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Revista Mexicana de Estudios Canadienses (nueva época), núm. 16, 2008, pp. 121-126

Asociación Mexicana de Estudios sobre Canadá, A.C.
Culiacán, México

Disponible en: <http://www.redalyc.org/src/inicio/ArtPdfRed.jsp?iCve=73918504010>



Revista Mexicana de Estudios Canadienses
(nueva época)

ISSN (Versión impresa): 1405-8251

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Asociación Mexicana de Estudios sobre Canadá,
A.C.
México

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Más información del artículo

Página de la revista

The Cirque du Soleil in Las Vegas: An American Strip-Tease¹

Louis Patrick Leroux

The idea of a Québec-based entertainment corporation specialized in spectacular extravaganzas taking the city of kitsch by storm is already an extraordinary one in itself. That it would do so five times and maintain a buzz for fifteen years is astounding. For it to do so with the help of respected art-driven directors René-Richard Cyr, Dominique Champagne, Robert Lepage, Serge Denoncourt and various designers, artisans, and actors from Québec's "legitimate" theatre scene is quite simply unfathomable.

The Cirque built its reputation on a dreamspace, an "imagi-nation," as Jennifer Harvie and Erin Hurley put it,² where one can transcend traditional national parameters, where sexless bodies contort before us and artists from across the world unite to tell the non-verbal tale of infinite human potential. This "imagi-nation" is one where the Cirque can embody its own ideological topography—this nation is, of course, both creative and corporate.

For decades, the Cirque's aesthetic, especially with Franco Dragone directing its shows,³ was one of scenic poetry extolling all things ethereal, clean, and delicate, as Nathalie Petrowski put it in her column in *La Presse*. She added, slyly, that "by banning animals from its circus top, the Cirque du Soleil also banished animal instinct with all of its brutal, dark, and fleshy implications" (2003: C5). And yet, after having been an essential partner in Steve Wynn's Walt-Disneyfication of Vegas, the Cirque has worked very hard to break its squeaky clean image with more recent shows like *Zumanity* and the forthcoming Criss Angel show at Luxor. With *Zumanity*, the Cirque strayed away from traditional circus and put forth the smell of polymorphous sexual humans: brutal, somber, flesh-driven and fetishistic images.

Zumanity is the Cirque's third show to take on Vegas. It originally was intended to renew, if not radicalize, the Cirque du Soleil's "family entertainment" image, by creating a resolutely adult erotic cabaret.

Interestingly, their first two shows, *Mystère* and the improbably aquatic-themed show *O*, widely contributed to giving a new family-friendly sheen to Las

Vegas with their artistically-driven, yet accessible, spectacles. Ten years after arriving in Vegas with their first show,⁴ the Cirque du Soleil needed to prove that it could play big and that it was willing to take business and artistic risks alike.⁵

Americanization of the Cirque and its newfound fascination with narrative

The Cirque's gaudiness and excesses might point to an Americanization of its shows, yet one can't help but notice the gradual imposition of a narrative-based, indeed almost a literary, sensibility in the Vegas productions. One can discern an interest in narrative devices (action and plot) as well as the gradual integration of speech in the Cirque's otherwise non-linguistic tradition.⁶ We're still quite far from circus-theater or even extensive playwriting being applied to the circus, but one does sense a growing concern and, indeed, a desire in the Cirque artists to build a story which goes beyond the Cirque's own proverbial and well-worn "collective transformation" trope. The fact that the Cirque has been integrating theatre-folk such as Dominique Champagne, René-Richard Cyr, Robert Lepage, and Serge Denoncourt probably has something to do with the progressive move from its funfair ("*théâtre forain*") and circus origins to its current theatre-driven spectacles which weave circassian acts into a basic, sustained, narrative.

The arrival of theatre artists at the helm of the Cirque's most recent shows coincided with Franco Dragone's departure. While Dragone was a theatre director as well, his experience with European "artistic" circuses and his own experiences in collective theatre, forever marked the baroque, and sometimes rococo, aesthetic of the Cirque du Soleil. Dragone's shoes were very large to fill and the Cirque opened up to as many directors as there were shows in development, each director bringing his own artistic baggage while sharing the same Québec cultural origins: part American, part European. The opening of the Cirque to so many directors was enabled by its exponential and hyperactive growth in Las Vegas' surreal and excessive entertainment market – an ever-expanding entertainment market defying the usual commercial laws of supply and demand. It seems as though the more the Cirque supplies, the more demand there is. This unexpected elasticity has allowed for many artists to join the Cirque's ranks and to develop projects they would have never even dreamed of elsewhere.

