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Theater of the Bazaar

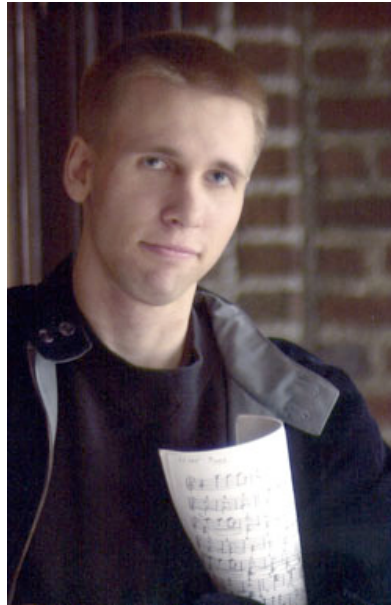
Seven Days catches up with Circus Smirkus composer Tristan Moore


BY **DAN BOLLES** [08.12.09]

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For most circuses — Cirque du Soleil being the obvious exception — music is something of an afterthought. Find a calliope-playing monkey and you're in business, right? Well, not quite. Still, your average American big-top show relies on relatively predictable musical fare to augment the main event. But Vermont's **Circus Smirkus** is hardly your average circus. And **Tristan Moore** is hardly your average composer.

Moore ran away with the circus last year, realizing a dream 15 years in the making. After time spent studying circuses in Europe, where the discipline is more highly regarded as a legitimate art form, he is uniquely qualified for the job. Now in his second season with the troupe, Moore has crafted a fascinatingly diverse soundtrack to Smirkus' 2009 spectacle, "Smirkus Ever After: A Big Top Fairytale." And with nary a calliope — or monkey — to be found.



Tristan Moore Image Courtesy of Cirkus Smirkus 

Seven Days recently caught up with Moore by phone on the road, in advance of Circus Smirkus' final 2009 performances this week.

SEVEN DAYS: I imagine composing for a circus would be a different beast from say, a theatrical production, which would follow a more linear story arc. TRISTAN MOORE:

Absolutely. One of the major challenges is the variation in timing. You never know how long each act is going to last, because jugglers sometimes drop. And beats need to be done again. Yet you still want to have a musical flow that parallels each act as best as you can. So you need to build some flexibility into the musical structures. That's a whole circus act in itself.

One way of dealing with that challenge is to create sections — we call them "safety measures" — where we just kind of continue to vamp, to improvise until [the performers] reach a certain point in the act. And that's sort of our cue to go on to the next section.

Circus Smirkus wraps up its 2009 tour, "Smirkus Ever After: A Big Top Fairytale," with four shows this week: August 12 & 13 in Montpelier, and August 14 & 15

Technology has helped with some of that. Partly what we do for these shows is to supplement the live performance with sequenced sections of music. And each of those sections is assigned to a section of the act,

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so we can move seamlessly back and forth between them as need be. There is a lot of programming work involved in making that come true. But it definitely pays off in terms of a live feel and the energy it brings to the performance.

Another challenge is the incredible diversity of the acts involved in the show, which is a wonderful challenge for me. One of my favorite things to aim for is diversity in my musical scores. I don't like to be too predictable. I like keeping the audience on their toes. So we get to use a variety of genres of music.

One of the [best] parts of the process is experimenting with different sounds and matching them up with video footage of different acts and seeing how they can serve to augment the energy and rhythm inherent in each of those acts.

SD: Does the score evolve over the course of a season? TM: Yes, very much. A few sites back, we

significantly redid the opening of the show. We added an overture. It started with the director who is on tour with us, Troy Wunderle. Troy wanted to create more of a build, so that the energy of the opening was approached more gradually, rather than hitting the audience like a truck ...We are constantly making little adjustments to the acts, as things are added or taken out.

SD: This is your second season with Circus Smirkus. What did you learn from last year and how did your approach to this year's score change? TM: If I learned one thing, it was to be more aggressive in asking the questions I knew I needed to have answered in order to do a good job. Asking the directors the right questions was one of those things. The first year, we were all kind of getting acquainted with one another's vocabularies. There is a learning curve there. And it definitely paid off a lot this year.

The other thing was just trusting that all the parts of this giant machine are going to do their part and come together to make a show. The first year, I was scared just because it comes together so rapidly. In three weeks, basically, the performers are still learning their skills and refining their tricks. It's hard to see that there is going to be a show. But having seen it come together once, I was able to let go and trust that, somehow, miraculously, it really is going to happen.

SD: That sounds absolutely frightening and liberating at the same time. TM: It really has been. Yes.

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