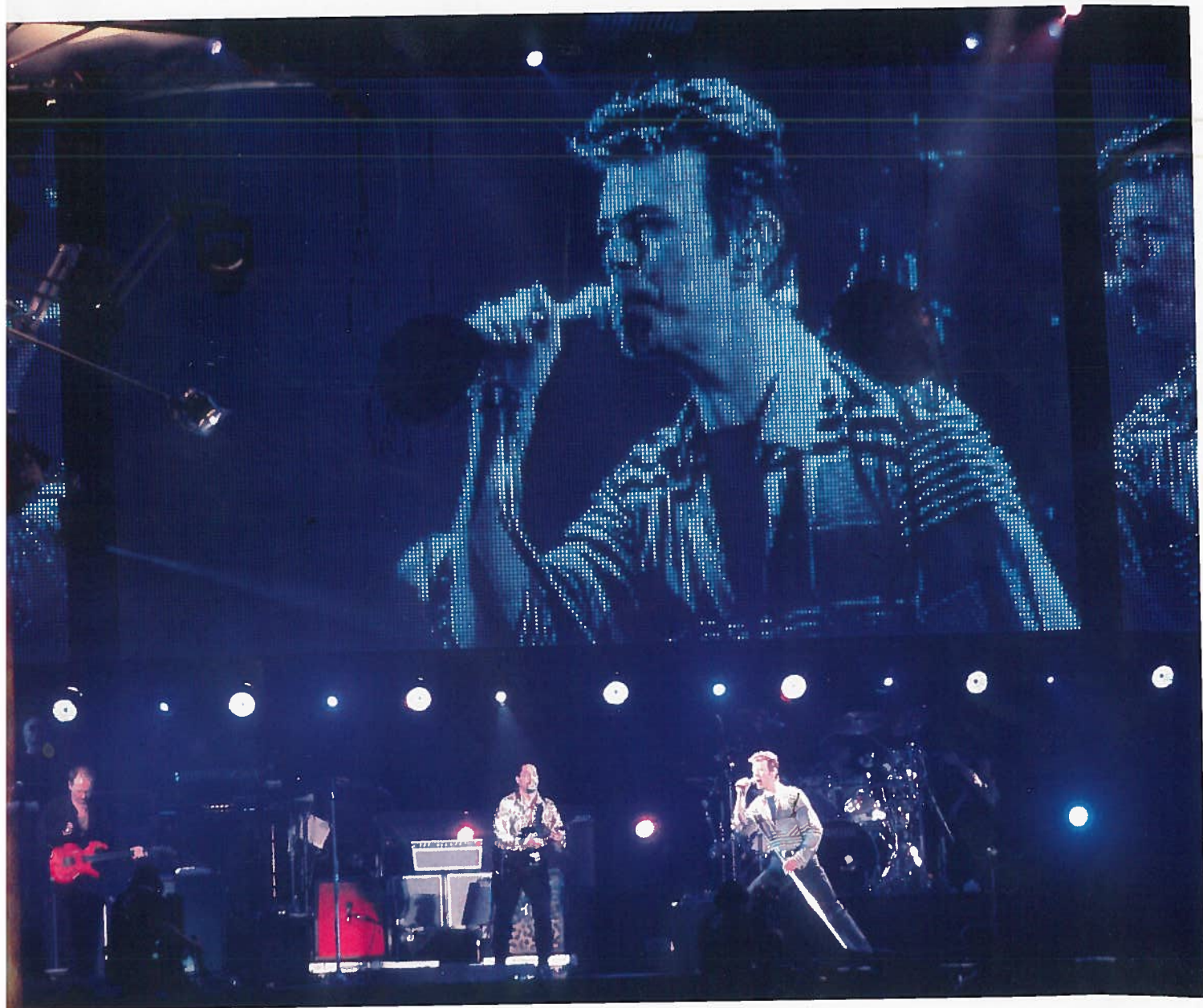


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PLASA

JANUARY 1996

WEIRD AND WONDERFUL

Circus as you've never seen it before. Rob Halliday reviews the technical feats that make Cirque du Soleil a truly innovative and imaginative night out

I don't think I'd ever heard Editor John Offord get excited before. Interested, yes. Keen and enthusiastic, certainly. But never, before that phone call, out-and-out uncontrollably excited. "Cirque du Soleil. Brilliant. Coming to London. Have to cover them," tumbled out, with a few more superlatives thrown in for good measure.

Cirque du who? Bear in mind that this was two months ago, before the company's sensational appearance on the Royal Variety Performance. And before the press and advertising blitz that has accompanied their arrival at London's Royal Albert Hall. Feelers put out amongst friends and colleagues confirmed the company's existence, but singularly failed to provide any description of what they did. Even the company's press advertising singularly failed to describe what they are all about, relying instead on celebrity superlatives: "a wonderful experience" (Bill Clinton), "a thrill for every age" (Steven Spielberg), "reinvented my imagination" (Harrison Ford).