The boundless possibilities of producing greater and greater Vegas extravaganzas (Steve Wynn reportedly said that there were no limits to how much money they could spend developing *O*). Also, *KA* is reported to be the most expensive theatrical production anywhere in the world, estimated at \$200 million

in production costs) point to an inescapable movement towards bacchanalian spectacles of excess.

While the shows bear the Cirque du Soleil “brand” (clowns as curtain-raisers, acrobats, androgynous costumes and makeup, live musical soundscapes, oversized sets, and impressive number of performers), they all reference their originating art form. For instance, *Mystère* remains the synthesis of the early Dragone years at the Cirque; it highlights and emphasizes the very aesthetic and dazzling effects that would make the Cirque du Soleil’s reputation. *O*, by resurrecting a long-forgotten nineteenth century tradition of aquatic circus, renews the circus vocabulary and exploits and is quite simply, in my opinion, the pinnacle of the artistic, economic collaboration and sheer gutsy folly that defined the working relationship between Cirque du Soleil, Franco Dragone, and Steve Wynn collaboration. *Zumanity*, the Cirque’s erotic cabaret, allows the corporation to show its audacious and “adult” side by integrating theatre artists referencing the German decadent cabaret. *KA*, directed by the ubiquitous and multi-talented Robert Lepage is many things at once: dramatic ballet for its argument, epic play for its plot, cinematic for its visuals and channeling of Asian films. *Love*, a joint venture with the fabled Beatles is the most easily accessible of all of their shows with its carnivalesque quality, pop dance sequences, and some of the most popular songs ever recorded.

Thus three tendencies are apparent in the Cirque’s Vegas shows: a first, European-inspired pole, which includes *Mystère* and *O*, is aesthetically baroque and referentially metatheatrical. One feels the collective process, the pulse of the ensemble at work in these first shows. These shows are the result of a brainy and instinctive assimilation of counter-culture iconography from the seventies. The other pole is resolutely American with forthcoming shows on Elvis at City Center and another at the Luxor with Criss Angel, an edgy magician who is known for his A&E show *Mindfreak* and frequent forays into pop culture through television, inventive guerrilla phone marketing and the web.⁷

The passage from one pole to another is ensured by *Zumanity* and *Love* which are both European in reference (the cabaret and The Beatles) while succumbing to an American pop aesthetic and fetishization of individuality.

Interestingly, the Cirque du Soleil, a Québec cultural institution lauded by provincial governments of all political persuasions, is feeding this hyperactive producer of American content in the US After decades of shunning speech, the Cirque has finally admitted written text in its shows, most notably *Zumanity*. Who speaks? A transvestite “Mistress of Seduction” played by Joey Arias, plucked from New York’s Bar d’O to entertain tourists in Nevada. The Cirque’s first speaking part is American: he/she speaks in contrived sexual innuendo. This

from the writer and director of *Cité interdite* and *Cabarets neiges noires*, two politically driven Québec plays. This from the then artistic director of Québec's only institutional theatre exclusively devoted to new Québec drama.

With *Zumanity*, the Cirque du Soleil has abandoned the pretense of producing "circus" and rather toys with a very American fantasy of the Thirties' German cabaret, not the intellectual, polemical variety, but the declining, bawdy, sexualized one. Interestingly, the set and back-drop are fuelled by the audience's presence and awkwardness before the spectacle of inhibited sexuality in the city of sin.

By calling upon theatre directors such as Dominique Champagne and René-Richard Cyr, the Cirque du Soleil has clearly established that it will, once again, deviate from strictly circus-centered projects. It is primarily interested in spectacle, risk-taking, and renewing its creative pool. *Zumanity's* discourse remains surprisingly metatheatrical (or is it metacircassian?) in the sense that the show reveals the Cirque's fundamental desire to bare its ambitions and attributes without shame.

