He said,

Glass pyramids. Faux Venetian canals. The 1,148-foot tall Stratosphere Tower. A couple of \$100 million daredevil circuses called Cirque du Soleil. They're all part of this neon-lit desert outpost 300 miles from Los Angeles--

with a magnetic pull like no other. Every American ends up on the Strip sooner or later, whether for a bachelor party, a girlfriend getaway, a trade show, or simply lured by a shockingly cheap hotel-and-airfare deal. It's the place Americans go to let their hair down. (n. pag.)

tripadvisor.com also ranks Las Vegas number four saying,

In Las Vegas, you'll find restaurants run by the world's finest chefs, opulent spas, and sophisticated hotels... along with penny slots, Elvis impersonators, and indoor Venetian canals (complete with gondoliers). Why come here? Because there is simply no other place on the planet like Las Vegas. And we wouldn't have it any other way. (n. pag.)

And *forbes.com* advises international visitors to come Las Vegas as well. Valaer Murray asserts that despite the worldwide economic downturn, Las Vegas sits sixth on the *Forbes* list of places to visit. Murray notes that Las Vegas did show a "6% overall decline in international travel last year" (n. pag.), but the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has continually ranked Las Vegas as a recommended locale for international travelers (V. Murray n. pag.). Liz Benston of the *McClatchy - Tribune Business News* reported that in 2011 "Las Vegas Visitors from South Korea and China increased by sixty and thirty-eight percent last year, respectively, while visitors from Canada, Australia, Germany, and France increased by more than twenty percent" (n. pag.). She continues her analysis: "last year's 6.7 million foreign visitors spent \$6.6 billion . . . accounting for twenty-seven percent of tourism revenue [in Las Vegas]" (n. pag.). She also offers a comparison of the spending habits of foreign visitors versus American visitors saying, "the average international visitor spent \$1,011 on nongambling activities compared with \$627 spent by

the average domestic visitor” (n. pag.). It is clear from these studies that foreign travellers are coming to Las Vegas with money to spend on entertainment; Cirque is well-positioned to appeal to these consumers.

Jennifer Harvie and Erin Hurley analyzed Cirque du Soleil’s success and found that “part of Cirque’s financial success stems from its high ticket prices” (312). They further cite *Forbes Magazine*, reporting that “Cirque sells an astonishing 96% of its house at every performance; break even is 65%. With approximately 32% of revenues left over as profit to be funneled back into Cirque operations, the Cirque’s expansion over the past two years has been phenomenal . . . [growing into] a multinational spectacle” (Harvie and Hurley 312). It is, in part, Cirque’s capacity for expansion that has prompted some critics to nickname it the “McDonald’s of Circuses” (B. Johnson 36). If Cirque du Soleil is the “McDonald’s of circuses,” why are they so successful on the Strip? The answer has to do with brand consistency. Although the Las Vegas visitor is looking for a unique travel experience and comes to town with money to burn, that same visitor does not want to feel “ripped off” by the entertainment. Much as tourists will eat at a McDonald’s or Denny’s in a new town because they know what they will get, a Las Vegas visitor will see a Cirque du Soleil show because they know what they will get. They will get spectacle and entertainment presented to the highest professional standards. Cirque biographers Véronique Vial and Hèlène Dufresne speak of the Cirque brand: “equally at issue . . . the Cirque’s productions . . . [are] uniquely . . . [its] own, that is, a recognizable brand—consistent, replicable, and marketable. With each . . . [production], its artists create a brightly colored, fantastical world characterized by the harmonious play of an international cast of circus performers (24). Kàren D’Souza of the *Oakland Tribune* says, “After all, the once avant-garde circus,

which began in 1984 in Montréal, is now one of the most recognizable entertainment brands in the world” (n. pag.). The world Cirque creates is awe-inspiring. It displays the grace of the human body pushed beyond expectation so consistently that it has come to be expected by Cirque du Soleil fans the world over. Spectacular human and technological virtuosity is what has come to be recognized as the Cirque du Soleil brand.