The biggest clue is, of course, in the title. Cirque . . . circus, maybe. The other clue the title seems to give, that the company are French, is less accurate. They actually hail from the other side of the Atlantic, from Quebec in Canada. And though these days they play across a truly international stage, their origins were small - a collection of street entertainers, stilt-walkers, fire-eaters and mime artistes. That collection was somehow pulled together into a loose-knit organisation called Cirque du Soleil by Guy Laliberté in 1984, thanks to inspired funding from the Quebec government, of a kind unimaginable by any arts group in this country, let alone one so far from 'mainstream' theatre. This enabled the fledgeling troupe to feature as part of the celebration of 450 years since the country's discovery. Bolstered by that initial



circus by ensuring that the performers are not all just circus people: Cirque staff scout the world looking for circus acts, dancers, street performers, gymnasts (some Olympic veterans), and other entertainers who might fit the Cirque style and bring them into Cirque shows. There is also an attempt to give the evening an overall theme to bind the acts together.

What really separates Cirque du Soleil from traditional circus, though, is the technical team: the designers of costume, set, lighting and sound. Dominique Lemieux's costumes are usually the first thing people notice about the company, since they often feature in

success, and with further government funding, the company launched an 11-city tour of Quebec under an 800-seat Big Top. The seating capacity grew to 1,500 as the tour expanded, firstly to cover the rest of Canada, then southwards into America. Company legend now has it that the US leg became a matter of 'to live or die in LA', without enough money to fuel their trucks for a return journey to Canada if they failed. Capacity crowds ensured that they didn't, and subsequent tours covered more of the US, Europe and Japan.

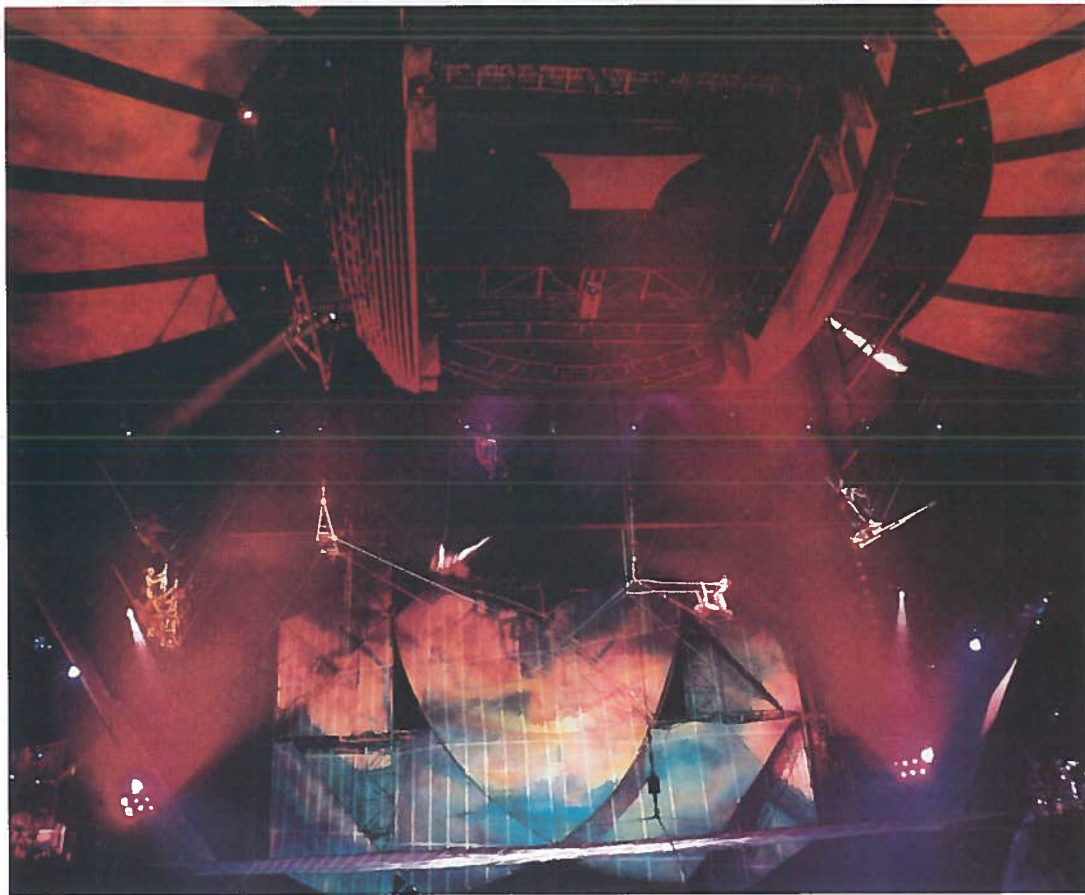
Which still doesn't actually explain what the company do. Well, yes, it is circus - but circus as you've never seen it before. The first thing to forget from the traditional British perception of circus are the animals - Cirque has none. Then forget the draughty, smelly, saw-dust strewn performance ring, and the seemingly random collection of acts. Cirque du Soleil's approach is to take the finest of traditional human acts - jugglers, high-wire acts, trapeze acts, even clowns - and blend them together into a whole, linked 'performance'. While their shows are, to some extent, still just a collection of different performances, those performances are taken beyond what you might find in 'traditional'

promotional material and photographs. Trained at National Theatre School of Canada and Montreal's Concordia University, Lemieux has now created the weird and wonderful inhabitants for four Cirque shows - Nouvelle Expérience, Saltimbanco, Mystère and Algeria. The characters range from giant, playful babies with enormous nappies to bungee jumpers in feathers, looking like abstract birds as they soar through the air, to bestilted devil-incarnates, to mysterious pole-climbers with backwards facing heads. Her work is an inspired mix of traditional circus, science-fiction, and fantasy. It is completely unique, and is the basis of Cirque's style - to the extent that it is probably more important than the set designs.

