

Montreal is Circustown

How circus-loving Montreal has persisted as the big top of the world



Recent graduates of the National Circus School swarm the Rue St.-Denis in flash-mob performances in Montreal. (Christine H. O'Toole/)

Four luxuriantly bearded men stalk onstage in tiny briefs at Montreal's Olympia Theatre, and the audience erupts. They get the inside joke: These performers are reincarnations of the beloved local circus strongman, Louis Cyr, who personified the Victorian beef-and-barbells physique. Over the next hour, to crashing live music, they run through every staple of a 1960s "Ed Sullivan Show" act. Teeterboards. Juggling. Human pyramids. Then they tweak the act. They spit ping-pong balls into faraway cocktails on cabaret tables. They stretch two female partners into lithe human jump ropes before urging them into a glitter-coated mud-wrestling match. Finally the ringleader appears. She's a leather-clad dominatrix, cracking a whip.

Cirque Alfonse's absurd brand of circus art is a hit worldwide. But it's no surprise that it was created here, alongside every other flavor of physical performance, from tightrope walkers and fire spinners to aerial silk dancers and trapeze artists. To reclaim a cliché, circus in Montreal is a big tent — and right now, it's the big top of the world.

The home of Cirque du Soleil attracts aspiring performers from all over the world. Do you twist like a pretzel? Juggle flame? Fly through the air with the greatest of ease? Me neither. But I was curious to see how the new crew reinvents old tricks. On a trip in July, I found plenty of talent. Most of it was airborne.

Ever since John Ricketts brought his traveling circus here in 1797 — it was a blockbuster hit, running for a year and a half — Montreal has been embellishing the circus tradition. Contemporary companies rely less on baggy-pants comedy (though in one memorable performance I attended by Machine de Cirque, another breakout local troupe, the pants came off

altogether). Some acts play it straight, more ballet than burlesque. The lion tamers and pirouetting elephants are gone. So is the freak show. But freaky behavior, like Cirque Alfonse's, is still encouraged.

At the circus, there is always the hope that something dangerous will happen, Claude Debussy once said. And in today's circus, risk is still essential, says Patrick Tobin.

I asked Tobin to lunch because he just graduated from the prestigious National Circus School here. The 25-year-old Massachusetts native explained his career choice easily — “I was the kid who was always jumping off everything” — and moves with the poise of a born acrobat.

“The reason circus has survived is that it's adapted and changed,” said Tobin, who majored in the disciplines of tightwire and aerial rope. “It's spontaneous. It filters through different cultures and languages — I had classmates from 20 different countries.” In Montreal, they fit right in; immigrants compose nearly a quarter of the city's recent arrivals.

After an eight-week stint with Chicago's Midnight Circus, Tobin is planning European auditions. “It's a small community that's spread out all over the world,” he said. “You find them, you find a job.” Meanwhile, he bounces between Boston and his Montreal neighborhood of St.-Michel. The district is close to the school and rents are cheap. “There are so many circus artists passing through year-round that it's a great place to network and meet other creative artists,” he said.

The residential neighborhood of the Plateau is a bit more upscale. Overlooking the old port, it gives off a genteel Parisian vibe. As I pass through St.-Louis Square, with its belle epoque fountain, the benches

are crowded with pensioners. They're the audience. On the lawn, trios of young acrobats dive like swooping birds, their practice suggesting years of work at the barre. One twirls through a giant hoop. A dreadlocked student, his backpack stuffed with juggling clubs, returns a two-wheeler to the local bike-sharing stand. Over clafoutis at nearby La Petite Cuillère, a cafe wedged between old-fashioned bookstores, I meet the academic ringleader of the scene.

Patrick Leroux describes himself as "the resident circus nerd." An English professor at Concordia University here, he also heads the Montreal Working Group for Circus Research. He quickly sketches how French language and circus inform the city's spirit.

Montreal, he says, has always considered itself more Gallic than Anglo, and its separatist identity crested just as the city hosted the 1976 Summer Olympics. "That's when the national gymnastic team came to Montreal, creating an interesting mix of gymnasts and artists that hung out together." Over the next 20 years, Canadians vetoed Quebec's political independence. Many corporations decamped to English-speaking Toronto, but Montreal's artists defiantly remained. Canadians who trained at the national circus school of Bulgaria realized that the silent art of the circus could break through the language barrier at home, and they envisioned a Euro-styled company in America. Three years later, Cirque du Soleil, and a worldwide Spandex-clad juggernaut, was born.