Constancy of performance and value for the entertainment dollar is not the only reason for Cirque’s success in Las Vegas. Cirque pushes limits, much as Las Vegas itself does. Its productions are grander than any other productions in the world, including their own tour shows. More money is spent on a single Las Vegas Cirque production than any of Cirque’s road shows and more than any other entertainment offering on the Strip. Money is invested in talent and technical spectacle. Nearly every one of Cirque’s Las Vegas shows has some type of new technology, from the sand deck in *Kà* to the splendid speakers in *Love* to the three-part atmospheric control of *O*. Harvie and Hurley say, “Cirque’s concern with surpassing limits is most evident in its performance codes, which include fantastical costumes, masked or heavily made-up performers [and] acts of technical virtuosity” (313). *Kà* company manager Jeff Lund tells *about.com* journalist Angela Mitchell,

Cirque du Soleil shows in Las Vegas are set apart by the scale and the scope of the productions. Everything in Las Vegas is larger than life. Cirque du Soleil shows fit right into this model, and are part of the ‘wow’ factor that people have come to enjoy. Everything in Las Vegas is done to the extreme, so a show that is more grandiose than anything else is an obvious fit. For that reason alone, Vegas is the perfect fit. (“Behind the Scenes” n. pag.)

Larger than life performance is augmented by consistently high performance standards. Shows are rigorously maintained over time, and Cirque constantly takes them into hiatus to rework them and keep them fresh and new, year after year.

Another draw for Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas is the wordless nature of the productions. Lacking recognizable dialogue, their performances can be enjoyed by any visitor to Las Vegas regardless of native language. The spectacle speaks for itself by presenting themes and narratives in a nearly pantomimic manner. The lack of spoken dialogue also allows for productions that can speak to both young and old, although the theme of *Zumanity* is more adult in nature.

Replacing the dialogue with original music or original orchestrations, as is the case with *Love*, Cirque speaks beyond verbal language. It speaks the language of music and of sound. Cirque du Soleil is known for “world-beat” music. Its artists draw from sources the world over, reinventing what they find. Harvie and Hurley say, “its musical language is a mix of indistinguishable romance languages set to ‘world music’ beats. This combination . . . is one of the more revealing examples of how the Cirque integrates and unifies differences” (313).

In all, Cirque was the right thing at the right time. In the 1990s, Las Vegas needed a greater international draw and Cirque du Soleil needed a respite from its nomadic touring life. The organizations intersected and created the phenomenon that is Cirque Las Vegas. Founder Guy Laliberté says, “it really opened up things in terms of the type of show you could see in Las Vegas . . . That feels really good.” (Babinski 163). The timing was fortuitous; the desire for more spectacle in the city of Las Vegas and the desire for a home for Cirque converged.

The ideal spectator of a Cirque show comprehends plot by means of spectacle, the visual and aural elements of the production. Music and images tell the story. Cirque creates in its theatres temporary communities of international visitors, people who do not share a common language.

Las Vegas is certainly a town of “spectacle.” From the moment travelers arrive at the airport, they are barraged by sights and sounds. Booming, glitzy billboards announce headliners, comedians, magicians, and shows, promising an entertainment experience more extraordinary than any seen before. The flashy signs and images created by merchants hawk products with spectacular verve. Restaurateurs display such lush culinary offerings in impeccable surroundings that the spectacle of food ignites even more senses. But how did Las Vegas get to this point, how did it become this hedonistic pleasure center for all of the senses? How did spectacle come to reign supreme?

Las Vegas places the visitor at the center of an astounding experience; it invites visitors to play an important role in the immense show that is playing out before their eyes. Cirque du Soleil combines many of the elements intrinsic to Las Vegas to create a performing arts brand that reflects the city in which its works are so proudly housed. It embodies three essential elements: wordless international spectacle. Vegas embodies these elements as well. It is a city in which one can thrive even if one cannot speak the English language, or at least the American dialect. As Jerry Fink says in the *Las Vegas Sun*, “perhaps one reason *Mystère* gained instant popularity is that it has universal appeal – there are very few spoken words. An international audience does not need to understand English to appreciate what takes place. It is an evening of awe-inspiring action” (n. pag.).

How has Cirque du Soleil been changed by the Las Vegas experience? Its artistry has evolved from its roots in the style of Bread and Puppet theatre and street performance to a high-end technology and production style. Some critics say that Cirque du Soleil has “sold out” and blame founder Guy Laliberté. It has been suggested that he enjoys the high life and just wants to make more and more money. The reasons for Cirque’s growth and evolution go well beyond profit for its founder; they include a desire to break down barriers. Cirque du Soleil, even in its earliest permutations, pushed the envelope. At the beginning, it was Giles Ste-Croix walking on stilts from city to city; today Cirque presents some of the most costly production shows in the world. However, Cirque does not just push the money envelope; it pushes the envelope of human physical ability and theatrical technology. The artists involved with Cirque today perform the seeming-impossible. Examples include the *Love* performer, Illuminaire, who calmly sits reading a newspaper while he is on fire, the brothers performing the Wheel of Death in *Kà*, and even the resurrection of the Beatles after the deaths of two of the Fab Four.

