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by Ernest Albrecht

The first Cirque du Soleil show Tristan Moore saw live was *Quidam*. “That first Cirque du Soleil experience,” he recalls, “left a profound mark on me and kind of changed the course of my career. That show and its music in particular had a profound impact on me personally. I went to see the show in New York. I bused up there to watch it once and ended up watching it four or five time straight because I had never seen anything like it.” Simultaneous to seeing other Cirque shows, he was academically studying circus in the European tradition, and spent six months in Paris studying theatre and dance and seeing a ton of circuses. “So I had a total immersion in the circus scene long before Smirkus ever contacted me.”



Moore’s association with Circus Smirkus came about somewhat curiously. Originally from Salt Lake City, Moore was attending Amherst College in Massachusetts in 2000. As a summer job he and his girlfriend were painting ski lift chairs in a mountain resort in Stowe, Vermont. One day he heard that a circus would be coming to town. “I thought that was the strangest thing,” he recalls. “That in this tiny Vermont town that there could be a full blown circus coming through.” Already a circus fan thanks to his introduction by Cirque du Soleil, he went and sure enough it turned out to be Circus Smirkus. “I was totally blown away by the production values of this little mud show.”

At the time Smirkus was not using live, original music, and so Moore dismissed any thought of there being any kind of opening for a musician or a composer with this show he found so fascinating. Back in Salt Lake City, he found work as resident composer for a dance company and was also working with various theater and dance groups when out of the blue, Circus Smirkus came calling. “I think they did a web search for various composers who would match their aesthetic,” he believes. Michael Dobson, who had been the show’s drummer and percussionist, had by then taken over as musical director and was searching for a composer.

In the initial inquiry of his interest, the name of the company was not revealed. All Moore knew was that there was a company on the East Coast asking him to go on a strange tour with them. To find out more he Googled Michael Dobson’s name and Circus Smirkus came up. At this point his enthusiasm quickly escalated. “I was really enthusiastic about working for the company at that point, and so I sent Jesse Dryden [the company creative director] a huge email detailing why I was the right person for the job and how I would accomplish technically what they needed for *Smirkusology* [their next show].”

In 2008 Moore joined the company as composer under the musical direction of Mike Dobson. A year later he was the musical director and over the next six years has worked with several different percussionists, Parker Bert being the most recent.

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

Circus Smirkus’ creative team usually begins work in January, when the company holds live auditions for that summer’s troupers. Since some of the creative team will be attendance, they take that opportunity to

talk a little bit about that coming year's theme, which is usually chosen back in November.

At this time, however, there is still a lot floating around as to how the theme is going to translate into specific acts. Of course the team has to know which troupers are going to be in the ring that summer before they settle on those connections. But then starting in late March, April and May, Moore will have a series of general conversations with Jesse Dryden, the creative director. "We talk about the theme and what the new show should feel and sound like. We talk about the palette we are working with, and eventually we start getting more specific over the course of several more telephone conversations. Like how the theme can be brought to bear on specific acts, and in this year's case, which is a very story-centric approach, we were talking about ways to tell the story through the acts and how the clowns would tell a story that bore some resemblance to the original story but also had its own unique spin on it. The fact that we were doing *Oz Incorporated*, and not just *The Wizard of Oz*, meant that we were dealing with three different aesthetic lenses through which we could approach the acts. There was the *Oz lens*, the fantasy world of Oz that most of the audience would already be familiar with coming into the show; the *corporate lens*, which musically for me started to become a more electronic synthetic sound – whereas Oz would be more a palette of child-like and bell-like sounds, bells and resonant sounds – and then finally you had the *circus lens*: the acts and the movement of the apparatus."

There was always some initial indication of what acts would be in the show and how those acts would feel based on the personality of the individual performers doing those acts and their strengths as performers. That is why "I took video footage at the auditions so that I could continue to go back later and watch the individual performers and understand the energy they brought to the ring." By the time June rolls around and the entire company arrives at the circus barn, there is still a lot that is undecided, but very quickly in those three hectic weeks of rehearsal, things begin to take form in a much more concrete way and by that time, Moore will have written some music as a groundwork of possibilities. With only a general framework from which to work, those three weeks obviously are a very busy time for the composer. The reason for such tight time constraints is that the rehearsals and tour must accommodate the troupers' school schedules, and they tend not to be available until June.

"I lose a fair amount of sleep during the final week of rehearsals," Moore reveals. Despite the enormous pressure, there is some solace in knowing that down the road he can continue to tweak and polish and refine.

During those three weeks Moore moves back and forth between his little composition studio and the rehearsal tents, watching the acts develop as closely as he can. "Having video footage of those acts has made an enormous difference for me," Moore explains. "I don't know how I would be able to do what I do, trying to tailor moments in the music to moments in the acts, without having the concrete record of the timing in the rehearsals that the video footage permits. In my first year I hadn't yet figured out how crucial that was. I was really struggling with how to match the music to the acts."

Of the rehearsal period Moore says, "It's an intense working environment, but in a very friendly, pleasant way. Everybody is working together and supporting each other, but they are all also being asked to push themselves to their own personal limits. It's the nature of the beast. Maybe that's part of the reason I keep coming back. There is a little bit of addictive quality to the thrill of that push in such adverse circumstances.

