



CIRQUE DU YOGA

BY SHANNON SEXTON

IF you enter one of Cirque du Soleil's lavish, eerie theaters in Las Vegas, be prepared: a ragged, screaming martial artist may bungee jump from the 30-foot-high rafters, karate-kicking toward you like a madman until his cords run out of elasticity. There is a moment when he is suspended above you, roaring, then the ropes snap him upward again—just in time. Goofy characters may usher you to the wrong seats, dump your newly purchased bucket of popcorn over your head, bumble through the aisles and sit in your lap, or feed you strawberries from a silver platter.

Welcome to Cirque du Soleil, where fantastical creatures reach out and touch you, and the ending is always a surprise. This edgy, artsy, meta-circus has been called “a circus without boundaries” by *60 Minutes*, “a cultural earthquake” by the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, “an exalting hallucination” by *Time* magazine. “Cirque du Soleil has become the gold standard of live entertainment....,” says *Time*, and “makes nearly every other form of entertainment seem timid, sullen, earthbound.”

Over 50 million people on four continents have been wowed by a Cirque du Soleil show. Critics credit the French-Canadian entertainment giant with reinventing the traditional, three-ring circus into a new, mind-boggling mix of modern art, street performance, and circus jamboree engulfed in a dreamland of bold, brilliantly costumed characters, visionary lighting, and haunting, original music.

Class Photos By
ISAAC BREKKEN



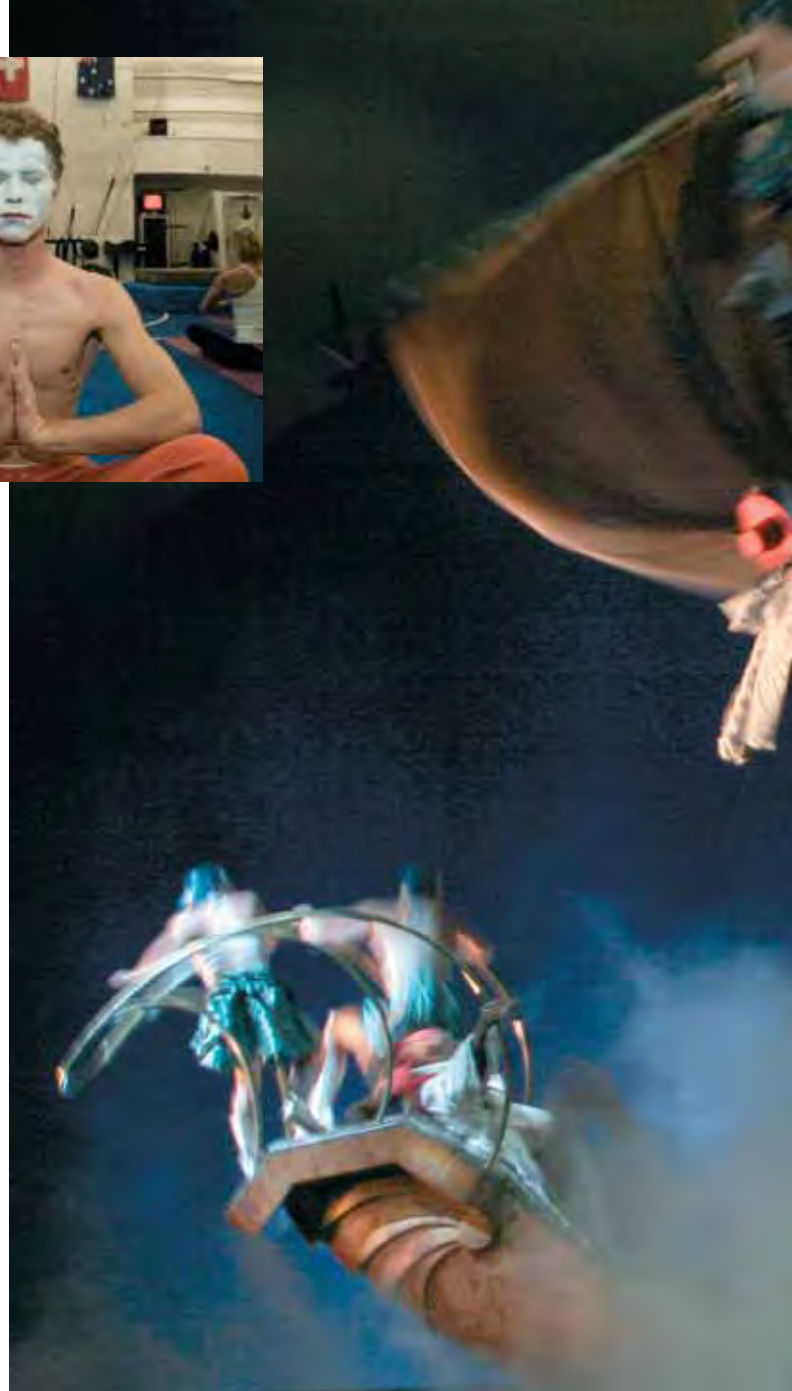
Where else can you watch fireworks explode on a shape-shifting stage that may fill with water or disappear into a foggy, ethereal abyss at any moment? Where beautiful, thin-limbed girls perform every rubber-band yoga pose you've ever seen—on top of each other? Where a man nonchalantly hugs a rolled-up newspaper while his hat, clothes, shoes, and chair go up in flames?

