

THE ART OF THE CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS

How the spirit of risk-taking and a lack of respect for barriers inspired Quebec’s Cirque du Soleil to unheard-of aesthetic and commercial heights

A little more than three decades ago, a group of jugglers, stilt-walkers and accordion-players brought their start-up idea to a Quebec agency and asked for funding for a show about Jacques Cartier’s 1534 arrival in what would become Canada. Although turned down, the street performers behind Cirque du Soleil were undaunted, and went straight to then-premier René Lévesque. “That was gutsy and unexpected,” says Louis Patrick Leroux, a playwright and director who holds joint appointments in Concordia University’s departments of English and French, and is a leader in the burgeoning field of contemporary circus research.

Cirque got its funding, and made its point; this was a company ready to push beyond the usual limits, whether in the creative process or in its approach to business. That spirit would prove to be the foundation of a made-in-Quebec, worldwide success story that would break down the barriers between art and commerce and between the circus and other performing arts.

“The guts of Cirque is their ability to take risks and try to maximize the potential of that risk,” says Lyn Heward, who was head of Cirque’s content creation division from 2000 to 2005, overseeing the development of such groundbreaking shows as Varekai, La Nouba, O, Dralion, Zumanity and KA. She is now a goodwill ambassador for the company.

Professor Leroux and Ms. Heward will be featured in the Concordia University Thinking Out Loud conversation series on creativity, held in partnership with the Globe and Mail. Their session, on March 12, will focus on circus research and creativity. For Professor Leroux, the fas-



cination of the contemporary circus, as created by Cirque du Soleil, is in the way it combines theatre, dance and acrobatics. His research focuses on, among other things, the creation process of circuses. “Working on contemporary circus for me is engaging with a total art involving aesthetics, storytelling, acrobatics, athletics—inevitable, ineluctable movement.” His research has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Québec Fonds de Recherche Société et Culture and, for a new project on social circus (the use of circus arts for social good), the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

To create a total art, the company, while centred in Montreal, needed to go to the ends of the Earth to recruit talent, says Ms. Heward, whose duties at Cirque included recruitment. “One of the great strengths of Cirque du Soleil is realizing that talent exists everywhere. You’ve just got to spend the time and the energy to find it.” But identifying talent is not

enough. Training, preparation and team-building are all vital, she says. “I don’t mean just the artists. I mean also putting the technical team together, putting the creative team together, building a working synergy between those groups of people in order to create something which is new and unique. Those are Cirque’s two big investments, identifying talent and nurturing talent.”

Cirque also sought to break down barriers that might have prevented a gymnast, say, from learning to become a clown, too. It did not assume that people were limited to the one big talent they had demonstrated in their lives. “You want versatile talent, people who can learn to sing even if they’re gymnasts or learn to dance even though they’re divers or synchronized swimmers,” Ms. Heward says. “They have to be polyvalent. They can do different things if they’re given access to the proper training.”

Cirque got its start amidst a gloomy environment among art-

ists after Quebec rejected sovereignty in the 1980 referendum, Professor Leroux says. There was a reaction against the identity-based art of the 1970s. “The 70s mostly offered plays about ‘Quebecness’ — how we speak, how we think.” Dance, acrobatics and other art forms based in image and movement became more prominent, providing an escape from identity politics. “We needed this broadening of perspective” that Cirque provided, he says.

The company has grown exponentially, producing eight shows simultaneously in Las Vegas and 10 touring shows. It has done for Montreal what Research in Motion and Blackberry did for Ontario’s Waterloo region: spur the creation of a hub of industry employing thousands in the local community.

Although it has retrenched of late, laying off hundreds of employees, Cirque’s economic impact remains extraordinary: over \$1-billion in direct revenue annually flowing into Montreal, and

much more in spinoffs including 40 smaller circus companies, the National Circus School of Montreal — the only government-funded school of its kind in North America — not to mention that Quebec schools offer circus activities through physical education or after-school programs.

Cirque was never apologetic about trying to mix commerce and art, Professor Leroux says. “From the start, Cirque du Soleil had no qualms about creating art that would also entertain vast amounts of people.”

And Montreal’s reputation as the capital of circus arts has become entrenched, as Professor Leroux learned while in Chicago at a meeting of circus researchers and performers. “The circus people in the U.S. saw Montreal as a Mecca of the circus. They had the sense that it was a place where everything was possible.”