For Algeria, Mystère and Saltimbanco, the set designs have been the work of Michel Crête. The shows feature abstract floor paintings, Saltimbanco's being much, much brighter and more colourful as befits the show's style, which is closer to a raucous straight circus than the more abstract Mystère. Both shows also feature background structures - a huge twisting, turning metallic 'sky' in the Vegas show, and a sculpture of circular glass panels in Saltimbanco. Both shows have a strong synergy



Saltimbanco: bright gaudy colours and costumes that immediately say vaudeville have arrived in all their glory at London's Royal Albert Hall.



Above and below: *Mystère*, inspired by Homer's *Odyssey*, is a mix of traditional circus, science-fiction, and fantasy.

between set and costume colourings - in *Saltimbanco*, this allows characters to almost become camouflaged on the floor at times. But the set designer's work is to some extent limited by the need to leave the space open for the aerial acts.

Neither costume nor set would really work without the two elements of 'glue' that bind Cirque performances together - the lighting and the sound. The lighting design is in the hands of Luc Lafortune, who has been working for Cirque since his graduation from theatre college and lighting their shows since 1986. Colleagues describe him as the 'best-kept secret in lighting', because the vast majority of his work has been for Cirque - and that work is outstanding. Yet his involvement with the company and, indeed, with lighting design, came about almost by accident. As he explains: "I studied to be a psychologist, then figured 'it's interesting, but I cannot tell these people how to live their lives if I'm not even sure how to live mine'". Instead, he enrolled on a theatre arts course, aiming to be a set designer. "I figured it was the last opportunity I would have to do something I really wanted to do. In the first year I met a guy who was also a first year student of set design. He was great - he designed complete environments whereas I just stuck to the script and made cardboard houses with doors and windows. It quickly became obvious that my career as a set designer wasn't meant to be - although I had the desire, I didn't have the instinct that was needed."

Instead, Lafortune became assistant to the electrician on a college production of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*. His role on the show was to be the telephone patch boy, re-patching dimmers during the show, but "I quickly realised how lighting could influence perception - that you weren't just illuminating,



but determining how people see. And that's when I really got into lighting."

Gilles Ste-Croix, now one of Cirque's directors, was also a student at the college. Lafortune explains that even then the ideas behind Cirque were being formed, with their emphasis on design and theatrical-style presentation coming from the theatre-based background of the people involved. "Gilles knew that they were going to start this thing up and they didn't have any expertise, so he figured he'd go to university and learn." The company was formed the year Lafortune left and, by chance, he ended up working with them. "I applied for jobs - but four years at university didn't really look much on a resumé. The only reply I got was from Cirque du Soleil!"

He spent a year on the road as Cirque's lighting technician, then a year as board operator serving the independent lighting designers the company was using. Eventually, "I said to them you're not going to find anyone

able to light circus in Montreal because we don't have a circus tradition like Europe - so why not let me try!"

In the years since, Lafortune's palette of equipment has moved from his original 48 rented Parcans to the thousand-plus dimmer rig currently lighting *Mystère*, the permanent show the company now have at the Treasure Island hotel in Las Vegas. His approach to the task has also evolved - as I explained earlier he has been lighting shows for the company since 1986, but ask him when he started being their lighting designer and the reply is a quick "two years ago" followed by a laugh. "That is when I started understanding the essence of light, the idea that it is supporting the action and influencing the perception of the spectators."

But even with a clear understanding of what lighting can achieve, lighting for a Cirque show is difficult, especially because of the way the company create and rehearse their shows. Lafortune, for example, has the rare privilege among lighting designers, of being involved from the moment a show is first discussed. At that point, the creative team are trying to find a common 'theme' for the show -

Mystère, for example, was originally inspired by Homer's *Odyssey*. The aim is not to find something that the production will adhere to rigidly, but rather to find a common 'link' for all of the artistes to work with.

In the case of lighting, the theme is there to ensure that Lafortune is thinking along the same lines as his fellow designers when he has to create images quickly - since, despite the long gestation periods for shows, the way they are created means that the lighting team still often find themselves racing against the clock. "Although I'm involved from the early stage, the show will still be a work in progress by the time we get inside the tent or theatre. And the moment you get into the house, things happen. People go out on stage and all of a sudden you find that your original intention for the show has taken a new direction, and you have to be able to follow that."