You won't see any typical gymnastics acts here. Cirque parades Olympic-trumping acts that are loosely strung together with a mystical, impressionistic story line. (Even acrobats have a subtext; instead of being circus artists, they assume theatrical roles. In one show, for example, they're weary warriors working on an aerial boat that has been traveling for a thousand years.) This is circus to the nth degree.

But Cirque is more than shock-value entertainment; its performances are also transcendent, otherworldly, full of hope. When you witness one of the company's soulful productions, you remember that the world is a living canvas that deserves our reverent attention; you remember laughter and childlike wonder, love and loneliness. But most of all, you marvel at the potential of the human body, the collaboration of creative minds, and the collective spirit that entwines us all.

Behind the scenes, Cirque's world-class cast of characters work tirelessly to make their magical acts look fluid and effortless on stage. But if you're swallowing fire, or bench-pressing a muscleman, or performing a hands-free headstand on a 40-foot-high trapeze bar every night for a living, your chances of injury are pretty high. If you get hurt, your career could be sidelined, or even finished, in a heartbeat.

As a result, many performers have short career spans. Every year, 20 percent of Cirque's staff



disappears due to injury or retirement. But because this particular circus was founded by a band of daring, starving artists in Montreal, Cirque is sensitive to the issue. (The company's founder, Guy Laliberté, was a fire-breathing, stilt-walking, folksinging street performer long before he became the company's multimillionaire CEO.) Cirque values the 800 performers who make their 12 currently running shows come to life, so the company takes a proactive approach to helping them keep well, offering their artists a variety of benefits including free health insurance; physical therapy, massage, and rehabilitation services; wellness classes on postural awareness, nutrition, and stress management;



and strength and conditioning programs such as biometrics, pilates, circuit training, core conditioning, and hatha yoga.

“We want our artists to be as healthy as possible for as long as possible,” says Janet Pundick, director of Cirque’s health services, “so we try to promote many avenues of health for them to choose from.”

Why do activities like yoga help? Because every second of a Cirque show is strictly choreographed and there are no rotating casts, performers move through the same movements night after night, week after week, year after year. As a result, they may have flexible legs but stiff shoulders; they might be stronger on one side

than the other; they may have repetitive stress injuries. So Cirque performers spend a fair amount of time off-stage trying to cultivate balance.

Yoga is a popular choice for them because, as Janet says, “it helps the artists maintain optimal health and biomechanical alignment, which is essential for any athlete.

“Some artists use yoga as an adjunct to their formal training,” she continues. “Others need it because their act requires an incredible amount of flexibility. Some use it as a warm-up, but for others, yoga is their passion.”

Yoga helps performers conquer their cruise-control habits by awakening their muscles, deepening their breath, opening their hearts, and focusing their minds.



Last year, Cirque invited one of their behind-the-scenes employees, Julie Roddham, to teach hatha to the performers at a resident show in Las Vegas. A newly minted Anusara Yoga teacher, Julie had been practicing for only two years, and she had never been an athlete or a circus performer. While the Cirque artists spent their work nights in grueling training sessions and shows, Julie worked as the head of wardrobe. As a result, she was more than a little intimidated by the job. “I thought, ‘What can *I* teach to Olympic-calibre athletes?’

“When we got in the classroom, I was really surprised,” says Julie. “The artists are really skilled in their specific disciplines, but they’re a lot more fragile than they look. They work and train so hard that they often end up with injuries or instability in their knees, hips, wrists, and backs. They can be very open in one part of their body, but very closed in others. Yoga gives them whole-body awareness, and the therapeutic benefits are immense for them.”





What does a Cirque du Soleil yoga class look like?

Forget the soothing pastels and soft lighting of your local studio; there is no sweet-smelling incense here. Julie's pre-show yoga classes take place in a multipurpose training room with padded walls, fluorescent lights, and industrial, alpine ceilings. It smells like sweat in here.

The room has battle wounds: white paint is peeling off the walls and there are chunks of black foam showing through—permanent wounds where various objects have dented the walls. All day long, performers use this room for weight-lifting, circuit training, and rehearsing an aerial gymnastics act performed in spinning hoops strung from the ceiling.