Cirque’s technical theatrical spectacle shows exponential growth. The company began as a circus troupe with a blue and yellow striped tent. In Las Vegas, Cirque guts existing theatres or builds new ones. They have created new standards in sound amplification, lighting design, make-up formulas and heightened production values.

Cirque du Soleil sees itself as part of an international community. It has worked to give back to the world. The organization considers itself a “global citizen.” The company places social responsibility at the heart of this citizenship. Cirque strives to reduce its carbon footprint by banning plastic water bottles from its headquarters, Las Vegas venues,

and tour show campuses. Whenever possible the shows participate in recycling programs, including recycling rainwater at headquarters in Montréal.

Additionally, Cirque du Soleil has founded and joined several world philanthropic endeavors such as the One Drop Foundation founded by Guy Laliberté. The mission of One Drop is to provide clean drinking water to the world. In addition to yearly private contributions made to this foundation by its corporate leaders, Cirque now contributes one hundred percent of the collected admission from any and all VIP opening performances.

Philanthropic endeavors such as One Drop and corporate recycling are very much in line with the early “collective” roots of the first visionary leaders of Cirque du Soleil. Participating in world citizenship and fighting to change the wrongs of the world remain at the forefront in the philosophy of Cirque du Soleil at a corporate level: this is the collective background from which they sprang.

In Las Vegas, this connection to the world is harder to see. The shows are large, loud, bright and flashy. They hardly seem works created to better the world situation. Although the financial rewards that Cirque’s foundations receive from Las Vegas profits are not obvious to the audience member, the theme of world connection certainly is. All Cirque shows have at their heart a desire for humans to connect with other humans, creating a world wide whole. From the world beat music to the wordless presentations to the international casts and international feel of the production style, Cirque’s Las Vegas shows draw in audience members of different kinds and put them at the center of the work. Cirque leads the audience on a journey of discovery of self and other in each one of the seven Las Vegas offerings. Joan Acocella of *The New Yorker* says, “In my experience, Cirque also surpasses all other nouveau cirque organizations in its declared idealism. Every Cirque

production seems to be about world peace, or the holiness of the heart's affections, or something like that" (82).

Furthermore, Cirque's conscious avoidance of animal acts shows a respect for animals. It is widely known that circus animals have been treated cruelly in more traditional circuses. Cirque has not incorporated animal acts into its works for this very reason.

Michael Barnes says,

in many ways, Cirque represents the apex of the ritual-as-theatre tradition. Years ago, scholars recognized the similarities -- the arrangement of spectators and performers around a designated space, the use of spoken word, music and dance, the recurrence of particular symbols -- between religious ritual and theatrical performance. (26)

Peter Brook might have been writing about Cirque du Soleil when he speaks of the holy theatre in *The Empty Space*. In holy theatre, performers acting as shamans, communicate the invisible world beyond this plane of existence, sometimes wordlessly. Franco Dragone speaks of the wordless nature of Cirque du Soleil. He says, "the music grounds the eyes of the spectators, the emotions of the spectators . . . It is the language of the show" (Dragone n. pag.).

No matter how advanced the productions or how large the production budgets Cirque is at its heart still the collective experienced by its founders back in Québec. In his article in the *National Post*, Bryan Curtis says, "Cirque du Soleil is one of the greatest artistic follies of our age and one of its most baffling success stories" (C3). John Bacon identifies

Cirque du Soleil as “a creative entertainment company; we develop shows built around the dreams, talents, and passions of our artists and creators” (7).

What does the failure, and eventual closing, of *Viva Elvis* and the poor ticket sales of *Criss Angel Believe* say about the future of Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas? Some commentators think that Cirque du Soleil has run its course in Las Vegas. When this study was begun in 2008, the rumor was that Cirque planned to have a show in every Strip casino, or at least those owned by Steve Wynn. In 2012, with the closing of *Viva Elvis* some suggest that the bloom is off the rose and that Cirque is at the end of its era in Las Vegas. Nevertheless, the existing shows continue to sell out, or, at least, to make their nightly “nut,” and Cirque du Soleil’s newest nightclub is poised to open. Additionally, Cirque du Soleil plans to bring *Michael Jackson: The Immortal World Tour* in from the road to the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino in May of 2013 as *Michael Jackson: One*.