Still headquartered in Montreal, Cirque du Soleil was sold in April to private-equity investors (including the Quebec Pension and Investment Fund). But other troupes are gaining their own momentum. Leroux ticks off the current marquee names: Seven Fingers of the Hand created last

year's reprise of "Pippin" on Broadway; Cirque Éloize invented its signature Cyr Wheel to roll on to stardom in Dubai, Monaco and Broadway. "This is now a huge ecosystem, with 40 local companies," Leroux says. "It's what London or New York are to theater."



A scene from "The Pianist" at Montreal's annual Circus Festival. (Heli Sorjonen)

Leroux says circus mania starts young; his fourth-grade daughter's gym curriculum includes spinning diabolo sticks. Two outdoor acrobatic parks, Parc Exalto and Voiles en Voiles, cater to kids. What about adults? I ask. Where do grown-ups learn new tricks? Leroux tells me to take the Metro to Hochelaga, an old Portuguese neighborhood near Olympic Park.

On a flat, residential street, La Caserne is a municipal recreation center that's a clubhouse for aspiring acrobats under 30. At night, the former firehouse offers French-language classes in subjects like acro-yoga and African gumboot dancing. During the day, the old building hosts open training for professional artists who need vast spaces to practice. As I watch from a third-floor landing, a half-dozen artists are winding themselves in scarlet aerial silks, spinning like spiders down from the

ceiling. On the floor, sweating pairs practice the art of hand-to-hand, hoisting their partners steadily on their palms and shoulders.

Stuffing her equipment into a sequined pack, Leda Davis is finishing her day's training. The 29-year-old Calgary native brought her college degree in drama and dance to Montreal two years ago. Now she's building a career as a contortionist and acrobatic dancer, freelancing gigs at Montreal Jazz Fest and private events. (One recent moneymaker: serving champagne to wedding guests while suspended from ribbons.) "It's a bigger pond, with the best talent. Dance and circus are converging here," she says.

Alissa Bonneville's community circus project, CirQus, started by offering classes in La Caserne. But when 800 people signed up, she ran out of space. The Australian will move CirQus this month, sharing space in an old church with Trapezium, another local troupe. "We give employment to circus artists to teach the community. And our ceiling's 34 feet high. In circus terms, that's a dream come true," says Bonneville.

For outdoor training, Bonneville prefers vast Parc du Mont-Royal, a green forest topping the city. "It comes alive in summer," she says. "And on Sundays after the Tam Tams" — drum circle — "we get all the fire spinners together. I bring juggling stuff and hula hoops. It's great fun."

I decline her invitation to play with fire. But I want to explore Avenue du Mont-Royal, the southern boundary of the funky Mile End neighborhood. On a Saturday afternoon, the cafes are jammed, and so is the traffic. As I walk uphill toward the park, I see a parade filling the street. And — is that an elephant?

Turns out this celebration isn't a circus. I've stumbled into the annual Hare Krishna festival. Montreal compresses dozens of such celebrations into a frantic summer season. Now in its sixth year, the Cirque Complètement overlaps both the fireworks festival and the Comedy Festival in mid-July. Surveying the downtown scene from the rooftop bar of FoodLab, I see comedians at outdoor open mikes at one end of the Quartier des Spectacles. At the other, I see acrobats swinging lazily from rigging above the Rue St.-Denis. Approaching an intersection on a muggy afternoon, I catch an anti-gravity performance.

The first clue is the music: a waft of mournful pop that echoes up the gray stone streets. Then I see a handful of phones raised overhead. Finally, against the clouds, a couple in knee-length pants and muscle shirts effortlessly scales a 20-foot vertical Chinese pole. In a short pas de deux, they enact the ups and downs of a fraught love affair, climbing, caressing, catching and plummeting in perfect balance. Then they slide to the ground, bow, and walk down the street, leaving the audience with the classic question: How'd they do that?

