

Combining music, art and acrobatics, Cirque du Soleil defies gravity and, as our expert found, easy explanation

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By Charles Desmarais + Photography by Al Seib

First, Mom sat you down and told you the truth about Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. Then you learned to sleep at night with all the lights out. Then came science classes. The mysteries of life became formulas written on the palm of your hand, and the reward you sought was a C or better. + Bit by bit, you gained control of your dreams and your illusions; they became more realistic, more prosaic. + Instead of visions of a fantastic creature whose only purpose was to surprise you with gifts, you saw yourself winning the lottery or in line for a promotion. Uniquely horrible bogeymen with incomprehensibly evil



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designs were replaced by TV-stock drug addicts and bad guys.

You grew up.

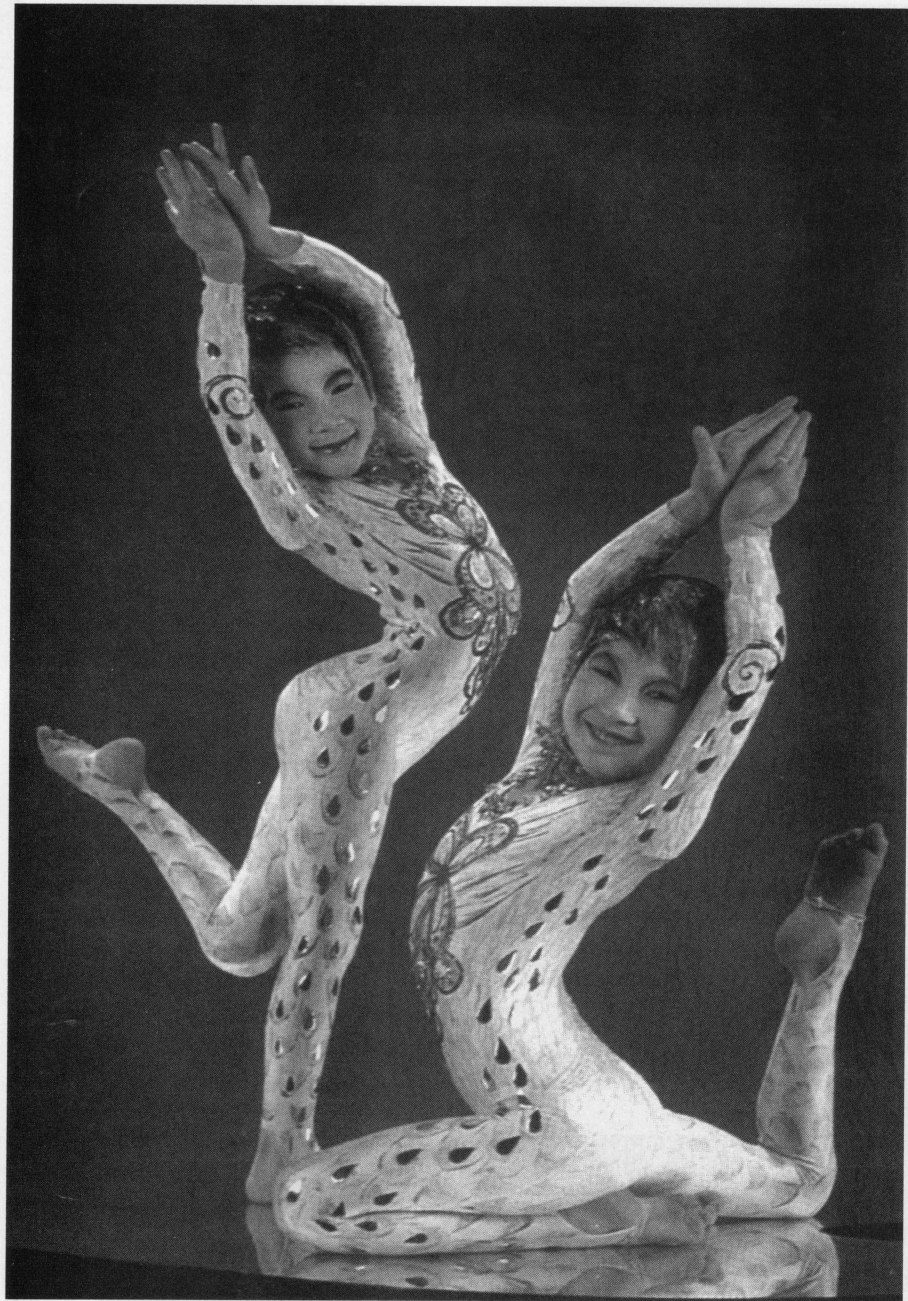
And then one evening you turn off the television and drive, not to a restaurant or a movie house or a building of any traditional sort, but to a parking lot at South Coast Plaza. Here, a gigantic tent of spotlighted yellow and blue canvas billows against the night sky.