Karen D’Souza of the *Oakland Tribune* writes, “detractors of Cirque feel that the factory’s [Cirque’s] goods are beginning to look a bit shopworn” (n. pag.). To a certain extent, Cirque must agree; they have heavily advertised *Mystère*’s official update, especially during the winter holiday season. The announcement of an update is not necessarily an indication that *Mystère* is suffering from low-ticket sales since Cirque is known for revamping shows regularly, especially the resident productions in Las Vegas. Arguably, the highly touted revamp is proof that Cirque du Soleil produces shows that are more like a living being, evolving through time. The updates to *Mystère* are minor but include an overall “amping” up of the production itself. As the first show that Cirque opened in Las Vegas, it is the least technologically awe-inspiring of the works on the Strip. The new

update is an attempt to move the show closer to the spectacle of its Las Vegas brethren without losing its charm.

During a revamp, a Cirque show typically gets new costumes, the well-worn set is retouched, and acts are reviewed and replaced as needed. *Mystère* added a few new characters to the show and spruced up the ones that remained. For the casual *Mystère* audience member the changes were imperceptible but fans of the show saw fresher colors and brighter scenic units. In March 2012, *Mystère* quietly added two new acts: Ginger Ana Griep-Ruiz performs an aerial tissue act that is touted by Mike Weatherford as performed “at a higher altitude, fall[ing] further before catching herself and swing[ing] way out over the first rows of the audience” (“Cirque du Soleil’s *Mystère*” J6). In addition, a new trapeze act was added to the show’s conclusion. Another important change is in casting. In October, Francois Dupuis, who originated the “big baby” character passed away; his unnamed understudy has since replaced him. In December 2012, Cirque du Soleil introduced another new act to *Mystère*, a Chinese pole team that had been playing in *Zed*. These changes are hints of what is to come in the next year when *Mystère* marks its twentieth anniversary performance.

Cirque launched a massive marketing campaign to announce these new acts. A green creature who looks to be a cross between a bird and an imp has now joined the signature logo featuring the red bird peeking over a desert horizon. He energetically leaps over the head of the bird just under the caption, “Mind-blowing New Acts.” It is this type of hype-- and this type of care given to older productions--that keep the shows selling to more audiences. Cirque strives not only to bring the first time viewer to *Mystère* but to bring

repeat business by producing an updated version of a show already seen. As Marie Labrecque says in *Voilà*, “the sun doesn’t set on the Cirque’s empire” (30).

Is Las Vegas saturated with Cirque du Soleil and the style of production it offers? In March 2005, Rob Lowman wrote in *The Houston Chronicle* that Las Vegas has become inundated with Cirque and Cirque-like shows. He writes, “Including *Kà*, there are now four Cirque du Soleil shows in Sin City, . . . and next year there will be a fifth, . . . Toss in Celine Dion’s Cirque-style show, *A New Day*, created by Franco Dragone, who was behind the water-based *O* and *Mystère* before leaving Cirque for his own projects . . . Too much?” (“It’s Cirque City” 4). He contends, much as the Cirque creators and publicity people do, that there is no end in sight for the production company.

Is there a glut of Cirque on the world market? Daniel Lamarre, the current COO of Cirque du Soleil, says no: “I don’t hear or see the audiences of the world saying that there is too much Cirque . . . *Mystère* is in its eighteenth year in Las Vegas, “*O*” still sells out every performance in its thirteenth year. People in some cities of the world complain that they don’t see us enough. No, I don’t think there is too much Cirque” (Ouzounian, “All the World’s a Stage.” E1).

It is imperative to note that there is one essential element that Las Vegas possesses that most of Cirque’s other performance locations do not: a constant influx of new visitors. According to the Las Vegas Convention and Visitor Authority, of the 38,928,708 visitors to Las Vegas in 2011, sixteen percent were there for the first time. Of course, many who come to Las Vegas are already familiar with Cirque du Soleil. Given Cirque’s numerous tours in worldwide venues, there are few regions of the developed world to which Cirque has not traveled. Certainly, most visitors to Vegas are familiar with Cirque du Soleil and their brand

of entertainment. Despite having the opportunity to see Cirque in their hometowns, visitors flock to the resident shows in Las Vegas because they are bigger, more daring and entirely different from the shows on the road. Purpose-built and retro-fitted theatres, multi-million-dollar technology, and edgy adult themed performances are parts of the Las Vegas Cirque that are unavailable to the world outside Vegas. Sixty percent of the visitors to Las Vegas in 2011 saw one or more shows during their visit, and of the sixty percent, more than half saw a Cirque production or Broadway-style show. For many visitors, Cirque du Soleil is part of the attraction and part of the reason for visiting the Strip.

