

## **Dark and Ancient Roots - the Circus of the Sun**

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*Cirque du Soleil* is arguably the premiere circus troupe in the world today. With six shows currently touring the globe and another six productions playing at permanent locations in the United States, no other circus can compare in scope or volume. They are literally “the greatest show on earth.” *Cirque du Soleil* has become a moneymaking machine, constantly creating new and seemingly innovative shows. But how new and how innovative are these productions?

In 1987 *Cirque du Soleil* claimed to “reinvent the circus.” Although they later retracted this statement, it does force the question: What is original and innovative about a *Cirque du Soleil* performance and what is not? This paper will explore the origins of one “unique” act within the *Cirque du Soleil* milieu, the aerial straps, and investigate to what degree it is an original or “unique” creation. As well, it will examine how *Cirque du Soleil* has transformed a major circus archetype, the ringmaster, into a new and distinctive creation.

In 1990, *Cirque du Soleil's Nouvelle Expérience* opened under the Big Top in Montreal, Canada. One of the feature acts in this production was the aerial straps, presented by Soviet acrobat Dimitriy Arnaoutov. The simple narrative embedded in many aerial straps acts exemplifies one of the primary tenets of the New Circus. The New Circus has rid itself of death-defying feats and animal routines and replaced them with performances that instil in the viewer some sense of the human experience. Arnaoutov's aerial straps act allowed him at once to fly free, while remaining fettered by restraints to the earth, revealing a deep desire to be something greater than a mere mortal.

In the program for the show the aerial straps routine was described as being “unique” and having been “developed in Moscow’s experimental Soyuz Gorskirk studio.” (*Nouvelle Expérience* Program, 44). Both of these statements lead the reader to assume that this is an original act that has not been performed in the past. This would be especially true of the average circus-goer who attends a limited number of circus performances.

Dimitriy Arnautov’s aerial straps act consisted of him wrapping leather straps around his wrists and being hoisted through the air by visible members of the circus troupe. He flew a range of “flight paths,” either around the circumference of the ring or across its diameter. As well, he tied himself in any number of wraps or knots and executed a variety of drops, akin to what is seen in a traditional Spanish web act. At first glance it would seem that the aerial straps routine has evolved out of the Spanish web or Roman rings acts. It has seemingly appropriated many of the techniques used in both of these acts, including the aforementioned wraps and drops, but also arm flanges and other lifts found in Roman rings. The innovative aspect of this act appears to be Arnautov’s ability to fly about the circus space, as opposed to the other acts that have traditionally worked on a vertical plane.

The roots of the aerial straps act, however, are not found in the Spanish web or Roman rings. In fact, these two routines likely owe their origins to this number. Aerial straps finds its beginnings in the Qing Dynasty (1644 – 1911) in China. During the Qing period, circus acrobatics became so widespread that artists needed to constantly develop innovative routines in order to attract an audience (Qifeng 86). This parallels our current era where older acts are being constantly “reinvented” in order to attract new audiences, or to bring existing patrons back year after year. Aerial straps was originally known as

leather straps, and is still frequently referred to by this name. The early rigging for leather straps consisted of a bamboo frame, in the shape of a tepee, from which leather straps were hung. The artist would jump up and grab the straps, in the same manner that one would take hold of Roman rings. The straps would then be wound around the wrists and a series of physical feats would be executed at various speeds (Qifeng 86). A poem written during the Qing Dynasty details the act:

Two poles upright, one across, held up by props,  
 Hanging down by leather straps an acrobat drops,  
 Circling like a hawk, floating like a duck,  
 With grace and strength, he spins, and never stops (Qifeng 54).

This poem alludes to an act that is very similar to the contemporary version of this performance. There's even a sense of moving around the space in the comparison between the acrobat and a hawk. Bird imagery is also very common in Chinese acrobatics, as well as the use of other animals, or even fish, in the creation or description of particular jumps or positions. In the act jumping through hoops, for example, we find one dive known as the swallow. We also have the monkey climb in Chinese poles (or pole climbing) and the fish is a position often found in this routine, as well. There is also a strong sense of the drops and spins performed in Arnaoutov's version of leather straps found in this poem.