For my last evening in town, I head north to the mecca: the City of Circus Arts, home to the National Circus School, Cirque du Soleil world headquarters, and the massive Tohu. It's in the St.-Michel neighborhood, one of the city's poorest.

Today the former landfill is a campus for the school, the Cirque and a giant cylinder, which is Tohu. Surrounded by a community garden, the venue — its name a riff on tohu-bohu, or hurly-burly — is a permanent year-round circus showcase. An azure-and-gold-striped tent billows alongside.

The 10-year-old Tohu supports a roster of worthy causes. It produces its own honey, distributes free tickets to its low-income neighbors and recycles its stormwater. By 2020, staffer Louis Theroux tells me proudly, the detoxed grounds will be the city's second largest park. The building's gray concrete exterior is textured in long, cracked wrinkles — a deliberate wink to the memory of circus elephants.

Before a performance by Machine de Cirque, I roam through Tohu's history exhibit. It turns out that Abbott and Costello and Pinky and the Brain are just recent iterations of a classic comic duo: a long-suffering clown in whiteface and the fat, red-nosed Auguste. The one-on-one matchup always works. But then the four T-shirted members of Machine de Cirque hit the stage, and I realize more is more.

More teeterboards, more juggling — this young troupe's approach to even standbys like unicycles is fresh and over-the-top. Each finely-honed bit raises the hilarity. By the finale, an elaborate burlesque with strategically placed bath towels, the wave of laughter crests, rocking a full house.

As they take an exuberant bow, the compliments rain down in French. The crowd surges to the foot of the stage. Machine de Cirque is a breakout company of grads from the circus school, and the sense of community pride is palpable.

On the bus ride back downtown, I take a window seat. Chic young circus gypsies throng the aisles, happily critiquing the Tohu show. A blue-haired unicyclist in the curb lane passes at top speed. As I exit at the Jarry metro station, a tall brunette waits patiently. She's wearing a lacy dress, high heels and full whiteface: a modern-day Pierrette.

Anywhere else, I think, this crowd might be labeled as freaks. In circus-mad Montreal, they're just commuters.

O'Toole, a Pittsburgh-based travel writer, last wrote for the Travel Section about Southeast Asia's golden triangle.

IF YOU GO
Where to stay

Loft Hotel

334 Terasse St.-Denis

888-414-5638

lofthotel.ca

Ultramodern boutique hotel convenient to the Sherbrooke metro station, the Plateau and the Latin Quarter. Sleek contemporary interior design and rooftop deck. Doubles from \$200.

Where to eat

Hippi Poutine

3482 Rue St.-Denis

514-848-0316

www.hippipoutine.net

The hefty Montreal tradition adds international flavors at this bistro with outdoor seating overlooking the Plateau's St.-Louis Square. The \$7.50 specials include beer or sangria.

FoodLab

Société des Arts Technologiques (SAT)

1201 St.-Laurent Blvd.

514-844-2033 ext 225

www.sat.qc.ca/fr/foodlab

Elegant casual dining and a rooftop patio with communal tables. Dinner for two about \$50; stick around for DJs, video, and electronic art installations downstairs. Open Monday through Friday.

What to do

Tohu

2345 Rue Jarry E.

514-376-8648

tohu.ca/en/

A year-round scheduled of international circus performance. A 30-minute journey by Metro and bus from the central Berri-UQAM station, the sprawling campus also offers audio guides (French only). Ask in advance about English-language tours or check circus listings on the city's cultural calendar at www.lavitrine.com.

Studio CirQus

6956 Rue St.-Denis

512-347-0914

www.lecirqus.com

The fitness center offers amateur workshops in circus disciplines. [Classes range from \\$19-\\$38.](#)

Parc Exalto

4141 Pierre-De Coubertin Ave.

514-252-4141, 1-877-997-091

www.parcexalto.com

A new addition to the city's Olympic Park offers obstacle courses and other a la carte attractions from trampolines to trapezes. Tickets from \$10-\$23.

Voiles en Voiles

Place des Vestiges

Vieux-Port de Montreal

514-473-1458

www.voilesenvoiles.com/en

This pirate-themed family theme park bounces with aerial adventure courses, climbing and inflatable games. Open April 9 through October. Tickets are \$22 for one, two-hour admission and \$66 for an unlimited family package.

Information

www.tourisme-montreal.org