From Cirque's current history in Las Vegas, projections can be made about their future as a production company and about their future in Las Vegas. "The expectations are high and there is pressure to delight audiences . . . but also to open new doors" (D'Souza n. pag.). In a 2009 interview with Karen D'Souza in the *Oakland Tribune*, University of California- Santa Cruz theatre professor, Patty Gallagher says,

Cirque is still pulsing and vibrant after all these years because they pull from artistic developments around the world. They don't have a static definition of themselves or circus in general . . . they look around the globe for compelling and visionary artists and say, "How can they change Cirque?" I'm always impressed and amazed by the creative teams they assemble. (n. pag.)

It appears by all accounts that the growth of Cirque du Soleil has slowed, but it has not stopped. The future remains to be seen, but one thing is sure, Cirque will continue to evolve and expand.

Cirque du Soleil's influence is being felt in other productions on the Las Vegas Strip. History department chairman at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Hal Rothman, says,

“Cirque du Soleil . . . is part of a long-term trend. Clearly, this is the next step in the evolution of entertainment here in Las Vegas as the capital of entertainment consumption” (R. Smith 1D). Currently, there is one show on the Strip that is much in the style of Cirque du Soleil but is not one of their offerings. *Le Rêve: a Small Collection of Imperfect Dreams* (*The Dream*) is the brainchild of former Cirque director/producer Franco Dragone, and is the resident production in the flagship of the Wynn resort chain, Wynn Las Vegas. It is noteworthy that the Cirque-like *Le Rêve* is being produced in a property that is owned by Steve Wynn, for it was Wynn who brought Cirque first to Las Vegas with *Mystère* in 1993. In 2000, Wynn sold his ownership of Mirage Enterprises to MGM Grand CEO, Kirk Kerkorian, and thus Wynn’s connection with Cirque du Soleil seemed at an end; however, in 2005, Wynn opened the first of his new self-named Las Vegas resorts, Wynn Las Vegas. For his plush new country club and casino, Wynn needed a big name, high spectacle entertainment offering but he wanted it to be different from what was offered through the Mirage chain of resorts. He invited Franco Dragone to return again to Las Vegas and to create a show for this resort. Dragone, now the owner of his own entertainment group, accepted and *Le Rêve* was born.

Le Rêve bears a striking resemblance to Cirque du Soleil’s *O*, which was Dragone’s last Las Vegas show for Cirque du Soleil. The show centers on a 1.1 million gallon pool into which performers plunge and are repeatedly raised from. Dragone says, “my aim with *Le Rêve* [was] to create an entirely new universe, to transport everyone into a world where the theatre, performance, and audience become one and the same reality . . . to take them on a journey that through their consciousness touches the emotions in a way that is different and goes further than anything I have done before. To provoke memories and

communicate to the audience the fragility of humanity” (“Dragone Reveals *Le Rêve* at Wynn Las Vegas” n. pag.). Dragone’s aims are reminiscent of Laliberté’s desires to draw Cirque’s audiences into the performance. As Cirque says on their website, “Cirque du Soleil has constantly sought to evoke the imagination, invoke the senses and provoke the emotions of people around the world (“Discover Who We Are.” *cirquedusoleil.com*).

Le Rêve went through growing pains similar to those seen with some of Cirque’s later shows. After its initial opening on May 6, 2005 (“The Dream Begins” n. pag.), the show was closed and revamped. Once reopened, the show made better use of the technical capabilities of the theatre. *Le Rêve* artistic director Brian Burke says in the *Los Angeles Times*, “We are still learning about this technical marvel. We learned this theatre while we were running the show. We learned to get from one thing to another faster. And I think we now use every nook and cranny of the Theatre. We really push the limits” (Abowitz, *The Moveable Buffet* D17).