There are any number of acts in a *Cirque du Soleil* performance that find their origins in China. In fact, many *Cirque du Soleil* acrobats (and even the majority of

Dralion<sup>1</sup> performers) are from this country. Other Chinese acts found in *Cirque du Soleil* include: foot juggling, jumping through hoops, diabolo, the Lion dance, diving, and Chinese poles.

The diving routines are found in the water show “*O*,” and are executed utilizing Russian swings. It is very similar to an ancient Chinese act known as swinging on the water, where acrobats jumped off of swings, set on the bows of boats, into lagoons. Like the performers in “*O*,” the Chinese jumpers turned somersaults in the air, and struck poses as they were propelled towards the surface of the water (Qifeng 69-70).

One of the fascinating repercussions of creating “unique” works for the circus is that the original acts evolve in ways never imagined by their creators. Although it is often difficult to definitively state which act preceded or inspired which, there is a fair amount of extant documentation aiding in determining the development of various routines.

Returning to the leather straps, Dimitriy Arnaoutov’s *Nouvelle Expérience* act could possibly be considered “unique” in the sense that it moved around the circumference of the ring. However, it was obviously based on a much older routine that originates in Mainland China prior to the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What is fascinating about the aerial straps from a modern perspective, however, is how it continues to change and evolve within *Cirque du Soleil* and other circuses today. In *Cirque du Soleil’s* *Mystère* and *Alegría* the aerial straps reappear combining Arnaoutov’s routine with a three-dimensional cube. Created by Mikhail Matorin, this act is formally known as the aerial cube and was conceived over a ten-year period. In Linda Granfield’s book *Circus*,

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<sup>1</sup> *Dralion* was first produced by *Cirque du Soleil* in 1999.

Matorin explains that “the routine is meant to create a portrait of life as an endless struggle between tyranny and freedom” (Granfield 45). The cube, therefore, symbolized humanities constraints and flight our desire to be free. Yet, restrained by the leather straps, the flier never completely escapes his earthly constraints.

Another innovation in aerial straps, and possibly, the most aesthetically pleasing, was developed in conjunction with adaptations to the Spanish web act. In 1998 *Cirque du Soleil*’s production of *Quidam* introduced an act originally titled silks, but now commonly known as *tissues*. Performed by aerialist and contortionist Isabelle Chassé, this act exchanged the traditional single rope (or “web”) found in the Spanish web with two long cuts of red fabric. Chassé’s routine altered the act in a number of ways that had not been seen in the ring previously. Normally, a Spanish web is dead hung, meaning it’s hanging in a single spot and does not move. In *Quidam* Chassé was propelled from the upstage area (out of sight of the audience) on a track attached to a grid. Therefore, she did not need to climb the silks, but appeared wrapped in them as though she were in a cocoon or a womb. The size of the material, as opposed to the two inch diameter rope normally found in the Spanish web, allowed her to not only tie herself in knots and perform drops, but also allowed her to wrap herself inside the material in a variety of poses. As well, because there were two pieces of “silk,” she could also use the pieces to execute positions impossible to perform on a web, such as the splits.

The next step in the evolution of this routine returns us to the aerial straps. In *Cirque du Soleil*’s *La Nouba* the leather straps were replaced with the two strips of “silk” found in Chassé’s *Quidam* act. By substituting this material, the fabric now appears as “wings” as the performer flies around the stage.

The aerial straps originated in China during the Qing dynasty, but was considered an innovative act in 1990's *Nouvelle Expérience*. It has evolved into a number of variations over the last sixteen years and will no doubt continue to be adapted and changed in years to come.

Innovation is a keystone in the creation of a *Cirque du Soleil* production, as well as with many other circus troupes around the world today. Rather than simply recycle an old act, circuses often dress it up into something new. Often this is accomplished by combining a variety of numbers into one routine. For example, combining the fast track with the trampoline. Claiming to “reinvent the circus” is a bold and questionable statement, made by *Cirque du Soleil* in 1987. Three years later, in *Nouvelle Expérience* was really the first time they began to make the transition from a traditional circus without animals or death-defying acts, to an *avant garde* performance troupe. Although many of the acts, such as the aerial straps mentioned earlier, have been around for decades, there were a number of innovations found in this production.