Nothing is entirely familiar about this scene. It's a little like a sports stadium (outdoor arena, wood-and-metal bleachers) and a bit like a theater (horseshoe of seats around a platform), but it is neither of these. The tent is a shelter, but only barely a structure. The ping pang of heels on metal flooring, the flup flap of canvas in the breeze, the audible stretching of ropes and cables around the tent's superstructure are a dissonant poem, evanescent, ephemeral.

Brightly uplighted tubes of orange cloth flicker and swirl in the wind of small fans—flames of disconcertingly constant intensity. On this topsy-turvy night, you look down on the stage floor at a cloud-studded morning sky.

Welcome back to that place where enigma and mystery are part of natural experience. Welcome to a primordial time before the need to understand took the place of the ability to see. *Bienvenu à Cirque du Soleil.*

Cirque du Soleil has been landing in Orange County like some alien assault team for several years now, its distinctive canopy abruptly sprouting from a freeway-close mall parking lot. Suburban family vehicles line up to bring sellout crowds to each performance—2,500 people per performance, nine performances a week, usually for six weeks in a row—a total audience of about 135,000 innocent souls lured by the promise of light entertainment, all trapped in an environment that will use illusion to surreptitiously undermine our smug faith in



In a performance which alternately horrifies and fascinates, Cirque Du Soleil child contortionists Ulziibayar Chimed and Nomin Tseveendorj challenge notions about our bodies.

appearances.

Le Cirque du Soleil is, of course, that "Circus of the Sun" that leaves the cold winters of its Canadian home to take up residence in California for several months each year. Its local run begins January 24, and if it's as popular as in past years, the Orange County shows will have the highest percentage of ticket sales anywhere in North America.

Most everyone knows by now that

Cirque is not your average circus—no animals, no sawdust, no cotton candy. Its origins are in a loosely organized Québec festival of street performers. Before there even was a "company," there was *Le Club des Talons Hauts*—The High Heels Club—a ragged group of stilt-walkers and fire-eaters.

A good street performer is a lot like a professional circus performer. He must train in a skill the rest of us

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don't have, perfect his timing and, above all, learn to control the crowd. Some might call this playing to the crowd—pleasing the crowd. But this kind of performer does not, first and foremost, please. He conducts, deceives, fascinates, dazzles, hypnotizes. And then he collects, be it coins or ovations.

The best circus acrobats do something that is a lot like dance. The clowns have roots in the same cultural sources as Shakespearean actors. And music, the most abstract of the arts, wafts over all these forms, creating mood, segmenting time, announcing beginnings and endings.

The genius of Cirque du Soleil founder Guy Laliberté and his creative team is their recognition of these radical relationships and their decision to capitalize on them, even in the face of some major social and historical obstacles.

The course of modern Western culture has been one of categorization and division. This has reached absurd lengths, particularly in the arts. Drawing, printmaking, painting and sculpture each have their own journals, critics, collectors and, as a result, their own histories. Former University of California, Irvine, dance professor Paul Hodgins says his students routinely ask why they are required to take music history classes. A University of Southern California music professor says he learned long ago not to mention James Joyce's *Ulysses* in class—no one's even heard of it.

About 200 years ago, the institution we know as the circus developed and began its steady drift from the aristocratic riding rinks of London to the mass entertainment medium we know today. Clowns, acrobats and animal trainers have been plying their trades for centuries. But in a quest for a moral art that would instruct and uplift the masses, cultural money and power drew a line between "high" art—an intellectually satisfying ideal—and the vulgar, romantic, bawdy stuff to which we all respond at a level

somewhere between our necks and our knees.

So, The Dance (as opposed to dancing) was assigned the appreciation of the ideal human form in movement through space. The Theater became the medium for analysis of human thought and motivation. The Circus was regulated to the realm of "low art," a place for the visceral thrills of belly laughs and death-defying stunts.