The spectacle, promoted as "The sensual side" of the Cirque du Soleil, is billed as an examination of intimacy: sexual intimacy, revealing and embracing everyone's desires, perversions, and preferences. In reality, it is the Cirque's own strip-tease we are attending, not that of a performer, not even that of a group, but rather a cultural corporation which ultimately exhibits its deepest desires: that of being fundamentally American—to be seen by and with those who count for something, the popular crowd, the edgy crowd. The Cirque's seeking and bowing to peer-pressure is curiously transformed into an audacious act, both commercially and artistically. The audacity – the gall – of the Cirque is to dream the American Dream without irony and to actually achieve it while remaining fundamentally Québécois in its ambitions, cultural and territorial ties, and in its quiet but constant promotion of Québécois artists in the US. The Cirque has outdone the Americans in their dreams and accomplishments. It has become an intrinsic part of the American cultural landscape by becoming more American, more spectacular, more significant than the traditional purveyors of circus. One shouldn't be surprised by the forthcoming production with Criss Angel and the following one referencing Elvis. They fit in perfectly in the symbiotic tango between the Cirque and American culture in the same way Céline Dion sang a duet at Caesars' Palace with images of the late Frank Sinatra basking in her presence from beyond. What is more American than to be from elsewhere and to make it big in America in spite of one's origins through a combination of ambition, talent, and audacity?

Notes

- ¹ This article was originally presented as a paper at the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, McGill University, Montreal, February 2008. Its title was “The Cirque du Soleil’s American Dream,” and it was given as part of the “Québec in Vegas” panel at the “Are We American? Canadian Culture in North America” Conference. Elements of the paper and the article have been taken from my article (2008) “*Zumanity*: la spectacularisation de l’intime, ou le pari impossible d’authenticité au Cirque du Soleil” published in *L’Annuaire théâtral*, no. 43, Summer/Fall.
- ² Harvie, Jennifer and Erin Hurley in “States of Play: Locating Québec in the Performances of Robert Lepage, Ex Machina, and the Cirque du Soleil,” 1999, p. 309... explain to what extent the Cirque du Soleil has served Québec governments, of every political allegiance, in their cultural “paradiplomacy” efforts. In spite of its status as a transnational “imagi-nation,” the Cirque du Soleil remains a Québec-driven corporation (and brand) in the sense that the company originated in Québec and that its principal creators and designers tend to be Québécois. The Cirque has retained its headquarters in Montreal, in spite of the fact that its revenues are mostly from its permanent shows in the USA and from its international tours.
- ³ Franco Dragone, a Belgian director of Italian descent directed most Cirque du Soleil productions from 1989 onwards, including *Le Cirque réinventé*, *Nouvelle expérience*, *Saltimbanco*, *Alegria*, *Quidam*, *La Nouba* and the Las Vegas productions of *Mystère* and *O*. He has also directed the Steve Wynn produced *Rêves* as a rival aquatic circus production to the Cirque’s and his own *O* as well as Céline Dion’s *A New Day* concert/spectacle which ran at Caesars’ Palace for five years.
- ⁴ The Cirque’s first Vegas show was *Nouvelle Expérience* in 1992-93 followed, the next year, by *Mystère* which would become their first permanent show at Treasure Island Hotel Casino.
- ⁵ *Zumanity* was a beacon, attracting the Hollywood A-list and serious commentary alike. *60 Minutes* did a feature on the show as did *Entertainment Tonight*. In August 2005, two years after the opening and after a series of cast changes, *Zumanity* was re-launched in a sense with an aggressive campaign featuring appearances on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and a ten page pictorial of the performers in the iconic *Playboy* magazine in addition to an extensive interview with Cirque du Soleil founder and “Guide” Guy Laliberté.
- ⁶ Julie Boudreault (1996) and Ame Wilson (2002) have both written on the Cirque’s communication strategies which, until *Zumanity*, had relied on

nonsensical language or on recognizable non-verbal tropes and conventions. Ame Wilson writes: “(i)n the case of the Cirque du Soleil, the cultural language being exchanged between members of a society, in this case an audience who may not share another common language relies upon the instant recognition of a vocabulary of historical sources [...]” (127). Although, since *Zumanity*’s master/mistress of ceremony’s explicit and understandable speech (see my article in *L’Annuaire théâtral*, 2008), the Cirque has continued using speech in its shows with a recorded prologue for the Robert Lepage-directed *KA*, the smooth-talking pick-pocket in *Kooza* and sung tales by Jim Corcoran in *Wintuk*.

- ⁷ The Goth magician’s web site features intertwined American and Greek flags, a list of his recent appearances on CSI and Oprah, manifold sensual pictures of his muscular pecs and washboard stomach while the heavy metal theme of *Mindfreak* plays on and on. The casual browser is discouraged from looking in and must instead, in an overt action reminiscent of teen culture, join the “Loyal Freaks” to find out more. A discreet countdown to the show at Luxor (no mention of the Cirque) titillates fans’ anticipation for the big day: months, days, hours, minutes, seconds...

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Fecha de recepción: 18 de abril
Fecha aceptación: 19 de septiembre