One of the major modifications in the evolutionary process for *Cirque du Soleil* was the changes made to the ringmaster. The ringmaster has almost always appeared in the circus as a dominant and controlling figure, but the ringmaster of *Cirque du Soleil* has also taken on the role of clown, jester, and fool.

*Cirque du Soleil* has described their ringmaster as their “Roi des Fous” or King of Fools (Drake, ), inspired by the Monkey King (Sun Wukong) in the Peking or Chinese Opera. This was peculiar because traditionally the ringmaster has been seen as the straight man to the clowns, and in many traditions he is never allowed to play the fool (although he is often made to appear foolish).

*Nouvelle Expérience* added new twists to its ringmasters played by Brian Dewhurst who was the dominant ringmaster, and France La Bonté who served as his assistant. As the ringmasters, Dewhurst and La Bonté for the first time brought clown attributes to the ringmaster role in a *Cirque du Soleil* performance. In *Nouvelle Expérience* the clown and ringmaster were blended into a single entity, providing a definitive moment in the evolution of the circus. By merging these two disparate figures, *Cirque du Soleil* had accomplished a number of things. First of all, the ringmaster has always connected with the audience on a rudimentary level, providing them with information or enhancing their experience through the use of hyperbole. At the same time, the clown has touched the audience on an emotional level, thereby creating an intimate bond with the spectator. By creating a ringmaster with the soul of a clown, Dewhurst and Bonté were able to be the focus of the audience's attention, maintain their respect, and also communicate with them on a level unattainable by a traditional, distanced ringmaster.

Secondly, it brought to the clown a respect, which, in the circus, has often been lost upon the spectator, especially in the North American circus tradition. There are exceptions, but clowns are normally seen as buffoons who get a kick in the butt and a pie in the face. In other arts, however, such as film, literature, or theatre, the clown is held in high esteem, often being seen as a barometer on the state of the society. One must only look to Fellini's *Clowns*, Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, or Shakespeare's *King Lear* for examples of this. Fellini was able to juxtapose his circus clowns upon characters found in the towns where they performed, commenting on how life imitates art. Chaplin critiqued both fascism and Adolf Hitler through the use of a clown show. And Lear's

fool was blessed with better judgement than the King. In other words, the fool is often able to see the world more clearly than the powerful and respected. By combining aspects of the clown with the ringmaster, the spectator inherently respects the ringmaster and is forced to look more closely at the clown's motives on stage when playing the fool.

How then did Dewhurst and La Bonté distinguish themselves as clowns? How did they reveal themselves as ringmasters? Dewhurst accomplished this by joining the ranks of the performers. In his case, he took on the role of clown in a low-wire performance, with Nicky Dewhurst (his son) as the professional tightrope artist. This act displayed nuances typically found in routines involving a serious performer and a clown. Nicky Dewhurst performed in a straightforward manner, accomplishing the low-wire routine with relative ease. The impetus of the clown in an act such as this is twofold: to show that wire walking is not as easy as it appears and to provide comic relief. Of course, the best clowns are traditionally the artists that possess the highest skill level in their area of expertise. This is because it actually takes a greater degree of virtuosity to create the illusion of a misstep on the tightrope than most other aspects of the routine. For example, in many high-wire acts it is common for the artist to lose his footing as he is beginning to skip rope, catching himself by the crook of his knee before he falls to his "death". The point of this extreme example is to reveal to the audience how difficult skipping rope on the high wire is for a wire-walker. *Cirque du Soleil* juxtaposed a clown figure over that of the professional wire-walker to educate the audience about how difficult the act really is for the tightrope artist.

