

Drama department visits Cirque du Soleil's "Saltimbanco"

The University of Pretoria Drama department was invited to visit Cirque du Soleil's "Saltimbanco" for a backstage tour at the Coca-Cola Dome in Johannesburg. Professor Hoffer arranged the March 16 tour for the advanced design class, the Honours class, and the intermediate design class as well as interested faculty. Nearly 30 individuals attended.

Mr. Maxime Charbonneau, the Attaché de presse/Publicist for "Saltimbanco", greeted us at the Artist's entrance and brought us through the backstage area where a young performer was practicing rolling around with the DaVinci Wheel to seats very close to the stage. While Mr. Charbonneau regaled us with the history of the Cirque enterprise, we watched the trapeze artist practice her triple spins. Following that, we asked questions about life on tour, how the talent scouts work, and how much of the company is involved in management. Following that, we witnessed a training session for the trapeze and bungee cord performance, being told that one of the artists rehearsing today was new to the routine and had not yet actually performed it for an audience.

Mr. Charbonneau introduced us to Ms. Mandy Berry, the General Stage Manager for "Saltimbanco". She gave us insight into the hard work of getting the theatre and touring experience one needs before thinking about working at a company like Cirque. Cirque is a company totalling more than 5,000 employees, and nearly 105 of them are in the "Saltimbanco" tour. This troupe had just come to South Africa from Istanbul, Turkey, and was preparing to head for Perth, Australia afterwards. Ms. Berry strongly suggested that the more theatre technology one has experienced or studied, the better one's chances are for successful employment. One of the strongest conditions for touring remains extreme adaptability and diplomacy.

We watched the Chinese Pole training session where artists climb the vertical poles using their feet and hand effortlessly. We learned the footwear and the poles are treated to insure a firm grip. Afterwards, Mr. Charbonneau took us backstage to see the many road cases and how the different support departments are set up for repair, manufacture, and physiotherapy. We were especially thrilled to see the mask and headgear cabinets, complete with a few masks being remade, and also the wardrobe area complete with a monster of a sewing machine for the leather shoes, some of which must be built for every performance.

We learned that each Cirque du Soleil artist is responsible for his or her own make-up. Their make-up is designed to fit their own features, so no one's make up is exactly like another's. The performers sometimes take several weeks learning to put their make up on, often sitting in the make-up area until they get it right before they can go home. Each artist has a step by step booklet for their particular make-up which they follow religiously. Quality control is very strict.

We also learned that even after Cirque recruits an Olympic quality performer it can take up to two years before they are released to perform any one act. Athletic training, health and stamina tests, performance skills, language skills, make-up skills, and a basic theatrical education are all necessary before attempting a performance.

Lastly, Mr. Charbonneau took us back to our ringside seats where we watched the Russian Swing training session. The first performer to be thrown high into the air and caught on a slim pole held by two men standing on the shoulders of two other men standing on each other's shoulders was a veteran. None-the-less, the training session highlighted the extreme confidence and concentration the performers must have to achieve aerial feats like this. The second Russian Swing aerialist began her training session. She and her partners had been in training for several months, but the quality of the veteran definitely had the showmanship quality one expects from a Cirque performer. In fact,

when the second aerialist did the stunt with perfection, there was much happiness and joy on the stage.

Running away to join the circus may be a fantasy of many young people, and the Cirque du Soleil is certainly attractive. What hit home for most of us was the fact that it takes not only the expected hard work and dedication to make you worth hiring, but it also requires that you grab every chance you get to learn and perfect some part of your craft. In many cases, perfecting several would be a good idea. We witnessed the performers joking and kidding each other in one of their 22 different languages after the training session. That is when we realized that they are just normal people doing a theatrical job, and relaxing afterwards. We felt better about our own training and goals after that.