Julie's yoga classes last a mere 40 minutes and serve as a safe but challenging warm-up for the performers. Because the artists have two shows ahead of them tonight, they don't want to overexert themselves. Performers drift in one by one, sporting sweatpants and tank tops and luminous, painted faces. They

practice with their backs to the mirrors, without any sense of competition or drive.

Class begins with a few minutes of meditation and heart centering. Then Julie leads her students through a number of chest openers, lunges, and forward bends. Throughout the session, she links the spiritual elements of Anusara with the physical practice of postures.

Other performers are free to warm up in this room during yoga class. Midway through the session, a sullen, unglamorous woman in a baggy T-shirt and sweatpants enters the room, locked in the soundproof world of her headphones, and silently stomps on a Stairmaster in the back. Later, a short, shirtless muscleman begins lifting barbells beside her.

Meanwhile, the yoga students focus on the tasks at hand. It is beautiful to watch them. When their feet are planted in a lunge and they twist to the right, a dozen painted faces turn in unison, like a museum of white-faced mannequins come to life.



By the end of class, a girlish blonde has entered the room. She begins pulling her legs into hyperextended splits, curving her limbs like soft pretzel dough, yanking body parts into place, looking bored. She is wearing a bodysuit that fits like a second skin and looks like a kindergartener's finger painting.

Now, the yoga students are surrendering to the ground in *shavasana*, listening to Julie's instructions. But her voice is suddenly drowned out by announcements on a loudspeaker. No one appears to be startled; this happens at the end of every class. Afterward, Julie recites a short blessing and reads an invocation in Sanskrit. The students press their palms together in prayer position, bow their heads, and close the class with "*namaste*."

Thirty minutes until showtime.

Last night, I fell in love with "O"—the sexy, stunning, surreal show that Julie's yoga students perform in nightly at Vegas's poshest hotel, the Bellagio. Housed in a theater reminiscent of a 14th-century opera house, "O" is a vivid, spirit-driven show full of mythical creatures and mind-numbing feats that are performed in, on, and above a 1.5 million-gallon pool of water. Among many Cirque fans, this show is hailed as la crème de la crème. Unveiled in 1998, it sold out for five years straight and continues to enchant an audience of 1,800 twice a night, five days a week, 476 times a year.

Today, I'm backstage with a dozen performers from "O"—acrobats, gymnasts, synchronized swimmers, high divers, fire jugglers, mimes, and musicians who hail from around the world, from Cuba to Canada, Russia to the United States. Without costumes and stage makeup, they look like normal people—youthful, energetic women and men in their 20s and 30s, who, despite extraordinary success in their specialized fields,

are hardly egomaniacs. Twice a week, this group attends Cirque's yoga classes before their first performance of the night. Their experiences—both as Cirque performers and as yoga students—are not what you'd expect.

First of all: on stage, they get bored.

As a member of the audience, it's hard to imagine how a death-defying martial artist who is manipulating fire in the dark, by the pool, with the water serving as a brilliant mirror and the audience exquisitely hushed, could space out—until you realize that his act is virtually the same night after night. Some performers, who have worked for three and a half years straight, have executed the same, repetitive movements on stage at least 1,600 times.

"Sometimes we're like, 'Let's get this show over with,'" says Volodymyr Rozbitsky, a diver for "O" since 2002 and a three-time National Champion in Ukraine. "It's so easy to go on autopilot because your body does the same thing over and over again. You are very used to the routine."

Yoga helps performers conquer their cruise-control habits by awakening their muscles, deepening their breath, opening their hearts, and focusing their minds. Body awareness plays a big role, too. As musician Asia Grzesik notes, "It's good to go inward and feel how to move from the inside out, to actually *feel* what my body is doing while I'm singing and while I'm playing cello." She also uses yogic breathing techniques to release tension before the show.

Benedikt Negro, who plays a decrepit, spooky mime-like character named Eugen, says that yoga helps him put meaning back into his act when he's uninspired. After experiencing a spiritualized practice of postures, he and other performers find it easier to infuse their performance with deeper meaning and significance, too.

Performance Photos on Following Spread: Top Left: **Mystère** Photo: Tomasz, Rossa/ Costumes: Dominique Lemieux/© Cirque du Soleil Inc.;
Top Center: **O** Photo: Tomasz, Rossa/ Costumes: Dominique Lemieux/© 2004 Cirque du Soleil Inc.; Top Right: **O** Photo: Véronique Vail/ Costumes: Dominique Lemieux/© 2004 Cirque du Soleil Inc.;
Bottom Right: **O** Photo: Tomasz, Rossa/ Costumes: Dominique Lemieux/© 2004 Cirque du Soleil Inc.