While the younger Dewhurst was executing each of his moves with grace and precision, the older Dewhurst was constantly stumbling along. He attempted to follow his



partner onto the wire, only to discover that his sleeve was caught on the pole holding the wire up, and he was pulled back to the starting platform. When he finally made it onto the wire, rather than the smooth, clean steps of Nicky Dewhurst, he used a humorous bobbing step, which made him appear constantly ready to fall. This was an example of what Eugenia Barba, in his book *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, refers to as “precarious balance”, heightening the sensation of trepidation within the spectator. Brian Dewhurst's feet were highlighted by the fact that they were adorned in large, elfin shoes with rounded tips at the end. When he finally made it across the wire he overshot the platform, just saving himself in time from falling off. Next time, he completely overshot the platform, and slid down the diagonal support wire, onto his butt. As he climbed back up another diagonal wire he slipped and his partner jumped over him. Finally, while on the wire, he somehow got his sleeve caught under his shoe, causing him to lose his balance and fall from the wire. Of course, he managed to catch himself, spin completely around the wire 360 degrees and get back on it where he then performed a complex footwork routine revealing his true virtuosity, finally raising his arms in victory.

Besides physically playing a clown, Dewhurst was clownish in appearance, with wild greyish-blue hair and a ringmaster's costume with an exaggerated collar and tails. However, La Bonté, although not performing any specific clown routines, was truly clownish looking. Two things in particular identified her as a clown: her hair and her attitude. Her hair was straight out of the Bozo the Clown tradition, but instead of pointing out to the sides, it shot straight up in two triangular points. Like Bozo's, it too was a bright red, highlighted with flecks of yellow. It was her disposition, though, that made the audience connect with her as both a clown and a ringmaster. An evil (yet

infectious) laugh heralded a number of her entrances and accentuated many of her exits. As well, her movements, reminiscent of Oliver Hardy, suggested those of a clown.

The second question that was posed, was how did these two characters reveal themselves as the ringmasters of the show? On a visual level, they were both dressed in a fashion that one might imagine a ringmaster in *Cirque du Soleil* to be dressed, each wearing colourful tails with unusual cuts. Dewhurst's grey hair also gave him the appearance of being the patriarch of this troupe, a role that in European circuses often falls to the elderly owners, who are sometimes the ringmasters, as well. La Bonté, on the other hand, wore a miniature top hat, which identified her as a ringmaster. The top hat represented a part of the costume worn by traditional ringmasters.

*Cirque du Soleil* ringmasters have never introduced acts using the spoken word. Instead they typically use arm-flourishes to introduce the various acts. Dewhurst also took it one step further when he introduced the solo trapeze act in this show by cueing thunder and lightning. These effects provided a visual and aural introduction, rather than a verbal one, which revealed that the following number was to take place in the heavens. Another example occurred when Dewhurst signalled the start of the foot juggling routine by banging on a gong. Not only did this announce the beginning of the act, but it was also a cultural signifier as both the gong and the performers (Wang Lifang and Huang Yajing) are Chinese. La Bonté also wore a whistle, a prop often seen around the necks of traditional ringmasters, which she used to co-ordinate the set-up of several acts including the teeterboard and trampoline segments. Additionally, she used her arms to silence the audience in order to create tension before especially difficult stunts, such as when the teeterboard acrobats flipped a fourth member onto a group of men, already three high.

To accentuate this further, and to draw the spectator's attention, she also followed the movement of the acrobat from when he left the board, until he landed safely upon his compatriots. During this routine, Dewhurst also appeared with an icon of the traditional ringmaster, a whip. Besides further establishing him as a ringmaster, he also used it as a percussive device with the music, and to encourage or accentuate certain acrobatic feats. Also, it highlighted the cruelty conveyed through the use of a whip. By having used a whip to drive on the teeterboard acrobats, the spectator experienced the viciousness innate in the use of this device on animals. This was because the human had taken the animal's position in the circus hierarchy in this instance, and the idea of whipping humans is offensive. In the same manner, therefore, it dawned on the spectator how cruel it is to whip animals in other circuses.

In conclusion, *Cirque du Soleil*, like many circuses, strives to present innovative acts and productions. In many numbers we can often find something new, but we can also discover fragments of an older circus. What *Cirque du Soleil* has mastered is the ability to create a dynamic and aesthetically pleasing series of performances that speak to the audience on many levels. But are they a *cirque simulacrum*?

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