

WEEKEND STANDARD



Forget the moth-eaten lions, the stick-on smiles and the dreadful band. NEIL NORMAN takes a ringside seat at the latest of a new breed of circuses pumping new blood into classic routines

Blowing out the sawdust

“WE HAVE no animal acts. Actually, we *did* have a horse act. But we ate it. That's the thing with the French. You never know what they're going to do.” James Keylon (aka Alfredo di Carbonaro) is the ringmaster of the Cirque du Soleil. Or rather, he plays the *role* of the ringmaster. In the French Canadian circus, nothing is quite as it appears.

The latest of the *circus nouveaux* or “reinvented” circuses to reach Britain, Cirque du Soleil tears itself away from the slipstream of nostalgia that accompanies the memory of circus.

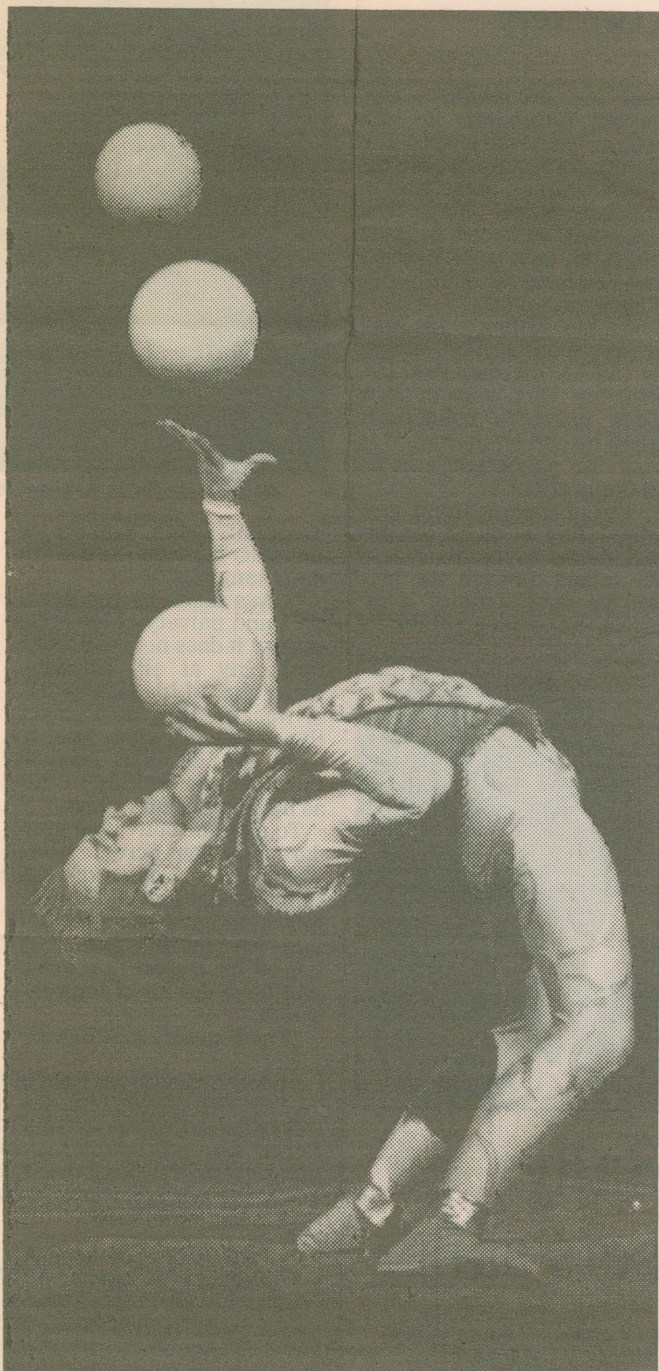
The whiff of sawdust, the musky aroma of big cats, the stick-on smiles of the aerialists, the aural assault of a truly dreadful band—these are nowhere to be found in the new circuses.

Founded and forged by young, freewheeling, energetic artists, the new circus takes risks, kicks stale routines into a parallel universe and looks forward rather than back.

THE success of previous visiting circuses like Circus Oz, The Flying Fruitfly Circus and the colossally exciting Archaeos—who distinguished themselves by being banned in Bristol on their current tour for being too controversial—have tapped a vein in the Euro-urban consciousness that owes little or nothing to the days of Bertram Mills, Mary Chipperfield or Gerry Cottle.

For these fellows, theatrical spectacle is more important than solo perfection. Liberated from the manacles of tradition, the new circus can do things that have never been done before. From chainsaws to satire, there's a cupboard full of toys that traditional circuses never had the key for, let alone opened. Above all, compared with the slick, anodyne professionalism of the older circus, new circus is sexy.