Critics identify *Le Rêve* as a “lesser Cirque show” (Abowitz, *The Moveable Buffet* D17), and its ticket prices reflect that notion. According to *showtickets.com*, “premium seating” tickets are \$125.40 and \$147.40, while Cirque’s water based show, *O* offers “lower/upper orchestra” tickets for the same night and same performance time for \$181.45. It can be noted, however, that *Le Rêve* has influenced Cirque. *Le Rêve* advertises the proximity of the seating to the action. According to its website, “the Aqua Theatre is so intimate, you will feel that you are part of the dream” (“*Le Rêve*” *wynnlasvegas.com*). The center of the action is merely forty feet from the closest seats and the theatre has only fourteen rows of depth, making the audience feel that they could touch the performers from any seat. Cirque’s first show to open in Las Vegas after the opening of *Le Rêve* was

Love. This show, too, is in the round and places the action even nearer to the audience than *Le Rêve*, with the closest seats being less than five feet from the stage.

Another production that bears some resemblance to the size and scope of Cirque du Soleil productions was Celine Dion's *A New Day*, which opened in the remodeled Colosseum at Caesar's Palace on March 25, 2003. Franco Dragone was tapped to direct. The show was large and lavish, much more like a Cirque du Soleil production than a typical headliner show. Backed by sixty dancers, she ended each performance by being raised on invisible wires to the rafters of the theatre, floating for a few minutes – sixty feet – above the stage (Ruggieri, "Cirque du Celine" G-1). This show ended its run on December 16, 2007 after 717 performances. Dion has since returned to Las Vegas and to Caesar's Palace and the headliner is the focus of the show now. Dragone was not asked to direct and Dion does not float above the stage, it appears that Cirque is not a part of Dion's new incarnation.

The other key player in the Las Vegas strip resort/casino market is the Las Vegas Sands Corporation, which opened Cirque du Soleil's *Zaia* in Macau, China, in 2008. The show did not perform for long mainly because of low-ticket sales. Since *Zaia* closed in 2012, no further word has been made about further collaborations between the Las Vegas Sands Corporation and Cirque du Soleil. Cirque continues to produce works in MGM Mirage properties only which raises the question, Can Cirque really dominate the Las Vegas strip when it is produced in only one of the three Las Vegas strip resort/casino super powers?

At this time of this writing, Cirque is just releasing a big budget 3-D film directed by James Cameron that focuses on Cirque du Soleil's shows in Las Vegas. The film, *Worlds Away*, opened in the United States in December 2012 and was released on DVD on March 12, 2013. This is the second film by Cirque du Soleil that addresses their Las Vegas

productions. The first, *Flowers in the Desert*, was produced for Public Broadcasting Television by Cirque du Soleil and is a ninety-minute overview of the Vegas shows. *Flowers* is really little more than an extended advertisement with teasers of some production acts from each of the shows. Each show is clearly identified both verbally and with title indicators, making it simple for prospective audience members to identify a show they might like to see.

The Cameron film, as mentioned, is more a feature film. Its intent was to bring the seven (Las Vegas) worlds of Cirque du Soleil to a worldwide audience, but most critics and fans agree the film is flawed. The direction is by *Shrek* director Andrew Adamson and James Cameron produces. The work was filmed over the course of the year 2011. The problem with the film lies in the fact that Cirque du Soleil produces a style of entertainment that relies heavily upon live bodies in the physical presence of other live bodies. The use of tight camera angles removes elements from their greater context and some technical elements, such as the make-up, just do not transfer to high definition film. Peter Hartlaub of the *San Francisco Chronicle* says, "There may be a way to replicate the thrills of Cirque in a movie theatre, but this isn't it. It would be like watching a movie of people eating sushi, and then thinking you just dined at Nobu. Until further notice, Cirque du Soleil is best experienced live" (n. pag.). Like *Flowers*, Cameron's film seemed designed to promote the shows. Get a big budget film crew to create a "movie" about the shows being produced in Las Vegas, where they are always open and available for audience members and you help to create a market for those works. It does little good to produce a film about the touring shows; they are much less accessible to the world at large.

Many see the film as a marketing tactic. Kimberly Jones, of the *Austin Chronicle* calls it a “pupu platter of seven Cirque du Soleil shows . . . strung together with the very thin connective tissue of an original story” (n. pag.). The film might appeal to a new Cirque audience member but it will fail to satisfy anyone who has seen Cirque perform live. Its effectiveness as a tool for new audience cultivation is minimal given the poor box office returns but as Alan Scherstuhl of *The Village Voice* said, “it beats the Vegas ticket price” (n. pag.).