That requirement for freedom, and so versatility, combined with the long lead-times required by commercial projects such as those in Vegas, where the theatre was created with Cirque in mind, means that the initial lighting design will not be all that precise. For *Mystère*, he "played safe - a back wash with colour changers, a front-of-house wash, side wash, maybe three or four gobo washes and then specials just about anywhere that we could hang an instrument, so that the moment we needed something it was there." The versatility of his rigs has been increased by his use of moving mirror lights. *Mystère* originally used Clay Paky SuperScans, and added five SuperScan Zooms during the dark period during Vegas' pre-Christmas quiet spell.

Lafortune has to be able to have a rig which can be adapted quickly in this way, because the performances he is lighting are dynamic - while you can ask an actor to stand still while you focus a special on them, asking a bungee cord performer to pause in mid-flight is harder. The nature of the acts also impose other challenges



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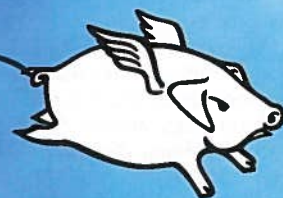
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Cirque du Soleil's tented encampment.

on the designer - from a creative point of view he is having to deal with huge amounts of space, in three dimensions rather than just at floor level. And from a practical point of view, he has to consider the artistes's safety. "Sometimes we can't achieve everything we want because it affects the performers - a particular light might be causing a shadow which means that they can't see a bar properly. You can't understand that unless you get up in the air and look at it from their perspective." Which isn't to say he's averse to trying. "Many of our performers don't come from theatre backgrounds and so don't understand what lighting can do, so I'll bring them into the house to show them what we're trying to do."

The remarkable thing is that, despite these 'limitations', Lafortune manages to create work of incredible beauty that has established a house 'style' for Cirque, though he dismisses suggestions that he has an identifiable style. He claims to prefer the options provided by different angles of light, rather than just relying on colour, since he is wary of colour because of the different reactions it can provoke. *Mystère* technical director Don Maclean does qualify this by saying that he is expecting a *Lafortune Blue* on Rosco any time now, and certainly Lafortune's work shows him to be a true master at mixing and blending colours, often using unusual combinations to stunning effect. In fact, there only seem to be two things he doesn't like: pre-rigged Par bars ("they are just for convenience. Lighting is not about convenience"), and standing still as a designer. "When we put the new routines into *Mystère* in December, it was two years since I first lit the show and my style has changed. The lighting for the new acts is in a different style and they stand out to me. Maybe the audience doesn't notice, but I do." When his schedule permits, he will make a return visit to Vegas to attend to this problem.

While creating his designs, Lafortune likes to work closely with his team, and to make sure that they are as much a part of the final show as the on-stage artistes. Shows are re-lit on the road by lighting directors chosen because of their care for the show. And they are run by board and followspot operators who take their own cues from the performers and musicians and run them manually, rather than relying on a show caller and a 'go' button.

But the designs are still clearly his, and are remarkable. They show that Lafortune really is the best kept secret in lighting, perhaps because Cirque without him would be a poorer Cirque. But the secret surely cannot be kept for long. Not that there would be any shortage of people wanting to try to step into his shoes.

Technical people who see Cirque shows always then seem to want to work for them. And for a few lucky individuals, that dream comes true. One of those is sound designer Jonathan Deans. Ex-Autograph, Deans found himself in Vegas working on the Siegfried & Roy show at the Mirage Hotel, following his contribution to the seminal musical *Time* in London. While in the States he found himself talking to some people with jackets proclaiming 'Cirque Something'. At first he wasn't greatly interested. "We got on the same plane and they said where do you live? I said LA, and they said 'we have a Cirque in LA down in a tent' and I thought great, a tent," he explains in his mock-sarcastic tone. But Deans went and saw the show, *Nouvelle Experience*, and "sweated in my palms, thinking 'how much do I have to pay them to be part of this'."

"Afterwards they said 'did you like it' and I said 'yeah', trying to be cool." More discussions followed, resulting in Deans being taken on-board to design the first production of *Saltimbanco*, the show which the company have brought to the Royal Albert Hall in London where it is designed by François Bergeron, whose background ranges from musicals such as *Dreamgirls* to permanent installations like *Niketown* in New York and who also served as Deans' associate on the epic *EFX* at Las Vegas' MGM Grand hotel. "Cirque are now doing a lot of shows, and the division seems to have become that I do the more permanent shows while François gets the tent, which is great fun." Fun isn't the first word Bergeron uses to describe the tent, where he is "always having to fight against plastic, canvas and a metal floor," but he says it with affection, and enjoys the open sound produced that seems to wrap-around the spectators.

The contribution of Cirque's sound designers is as deep as those of their lighting designers. The sound designers work through the long creative period, an approach that Deans describes as "an amazing way to work - hard for everyone, but an incredible imagination drive.

You just create things as you go along. When you put a new production together, everyone throws things in - you can be in a situation where you're doing that with an audience, trying something that might crash and burn or might be successful. It's a great learning experience." The role of the sound designers is to work with the composers and musicians to help shape the sound of the specially-written scores, and to specify and install the system that will let them bring that score across with a maximum of clarity and impact. The resulting system varies from show to show, since the designers prefer to design to what they need rather than around specific equipment.