Laliberté and company traced the roots of clowning back to the absurdity of our dreams. Then they tapped elements of Renaissance pageants and 15th-century Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*. They saw a dancer in each tumbler and aerialist. They stole lighting effects from the theater, the movies and Las Vegas. They found musical inspiration in the cutting-edge minimalism of serious composers like Terry Riley and Steve Reich, in the electronic music possibilities of new computers, in today's pop and rock and in the tah-dah fanfares of musty circus bands.

And then they went to work on what it all might mean.

Not that specific, readable narrative has ever been a major concern. The closest thing to a story line we have seen in Southern California was the concept Cirque used on its first U.S. tour, which had its clueless protagonists bumbling into an illogical sequence of wondrous, but utterly uncontrollable, encounters.

This year's show, *Alegría*, has an even less discernible theme. Company principals have indicated two possible interpretations: One is a focus on youth as the salvation of our age; the other assumes a changing of roles between an archetypal King and his Fool.

But both of these statements of theme are useless if your goal is to make sense of *Alegría*. A centerpiece of this year's show is a white-haired singer—a starkly alluring Madonna in white corset and cage-like skirt—who

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accompanies the action with at least 50 minutes of nearly-intelligible *bavardage*. But this gibberish contains an odd weight of portent and implication: when the voice rises from interminable moan to full-fledged wail, its one incessantly repeated word—Alegría—hardly seems an expression of “Joy.”

That’s the best part about Cirque du Soleil—it doesn’t try to explain itself or condescend by giving us pat explanations, off-the-shelf emotions and dime-store beauty. It is the joyless parts of Alegría that give it its tension. Thus, when a pair of tiny Asian contortionists wind around each other, their object is to play upon our fascinated horror of our bodies and their functions. Our discomfort is only heightened by the recriminating, pasted-on smiles of these eerily remarkable girls.

Bird cage images abound, from the open-work Pantheon dome enclosing half the stage (seemingly made of steel beams and hung at the show’s opening with decorative “perches”), to the vignettes of a caged airplane and a caged man, to the cage skirt of the singer. There is birdlike quality to several earthbound characters, notably the voiceless capon of a Master of Ceremonies, with his flapping arms and legs and protruding breast and tail, but also including any number of beak-nosed extras. Their impotence is a running commentary on the ultimate frustration of all the performances straining to swing, bounce or be hauled off the ground.

At the center of the program is a quasi-religious image, Mikhail Matorin’s cube dance. Matorin ascends into darkness above the crowd in swirls of colored light. Bit by bit, the message unfurls: Count on nothing—not vision, not gravity, not the predictability of the human form. Accept difference, accept change, accept uncertainty. Half martyr, hung on a geometric structure as elemental as a cross; half ideal figure in the web of Leonardo’s famous proportion drawing.

Everywhere, odd-featured characters poke their beaks and top knots into unlikely situations. Think of Batman’s strangest antagonists wearing Good Guy white hats. Who can say the real Penguin and the inner Joker are not mislead innocents, searching for their moment of *alegría*?

Cirque du Soleil has come a long way in 10 short years. This year’s show is underwritten by AT&T, Air Canada and Acura. Corporate logos abound on letterhead, programs, products and all around the tent. Nearly 1.5 million people will see this show at one of its 12 North American venues. Two additional troupes are performing, one in Europe, the other in Las Vegas. The three troupes and their support staff number 600.

The trappings of Cirque du Soleil’s success can get in the way at times. A glossy official program that sells for \$5 this year adds absolutely nothing to our understanding of the production, unless you count lists of names of performers—without the slightest biographical or professional data—as useful information. Worse, the program and the somewhat more informative 30-minute videotape about the Alegría show (\$9) indulge in the most sophomoric prose poetry.

The greatest danger, though, is that Cirque will start to imitate itself. The audience wants surprise and freshness, but one suspects most would echo the words of one Cirque-lover who said, “I hope they don’t change it and mess it up.” But, of course, that is what they *must* do, for until they “mess it up,” the company gets closer with each performance to the quaint lifelessness of such dead forms as traditional opera and circus. The creative act is the making of something new. OC

Charles Desmarais, of Capistrano Beach, is the former director of the Laguna Art Museum.

Tickets for the Orange County performances of Cirque du Soleil are sold through Ticketmaster outlets, by phone at 740-2000, or call the box office at 557-4111.