Where Archaeos's industrial bump 'n' grind operates on the dark side of the circus arena, often resembling an infernal ritual as the performers literally play with fire, motorbikes and chainsaws, Cirque du Soleil is an innocent *fantasie*, an elegant, ethereal midsummer night's dream. Here, we are



Juggling with new ideas: Cirque de Soleil's Zipperlin

in the presence of spirit magic; exotic images of mutated harlequins, flamenco acrobats, a restless, ever-changing musical accompaniment and a sophisticated light show—all contribute to the show's concept of a magic world intruding into grey reality for a few hours. The roots of the performance lie more in theatre than circus which immediately places the individual acts—particularly the clowns—on a different level.

Thus the extraordinary hand-to-hand balancing duet between former lovers Amelie Dumay and Eric Varelle is constructed along the lines of an acrobatic court-

ship, sealed with a kiss. A troupe of see-saw acrobats toddle about the ring in yellow and black like commuting penguins; Frederic Zipperlin emerges from an enormous plastic bubble like a mischievous, Puckish sprite, and proceeds to juggle balls of increasing size while simultaneously contorting himself into fantastic shapes.

Then there is the brace of Bulgarian beauties who do everything conceivable with a couple of ropes except tie up members of the audience—but you can't have anything.

One or two acts give the show a harder edge. Ring-

master James Keylon, whose character inhabits the role of a pompous mime artist, operates with his partner, Benny le Grand, at the extreme edge of traditional clowning.

“We play two old clowns who have been working together for years and are just trying to hang on. Unlike the clowns in Europe—who can do everything—we do *nothing*. We operate on the KISS principle—Keep It Simple, Stupid—so everybody can understand what is going on. Basically my job on the show is to keep the clowns off stage.”

It is also to satirise the traditional mime artist. When Keylon begins his hoary man-in-a-glass-box routine there is an audible muttering from the audience until the joke kicks in and they realise they are being had.

Having started life as a pharmacist—“I like drugs”—Keylon spent four years studying mime at the Marcel Marceau School so he knows whereof he mimes. He was eventually kicked out of the *ecole*, so the legend goes, for talking.

By a perverse coincidence, Marcel Marceau is appearing in a season in town at exactly the same time as the Cirque du Soleil, though whether the old master will deign to visit his recalcitrant former pupil is a matter of conjecture.

PERHAPS the key to the success of the new circus is the relative youth of those involved. One of the Cirque du Soleil's founders, and now its president, Guy Laliberte, was a mere stripling of 22 when he gathered together a cast of street theatre performers and, with the aid of a \$1.6 million grant from the Canadian government, performed the first show in 1984 to celebrate 450 years of the nation's existence.

Two years later, the Cirque du Soleil was up and running; and jumping and tumbling and flying, building a reputation that precedes them on their first European tour.

“There was no history of circus in Canada,” explains Laliberte, “only the American three ring variety. At first circus was not recognised as an art form by the government—it didn't fit into any established artistic scheme.”

Now, with ticket outlets, a film video company, an associated circus school in Mont-

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real and an almost fanatical Quebecois following, the Cirque turns over \$25 million to \$30 million per annum. Not exactly peanuts.

Never mind Billy Smart's, these guys have street smarts and it's paying off. They are now making big bucks in the big top where once they were busking for buncie.

The director of the current show, Grant Heisler, gives a few clues to the Cirque's success to date. “I like the simplicity of the show. We had a lot of complicated things that we threw out. I wanted

to give people a break—we lack the simple things in life.”

As an indication of the group's commitment, as well as the conceptual thinking at work behind the scenes, Heisler admits to making all the male performers cut their hair short in order to maintain the image of freshness and youth.

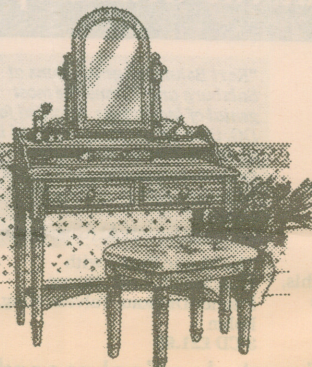
While some might view this as a curiously Machiavellian manoeuvre, even for a circus director, there is no denying its effectiveness. To witness all those glamorous, lithe and apparently youthful bodies cavorting in *extremis* is a reminder of that time when one thought, if only for a moment, what a great idea it would be to run away and join a circus. Perhaps it still is.

Now where did I put that hula hoop?

● *Cirque du Soleil makes its European debut at the Jubilee Gardens, the South Bank Centre, on Tuesday. It runs until Sunday 26 August.*

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