Aside from musical clarity, the most obvious part of Cirque's sound style is their fascination with changing the position of sound and moving it around the performance space. With the performers moving around so quickly, Deans feels that the sound has to move with them. "There used to be a sequence in the show with people juggling triangular hoops. We had the sound running up and down the speakers in the sky - not so that anyone would necessarily notice, but just to add some dynamic to the sound."

Early Cirque shows attempted these effects manually, but Deans' constant experimentation with moving sound around on other productions, and his dissatisfaction with available solutions, eventually led him to team up with Steve Ellison to produce products to provide the control they needed - and so form Level Control Systems. *Mystère* features the current analogue LCS system which has 16 inputs, 8 buss outputs and an 8 x 4 matrix controlled by an Apple Macintosh. This allows the operator to draw a 'route' for the sound around a speaker system, then leave it to the computer and its accompanying desk to figure out how to make the sound follow that route. It is put to great use in the show for whipping drum and wind sounds around the audience, as well as for more subtle shifts which help focus attention to particular areas of the stage.

Deans is already looking forward to his company's new digital system, which will also be able to handle EQ'ing and delays internally, allowing these parameters to be easily controlled and altered as well. "The idea is that it is a tool which doesn't limit you - you can lay the palette out exactly how you want, rather than being something like EQ that you just plug in and make work." The problem that he is now running up against is in controlling all of these parameters, and he admits that he has been looking at how others tackle the problem. Deans is a man with irons in many fires, yet even this self-confessed workaholic clearly feels a special attachment to Cirque, enjoying coming back to see the shows and feeling refreshed when working to introduce new acts into existing shows.

Of course, designers never work in isolation and the designers involved with Cirque du Soleil are no exception. Detractors - usually those cynics who haven't allowed themselves to enjoy a Cirque show - call the company a 'corporate circus' and, from a business point of view, they're right. The start provided by public money has created a self-funding company with a C\$50million budget. The press hand-outs boast that they employ 600 people on three continents, and that 110 people tour with *Saltimbanco* alone - of which just 45 are performing artistes. The rest include six cooks, a teacher and a physiotherapist.

The reason is simply that Cirque has chosen to do as much as possible in-house. Part of this decision is a matter of economic sense, which

says that rather than paying outside contractors to build scenery for their shows it would be more sensible to create their own scenic workshops. The same is true for the costumes: a workshop in Canada creates most of them, though some, notably those for *Mystère*, are now being made (and re-made; some of the acts can get through 12 sets of a costume per year) by teams employed locally. The extra finance that these workshops can bring in during the brief periods that they're not working on Cirque shows is also welcome now that the company is self-financing, rather than dependent on government subsidy - though the Canadian and Quebec governments remain inordinately proud of their offspring, judging from their notes in the company's programmes.

More important than money is trust - something that is vital when the final product involves people performing all kinds of stunts using custom equipment or ropes attached to truss. As Don Maclean, technical director for *Mystère* in Las Vegas notes: "Trust is extremely important, and knowing the kind of people you're working with and counting on, goes a long way." For that reason, all of the rigging for Cirque shows is carried out by an in-house team of 'artistic riggers', who work with the performers throughout the creative period and once the show is open or on tour.

The actual performances usually involve a delicate mixture of the stage crew and other performers: the company's legendary bungee acts, for example, require the trapeze from which the performers launch themselves to be cleared up and down with pin-point timing. For this kind of operation, other performers are used. "For each artiste that you see, there is another artiste that you don't see operating the trapeze - really they are pairs that work as one," Maclean explains.

Which isn't to say that the technical crew aren't fully involved in the creation of the show: with the show created as a whole, Maclean's practical side notes that "production for Cirque is extremely intense and expensive in time, money and energy. When you make a call for a working rehearsal, you don't just call the artistes, you call all the musicians, all the tech staff - it's a full show crew from day one." The result is that the crew are much more involved and committed to the show than is sometimes the case - in the two-and-a-half years since the Las Vegas show opened, only four people out of a technical staff of 55 have left.

THE SHOWS AND VENUES

ALGERIA

Though there are three Cirque du Soleil shows currently in existence, *Mystère*'s residence in Las Vegas and Saltimbanco's visit to the Albert Hall means that only one show is currently maintaining the company's tradition and playing in a tent. That show, *Algeria*, is currently rounding off a North American tour, and will then spend the rest of 1996 in Japan. The show is once again designed by the tireless team of Michel Crête, Dominique Lemieux and Luc Lafortune, with the sound design by Guy Desrochers.

MYSTÈRE - LAS VEGAS

Cirque du Soleil's first visit to Las Vegas initially appeared to be in their usual fleeting style, with a tent pitched outside the Mirage Hotel. But the tent remained for a year and Cirque became hot property, pursued by the many producers who make up the self-appointed entertainment capital of the world. For a while it looked as though a deal would be struck with the legendary Caesars Palace. But the eventual



Above, lighting designer Luc Lafortune and below, sound designer François Bergeron.

victor was Steve Wynn, the man credited with single-handedly reviving Vegas's fortunes when he opened *Mirage*, the hotel with the volcano on its front door. Wynn was building a new hotel, *Treasure Island*, and Cirque were booked as the hotel's headline act, with a 1,500-seat showroom theatre built especially for them.