Here's another surprise: many of Cirque's world-class athletes—who have surpassed their peers and won national, international, even Olympic competitions—actually struggle to open their hearts in fish pose, relax their hips in *sukhasana*, or stretch their hamstrings in a forward bend. Yoga introduces them to weak spots they never knew they had.

“I'm used to excelling at physical activities, so yoga can be frustrating for me,” confesses synchronized swimmer Ana Cukic. “When you realize you're not great at some of the balancing poses, you don't have enough flexibility in your shoulders, and you get frustrated with the breathing, you're like, ‘Why can't I do this?’ But that's why I keep coming back. Yoga challenges me, and I find that rewarding.”

Anastassia Dobrynina, a diver, says, “I don't consider myself to be flexible, even though I've been an athlete for twenty years. Julie will never be a competitive athlete, but she kicks our butts in yoga class! Just when we think we've reached our limit in a pose, she says, ‘Now, if you do this, and then you do this...’ and before we know it she has wrapped her body around her leg, like, three times, and we're like, ‘No way. We can't do that!’”

“But we like the crazy poses and sequences that Julie throws in at the end,” swimmer Shayna Nackoney adds, “because we feel like we're stepping up. We're becoming closer to that yoga master that we want to become.”

As Volodymyr explains, even after you've reached an elite level of performance, you still want to improve. But it's difficult because you've already achieved everything you need to maintain the status quo of your act. Few people can compete with you or even tell you how to improve. “Yoga adds an extra dimension,” he says. “It really broadens your view of yourself and of your abilities.”



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Among other things, yoga encourages performers to develop a different relationship with their body. As Julie notes, many have spent their lives in the “no pain, no gain” world of competitive sports. “Yoga helps them recognize what is good for their body and what could potentially harm it.”

Take stretching, for example. As synchronized swimmer Heather Stanley explains, “I grew up in a sport where stretching was forced upon us, with coaches shouting things like, ‘Get into that split! And hold it!’ I could never do it. I spent thirty years trying to be flexible. My body responds to yoga’s stretching techniques much better than the techniques that gymnastics and swimming coaches used. It’s unfortunate that yoga theories aren’t used more in active sports.”

Heather’s teammate, Ana, agrees. Recently, a physical therapist asked her if she thought she was stretching properly. “I was like, ‘Of course I am. I know how to stretch.’ Then he asked me, ‘Do you stop before you get to the pain?’ I thought that was the whole point of stretching.”

In synchronized swimming, it’s common for swimmers to force their bodies into difficult positions no matter how much it hurts. Hatha yoga is a huge contrast because it encourages them to work their way into poses gently, methodically, and over time.

The swimmers at “O” have a daunting job. On stage they transform into a troupe of upside-down, underwater ballerinas who perform amazing stunts in unison with each other and the music, which they can hear through submarine speakers. Their legs pierce the surface of the water from below, then jack-knife so their feet can splash the water musically, percussively—an aquatic morse code. Later, they surface as a line of ghostly, dreadlocked mermaids snaking through the water, staring at the audience with black, vacant eyes.

Synchronized swimming requires exceptional grace, strength, flexibility, and endurance because performers must work against the force of water while holding their breath. Even exiting the stage is complicated: they swim downward seven feet to one of 18 breathing stations, take a break, then swim through an underwater canal that leads backstage.

If you’ve spent your life training as a synchronized swimmer, learning yoga isn’t easy, says Sylvie Fréchette, an Olympic gold medalist and retired swimmer for “O.” “As soon as our head goes underwater,” she explains, “we have to hold our breath. Most of the time, that’s when we are exerting the most physical effort.” And because synchronized swimmers spend the majority of their waking hours wearing nose clips in pools, they’re accustomed to mouth-breathing. Those habits haunt them in yoga class. “We forget to breathe,” says Sylvie. “And then, when we try to start breathing through our nose instead of our mouth, we feel out of breath.” Learning how to nostril-breathe through movement means unlearning lifelong habits. But it’s worth it, she says.

“Sometimes I think, ‘Oh, I’m not going to go to yoga today. There’s no way!’ My husband and I work different shifts and we have two babies at home, so I’m often quite exhausted. But I know that if I miss a class, I feel it in my attitude, in my approach to everything. When you’re doing yoga, you don’t think about what you’re doing. You live. You feel. You breathe. There is nothing else like it in the world.”

Her fellow yoga students agree. Although their schedules are packed, they loyally show up 40 minutes early twice a week, brighten their faces with stage makeup, and go to Julie’s class before their first performance. That’s because yoga doesn’t just improve their flexibility and heal their injuries, it also deepens their breath, opens their hearts, and focuses their minds. On the days that they do yoga before the show, the performers say, they’re calmer, more focused, more inspired, more energized. And that, in turn, improves the quality of their performances. As Sylvie points out, “If you can’t take care of yourself, how can you give something beautiful to the audience?” ●