The history of Las Vegas’ entertainment has now become inextricably linked with the history of Cirque du Soleil itself. Cirque has given Las Vegas a new kind of entertainment and Las Vegas has given Cirque the drive—and money—to create technologically superb spectacles. An ever evolving entity, Las Vegas will cast off Cirque when it fails to generate sufficient interest and revenues from tourists. Art critic Dave Hickey says, “Vegas is very pragmatic. If it doesn’t work it will go away.” Steven Wynn adds, “the future of Las Vegas is dependent on entertainment and the arts. If it loses that, look out for the Indian casinos” (Hirsch n. pag.). For now, at least, Cirque’s position appears to be secure.

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APPENDIX

LIVE ACTION PRODUCTION CHRONOLOGY OF CIRQUE DU SOLEIL

YEAR	TITLE	TYPE	LOCATION	DIRECTOR
1984	<i>Le Grand Tour</i>	Touring	Canada	Guy Caron
1985 – 1986	<i>La Magie Continue</i>	Touring	Canada	Franco Dragone
1987	<i>Le Cirque Réinventé</i>	Touring	North America	Franco Dragone
1990	<i>Nouvelle Expérience</i>	Touring	North America	Franco Dragone
1992 – 1997	<i>Saltimbanco</i>	Touring	International	Franco Dragone
1992	<i>Fascination</i>	Touring	Japan	Roger Parent
1993 – present	<i>Mystère</i>	Resident	Las Vegas – Treasure Island Resort and Casino	Franco Dragone
1994 – present	<i>Alegria</i>	Touring	International	Franco Dragone
1996 – present	<i>Quidam</i>	Touring	International	Franco Dragone
1997	<i>Pomp Duck and Circumstance</i>	Cabaret	Hamburg, New York, and Chicago	Gilles Ste-Croix
1998 – present	“O”	Resident	Las Vegas – Bellagio Resort and Casino	Franco Dragone
1998 – present	<i>La Nouba</i>	Resident	Orlando, FL	Franco Dragone
1999 – present	<i>Dralion</i>	Touring	International	Guy Caron
2002 – present	<i>Varekai</i>	Touring	World-wide	Dominic Champagne
2003 – present	<i>Zumanity</i>	Resident	Las Vegas – New York, New York Hotel and Casino	Dominic Champagne and René Richard Cyr
2004 – present	<i>Kà</i>	Resident	Las Vegas – MGM Resort and Casino	Robert Lepage
2005 – present	<i>Corteo</i>	Touring	International	Daniele Finzi
2006 – present	<i>Love</i>	Resident	Las Vegas – Mirage Resort and Casino	Dominic Champagne
2006 - 2008	<i>Delirium</i>	Touring	North America	Michel Lemieux and Victor Pilon

2007 – present	<i>Kooza</i>	Touring	International	David Shiner
2007 – 2010	<i>Wintuk</i>	Resident (seasonal)	WaMu Theatre – Madison Square Garden	Richard Blackburn
2008 – 2012	<i>Zaia</i>	Resident	Macau, China – Venetian Macao-Resort Hotel	Gilles Maheu
2008 – 2011	<i>Zed</i>	Resident	Tokyo Disneyland	François Girard
2008 – present	<i>Criss Angel Believe</i>	Resident	Las Vegas – Luxor Hotel and Casino	Criss Angel and Serge Denoncourt
2009 – present	<i>Ovo</i>	Touring	International	Deborah Colker
2009 – 2010	<i>Banana Shpeel</i>	Touring	United States	David Shiner
2009 – 2012	<i>Viva Elvis</i>	Resident	Las Vegas – Aria Resort and Casino	Vincent Paterson
2010 – present	<i>Totem</i>	Touring	International	Vincent Paterson
2011 – present	<i>Zarkana</i>	Resident	New York – Radio City Music Hall, then Las Vegas – Aria Resort and Casino	Francois Girard
2011 – 2013	<i>Iris</i>	Resident	Los Angeles	Philippe Decouflé
2011 – 2013	<i>Michael Jackson: The Immortal World Tour</i>	Touring	North America	Jamie King
2012 – present	<i>Amaluna</i>	Touring	International	Diane Paulus
2013	<i>Michael Jackson: One</i>	Resident	Las Vegas – Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino	Jamie King