Or so legend has it. And while the showroom now has many features of a Cirque tent, with seating curved around a wide, deeply thrust stage, and the show plays to an average capacity of over 99%, it is clear that the money men weren't always quite so confident: Don Maclean, technical director for the show, notes that the concrete slab beneath Cirque's seating is poured with a design for traditional Vegas banquet seating and the theatre could easily be converted back to a proscenium stage. Happily that hasn't been necessary, and the showroom is resplendent with Michel Crête's light-coloured roof, designed to invoke a tent both visually and acoustically. As Jonathan Deans explains: "From the word go, we were able to work with architects on the acoustics. There's a great thing that happens with the tent because the audience can all hear each other, so they respond to each other. Most Vegas showrooms overdo the acoustic for the speaker system, but the audience can't hear each other and it kills the show." Deans thus laboured to keep parts of the floor and certain walls hard, working with an acoustician to achieve the lively sound that is now a feature of the venue.

The Vegas showroom provides Cirque with more technological 'toys' than their other venues. The stage, for example, contains a main stage 36ft x 36ft lift and three forestage 10 ft x 36ft lifts included both from practicality for the hotel, and Cirque's desire to work with bringing acts up from below floor level - something not possible in a tent. Above the stage is a hydraulic flying system based around four 100hp motors that drive 21 line sets. There are also 14 additional winches tilting and moving the 'sky' scenic unit, dropping drums and climbing frames in and out, and opening and closing the sliding baffle roof structure to allow performers through. The automation is operated by a team of three - an operator in the control room, a 'dead man' monitoring the lifts, and a rover who can investigate problems and troubleshoot.

For lighting, the theatre has just under 1,000 ETC Sensor dimmers, and is pre-wired for another 500 should the need arise. The dimmers are used along with their



fault-diagnostic system, which proved useful during the summer. Maclean explains: "Because of all of the air-conditioning systems in town, the power company has large capacitor banks which kick-in to raise the incoming voltage. Our system is designed to run at 135v, through custom transformers, so that we can use the Sensor's voltage regulating function to maintain 110v output even at the end of a 400ft cable run. When the capacitor banks kicked-in this summer, we discovered that there had been an error in someone's calculations between the various transformers, and we were getting over 140v. Fortunately, the dimmers warned us before any permanent damage resulted." The dimmers drive a mixture of sources, including Par cans and Source 4s, and are controlled by a Colortran Compact Elite desk, which the lighting director Jeanette Farmer and assistant Tom Hanlon like for the hands-on control it provides.

The moving lights in the rig, Clay Paky SuperScans and SuperScan Zooms, are run from a Compulite Animator by Christian Choi while the 'manual' moving lights comprise four Lycian Starklites and two Xenon Super Trouper followspots. There are also four HMI Panis with film scrollers, supplied by Production Arts and operated from a PC by Kirk

Mortenson, for the projection sequences.

A second Colortran desk, this time an Encore XL, has a slightly more unusual role - controlling the seven liquid nitrogen low-smoke machines (three from Rope Landmark in Chicago, four from SFX in Texas), and the Rosco 1600 smoke machines and RealFX cracked-oil foggers, all of which have DMX converters or relay systems. The board was brought in mainly for the Nitrogen system, which gives the best effect when run full until the floor and air above it are cooled, then rotated to ensure that the best tank temperature is maintained while reducing nitrogen consumption. Cirque's twice-daily performances use around 300 gallons per day from an 11,000 gallon storage tank that is refilled about once a month - Maclean reckons that by this means the lighting desk paid for itself in just one year.

Lighting the show is remembered by Luc Lafortune as one of his greatest challenges, because of the combination of politics, long lead-times and a new environment involved. He arrived on August 20th, 1993, and didn't leave again until January 15th, 1994. The time between started as 72-hour weeks, and ended up as 108-hour weeks, "drinking way too much coffee!" As well as lighting, Lafortune also had to integrate projection into a show for the first time. After much searching, he stumbled across Canadian photographer Pierre Desjardins, who soon fell into sympathy with Cirque's visual mentality, producing abstract images by developing his work in unusual chemicals.

In terms of sound equipment, the company were provided with what Jonathan Deans describes as a 'flagship system'. Based around a 60-channel Midas XL3 desk, signals are taken from the live band and singers and Sennheiser radio microphones on some of the performers, and fed out through Lexicon 300 reverbs, Crown amplifiers and Electro-Voice Deltamax loudspeakers arranged as delayed front fills with a separate delay system firing from the rear of the auditorium. Extra speakers are fitted to the moving 'sky' scenery, mounted in custom-built brackets that allow the speakers to remain in the correct orientation as the sky



Another scene from *Mystère* at Las Vegas.

tilts and turns. Some small Apogee units are dotted around the front of the stage to pull the sound down from the very high flown speaker positions. A Ramsa desk and D&P 11s are used for the band's monitor mix, with every musician having their own mix. The design is completed with the Level Control Systems desk and Macintosh, which has the venue's complex speaker system mapped onto its screen, and so allows Deans, or operator Kim Sandholt, to quickly draw complex sound movement paths, used to great effect in the finale number as wind and instruments whip around the auditorium.