To register for the talk by Louis Patrick Leroux and Lyn Heward, visit Concordia.ca/talks. The event is free but space is limited.

JUST TALKING Talent without borders

At the heart of Cirque du Soleil’s success is a multi-faceted art form, nurtured by a philosophy that encourages creative people from around the globe to bring out the best in themselves, say Concordia researcher Louis Patrick Leroux and Cirque ambassador Lyn Heward

Q: What can we learn about creativity from the circus?

Louis Patrick: The first thing that comes to mind is the fundamental interdisciplinarity of circus, the hybridity of the genre. Circus is something that brings just about every academic and practical discipline that I can think of. I’d been working on theatre my entire life and one could argue that theatre can bring all this together — but somehow it doesn’t. The study of theatre has become hyper-specialized.

Q: How has the circus in Quebec created such dynamism?

Louis Patrick: What I’m finding in the circus world is that you have engineers talking to historians. You have physical literacy specialists engaging with medical doctors and physiotherapists. You have marketing people engaging with archivists. I’d never seen this sheer openness before working on contemporary circus and it’s probably because it’s such a new field of inquiry.

Q: What first drew you to the circus as a researcher?

Louis Patrick: I come from theatre. My interest in theatre was in dramaturgy — analyzing how stories are told. It’s very word-based. I saw Cirque du Soleil grow in the 1980s. I was never attuned to it until they started playing in Las Vegas and hiring Quebec theatre directors, designers and actors. There were suddenly Quebec-developed and -conceived and -produced shows taking over Las Vegas, which seemed like the most unlikely scenario. Quebec had been promoting for the last 30 to 40 years a very word- and discourse-based



art linked to Quebec’s distinct identity. Then along came contemporary circus which was all about the performative body doing seemingly impossible feats. Being close to the theatre world, I could talk to people who went to work in Vegas, who came back with a world of possibilities. You could imagine amazing things and actually get them done with the recently acquired expertise and international contacts.

Q: What should be said about the marriage of art and commerce that Cirque has achieved?

Louis Patrick: Creativity in this case is both artistic and commercial, and it’s unapologetically so. For something to be good, it doesn’t have to be so obscure and refined that no one actually gets it. This emerging art offers in Quebec and internationally an interesting alternative to other arts, something that can touch the soul but also literally keep you on the edge of your seat.

Louis Patrick Leroux, a director and playwright, is a professor in Concordia University’s English and French departments. He is also scholar-in-residence at the National Circus School in Montreal and a collaborator with the Canada Industrial Research Chair for Colleges in Circus Arts.

Q: What’s a key lesson in managing talented people from your years at Cirque?

Lyn: Just because somebody is a good musician doesn’t mean that he or she can’t learn to dance or be a clown. The same thing exists in real life. You can have a creative accountant. You can have people who go far beyond the borderlines of what their traditional job is. Don’t put your employees in a box. Listen to their ideas. How can they extend themselves in the process while also helping you build your product?

Q: Could you give me an example from Cirque?

Lyn: Very often I’ve seen an acrobat or gymnast who says he does a great double or triple somersault, but he’s as funny as a clown. Don’t limit the limits of talent. People very often have other skills and talents that they can bring to the table but you have to give them an opportunity to show it off. Terry Bartlett was in several Olympic Games in gymnastics for Great Britain. We hired him in 1992 and he’s now one of the clowns in O. He’s also a great musician. To see him on stage as a clown —wow. Part of it was Cirque, but part of it was him finding it in himself.

Q: How do you recruit talented people?

Lyn: You sit on a lot of planes. You have to know what sorts of talent you’re looking for. Cirque started off as street performers and then as circus artists in



the late 1980s, and in the 90s — where I came into the picture — they were interested in a broader range of talent. Gymnastics, synchronized swimming, great musicians, great dancers. But Cirque also has a cultural spirit, a cultural depth, which means going to the far corners of the world to identify those unique talents.

Q: How do you help create a team, so the sum is greater than the parts?

Lyn: An investment in time. A Cirque show doesn’t take a month or two to build. Once the ideas come, it takes about a year, realistically, to work with artists. It’s not easy to bring in 55 people for a touring show and 75 to 80 for a big show in Las Vegas. It takes time to allow those people to work together.

Lyn Heward joined Cirque du Soleil in 1992, and from 2000 to 2005 was the president and chief operating officer of the creative content division. She is the author of The Spark: Igniting the Creative Fire That Lives Within Us All.