Elsewhere, the theatre offers many of the same problems found in theatres everywhere - inadequate storage space and lack of flexibility. But Maclean knows that it is just a "Chinese finger puzzle - where you can put it all together, but you just need to have everything in the right order". The difference between this show and the tent shows, though, is that most of those real people remain hidden; you are less aware of the mechanics of the acts, especially the aerial acts and the standing frames which can be raised from the basement rather than wheeled on; the result is a show that is less circus-like, but much more magical.

The set and costumes help this; the scenery is dark and brooding, especially when washed by 6k HMI Fresnels coloured deep blue. For much of the show the floor itself is invisible, covered by swathes of low-lying nitrogen fog that rise and fall as the performers soar above. Costumes take their inspiration from science fiction and fantasy - pole climbers with reversed heads, giant demons on stilts - but these are balanced by a human element in a giant baby who runs rampant throughout the show. The lighting demonstrates a mastery of colour, but also of the true 'art' of lighting - controlling where people look. Aside from costumes and theatrical performance style, the real difference between Cirque and conventional circus is the fluidity of the production. It doesn't stop. There is no ring-master boring you while the scene is changed; that role is filled by other artistes who, held in their light, distract you while a transformation happens. Suddenly there are six bungee jumpers hanging from the roof, or an angled trampoline has been set, and you have no idea how it got there. There is never just one

image - even if your eye falls away from the act in progress, Cirque ensure that you have something to look at.

Despite his fears about a clash of styles, Lafortune's work on the show is a triumph. He colours and controls the space magnificently, closing down to a tight, hard-edged circle for the two strong men, opening up with ripples on the roof, or making the whole space explode with strong backlight up through the smoke as the lifts drop down into the basement. The SuperScans are used both for big sweeps out into the audience as the performers re-arrange themselves, and as specials with a colour temperature that allows them to stand out sharply from the tungsten lamps.

His triumph is matched by that of Jonathan Deans' sound, which carries across René Dupéré and Benoit Jutras' music with complete clarity, yet with all of the energy that the show, at times, demands. And, of course, by the performers, who range from 'very good' all the way up to 'completely staggering'; performers who can scale vertical poles as if they had no weight, then slide down them but bring themselves to a halt mere millimetres above the ground; trampolinists jumping past or, seemingly, through each other; trapeze artistes catching each other by their finger tips, each jump more daring than the last. *Mystère* looks set for a long, long future in Las Vegas. Unlike some Vegas shows, it deserves it.

SALTIMBANCO

Saltimbanco actually pre-dates *Mystère*, created as it was in 1993 for a North American tour. It subsequently headed Cirque's move into Europe, as they established a second base in Amsterdam. The show has been touring Europe in a 2,494-seater, 50 metre diameter, 25 metre high tent that takes a team of 90 people to erect. But when the time came to consider a visit to Britain, some doubts seem to have set in. On their only previous visit to the country, Cirque had problems. A rented tent, a less-than-ideal location on London's South Bank, over-confidence in their own reputation following their success elsewhere and, almost certainly, Britain's notorious reluctance to accept that anything with a foreign-sounding title might be good, all conspired against them.

For their return visit, they have taken a different approach. Why not take a building that looks a bit like a domed tent like, say, the Royal Albert Hall, and mount the show there! In conjunction with Harvey Goldsmith, that's exactly what they've done.

Of course, making the transition from tent to hall was never going to be easy, especially in a hall as difficult as the RAH. The biggest problem the creative team faced was the height of the hall's seating - in the tent, the audience sits on one raked level, in the hall there are four levels of seating to contend with. The hall's limited backstage space also meant that the equipment used by the various acts had to be brought on-and-off from different places.

To accommodate this, the set was slightly re-designed. It still featured a main 'ring' area, built up from the Hall's arena flooring, but the section upstage of that which houses the band was re-raked to slope upwards and outwards to improve sightlines and to allow equipment to be rolled directly on-and-off stage. But the gaudy floor with its brightly painted butterfly image remained, as did the collection of coloured glass circles that sit above the band, and the main circular truss that supports the aerial acts and part of the lighting rig. Installing this required extra steelwork in the Albert Hall's roof; this holds a main black rectangular truss which supports the main speaker rig and the circular truss, which is then tensioned off to any available part of the building. Backing the stage was a wrap-around cyclorama that looked very low until you realised that its height is normally limited by the downwards curve of the tent's roof. But even with that slight oddity, the overall result was to make the normally cavernous hall feel surprisingly intimate.

The look of the show is more 'human' than *Mystère* - bright gaudy colours and costumes that immediately say vaudeville or, indeed, circus - appropriately enough, since Saltimbanco is old-Italian for street performer. The circus theme seems to be taken further, through the make-up and prosthetics, almost as if the intention was to take Cirque's troop of beautiful people and make them look like the curiosities of circus and fairgrounds of old - the midget and the bearded woman are here symbolised through giant noses, blank faces or stretched heads. Without all of the facilities of the Treasure Island showroom, the mechanics of the circus are also revealed, with the performers pulling ropes to lift or move trapezes, but fitting perfectly with the style of the show. Some of the acts may be superficially similar to the acts in the other shows, but the actual content is completely different. And in this show, the company seem to take themselves less seriously: a stunning strong-man performance quickly debunked by two clowns, or a bungee routine immediately upstaged by two anarchic punks in a passing nod to formal new-circus rivals Archaos.

Luc Lafortune's lighting rig backs this theme with a surprising variety of colours, from bright, gaudy ambers through to a range of green Par backlights and toplights. "My assistant said 'I don't like the green' at one point," Lafortune recalls. "I said 'you're not paid to tell me you don't like it, but to explain why you don't like it'. He couldn't, so it stayed." And it works, adding a mystery to some of the acts, while successfully toning down the floor's colouring. There is no open white in the rig; scenes that need bright white light are given it by mixing all the other colours.

The Albert Hall rig is based on the usual rig from the tent - predominantly Fresnels and Par cans, some topped with scrollers - with a

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re-designed front coverage from the Hall's gallery positions using extra Par cans and 2k Silhouettes. Perfectionist as ever, Lafortune isn't completely happy with the result, feeling that he is less able to keep the audience's focus completely on the stage because of both bounce from the Albert Hall's off-white interior (rather than the dark blue of the tent), and the extra throw from the lighting positions he is using. And those changed positions meant that extra rehearsals were scheduled, just to allow the performers to find new reference points in the lighting rig. The rig is run from 144 ways of touring dimming, driven by a Compulite Applause with Compulite's moving light wing controlling the SuperScans. Operator Nol van Genuchten is full of praise for this combination, feeling that it gives him the best of both fixed and moving-light control.

Lafortune also uses lighting from within the action, most notably the 'human Vari-Lites' - four performers who each have a huge, question mark-shaped hoop of metal with an M16 profile curving over their head. By twisting a handgrip the lamp can be made to tilt, by turning their bodies, to pan; the opening of the show has these four entering through the audience lighting themselves, then twisting the lamps upwards to light performers in the truss. They are a great effect with which the lighting designer is clearly still delighted, even after three years.

And while Lafortune is delighted with something old, sound designer François Bergeron is delighted with something new - the show's new venue. "I was a little worried by the Albert Hall because it is so big, and I thought it was going to be like other stadiums. But the sound turned out better than I expected, with some spots in the show sounding very good

indeed." Surprisingly, given the the difficult reputation of the Hall's acoustic, he feels that it was easier to deal with than the tent. "The only problem was that it was our first go here - the tent is difficult, but after six years we have developed a few tricks for dealing with it. The sound here is different - it's more immediate because it doesn't get carried around in the same way as it does in the tent."

The rig engineered by Hans van Wegen, is based around Apogee loudspeakers, a mixture of AE8s and AE5s forming the main rig with six AE2s normally used for the surround system and six AE12s under the musicians. For the Albert Hall, 30 extra AE8s were added to the grid and truss and four AE5s to the surround system. The speakers are driven by Crest amplifiers (a mixture of 8001s, 7001s, 6001s and 4801s), fed from a 48-channel Yamaha PM4000 mixing desk supplemented for London by a Midas XL88 8x8 matrix. Inputs come from Sennheiser UHF radio mics, AKG headset mics and an assortment of Shure, E/V, AKG and Sennheiser conventional mics. Reverb is provided by a Lexicon PCM-80 and five Yamaha SPX-990s, with delays generated by seven BSS TCS-804s, and there is a separate monitor system based around a Soundcraft SM48 desk.

Once again, a computerised surround control system has been installed to allow sound to be routed around the hall, in this case using two LCS matrix driven from a Macintosh Powerbook laptop that handles around 60 cues during the course of the evening. This is the one area where Bergeron feels the Albert Hall audience lose out to those at the tent, because of the difficulty of getting surround sound into all of the boxes. And the technology is used to different effect from *Mystère* - there it was epic. Here it is used playfully, even for comedy; the

show's main clown act is a semi-mime - a mime who generates his own sound effects. In one sketch he throws an imaginary rope out into the audience, with associated whistling sound. For one particularly epic throw, Bergeron and operator Patrick Martin take the sound and whip it round the hall as the performer and audience watch the rope's flight. As with so much else in a Cirque performance, it is the timing between the performer and the sound that makes the gag work.

Whether Britain takes to Cirque du Soleil this time remains to be seen. In the opening moments of the first performance at the Albert Hall they were certainly unsure - especially the audience members who were dragged on stage and into the action, an occupational hazard of being a Cirque spectator. But it didn't take long for applause, then cheering and finally foot-stamping to break through. On the official first night, the audience demanded, and got, four encores. Extra performances were soon being planned.

If Britain doesn't take to it, it's Britain's loss. Cirque is international - in part because they use little spoken language and so don't have to overcome that barrier, in part because their skills can be appreciated the world over. It's not old-style circus, and that upsets some people but clearly not the six-and-a-half million people who've enjoyed the company's performances since 1984 - or the many more who will enjoy them in the future, as they finish a new rehearsal space in Montreal to help with the process of creating shows and prepare to launch a new production later in the year.

They are a must-see company. They feel like a must-work-for company. John Offord may not get excited all that often but boy, when he does, is he right!



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