"It's all day, everyday. There's no breaks. You sleep, eat and work. The show creation is all we are doing while we are there. Sleeping becomes more and more minimal. I am becoming better about regulating my hours because I do realize I function much better when I've had a decent night's sleep. It's part of the job that you lose everything but the show. Your mind just has no time for anything else. It's amazing how much you can get done when there are no distractions. Where there's just the thing that everybody is focusing on."

Moore's first show with Smirkus "...was overwhelming and really exciting and scary because I had no guarantee that any of this was going to work," he recalls. "I hadn't foreseen how this was all going to fall

together so quickly at the end of the rehearsal period. I just saw that there were a lot of pieces flying around and it needed to be taken on faith that somehow all these pieces would come together in some kind of coherent show, and I was amazed when they did... so the next year was a little easier.”

The music in this past summer’s show was entirely original. “An interesting question for us originally – since we were making reference to a story that has a very iconic soundtrack already associated with it, the question arose, ‘Do we want to quote that; do we want to make reference to that?’ We were working under the shadow of this incredibly well-loved, iconic film/story; people might come in with very specific expectations about what they were going to see insofar as characters and a through line in the story. That has worked to our advantage in the past, as for instance in 2009 when we were working with the fairy tale characters, because everybody knows the tortoise and hare fable, so having an audience fall in love with those characters you’re already at somewhat of an advantage because everybody has that base line that they start from. Having a movie as your visual or character reference point was more of a challenge. Because you want to make sure that your spin on it is not derivative or plagiaristic – not that there was any danger of that with Jesse’s approach, because he is constantly looking for ways to make things unique and original. That’s the way his mind works. ...Very early on we decided, ‘Yes, we are going to put our own unique spin on this, and we should give ourselves the freedom to walk away from the audience’s expectations if we feel we can do something more exciting.’ That was liberating for me. Because quoting the original soundtrack extensively would basically serve to remind the audience that we were comparing ourselves with something we can’t create. We are a circus. We are not a movie. This is a very different sort of experience.”

One of Moore’s favorite moments in the show – one of his later discoveries – was the aerial perch act that came to be known in the company as the bambouk act. “Before we arrived at the Barn, it was designated as a ‘to be determined aerial act’. We weren’t quite sure how that was going to play out. And then late before we arrived at the barn, it was determined that we were going to try messing around with the bambouk apparatus, and I had no idea of what to expect from the behavior of this thing. I watched some videos on YouTube of similar types of acts, but I knew that most of those were very sensual acts and ours wouldn’t be even close to that kind of aesthetic, so that was a big question mark for me until late in the process when I watched one of the later rehearsals. I had been putting it off to the back burner for a while, hoping that inspiration would arise and sure enough, when I watched the connectedness in the performance of Bekk and Morgan I immediately had the sense that here was something the show did not yet have. Their sense of intimacy was largely missing from any other elements in the show because it is such a high energy, chase-filled, comedy-filled show. This could be a nice rest just before the Finale. I spoke to Jesse about that late in the process, and sure enough it was really fertile territory for me musically, just watching the two performers together. If it had been other performers I think the music would have evolved in a very different way. There was something about the way they related to each other that made me feel like I could go out on a limb and take a completely new direction very late in the show. I love finding moments to surprise the audience...”

Moore’s working relationship with Jesse Dryden and Troy Wunderle, the show’s creative director and artistic director respectively, is certainly unique. “Jesse is the main one that I get my information filtered through,” Moore tells us. “In both the pre-rehearsal period and the rehearsal period, he is the one who interfaces with me the most. But I also collaborate directly with the coaches and Troy. And once we are on tour, Jesse sort of steps away, so it comes down to the rest of the creative team to shepherd that vision forward. But before the show premieres, Jesse and I have a pretty close relationship. I think I am a sounding board to bounce his ideas off in a safe environment before taking it to a wider audience. We will throw ideas back and forth, not just about music, but thematic ideas. The music is there to serve the thematic component and the circus component in the show.... The theme element is about the story and characters, and the circus element is about accenting the tricks and helping the audience understand that ‘this is getting more difficult’ as you go through the act, creating a build, in the circus tradition. The music is there not to be just beautiful on its own terms – hopefully that just happens naturally – but my focus is always on supporting the vision Jesse is trying to bring into reality with Troy.

“Troy is a very collaborative director who loves to get input from the whole creative team. I really respect that – his ability to listen to all the different voices, knowing that he can’t be there to see *everything* about the show because he is also in the show.”

In discussing his approach to finding the right style for each year’s show, Moore says, “I try to start with a fresh palette of sounds, as much as I possibly can. This year I was playing with bell sounds, which come out in the aerial acts. There are certain sounds I have discovered that work really well inside the circus tent. And other sounds which don’t translate well. Brass works fantastically well, supporting centuries of tradition there. There is a good sonic reason for that. It cuts right through the reverberating quality of the tent because no matter what you do, you are getting a lot of bouncing sound in there. Our sound designer has his work cut out for him in trying to deliver a clear line of sound to everybody in the round. It’s not an optimal situation, but he has managed to do wonders. Certain pieces like the juggling act and the wire act have some brass sounds pretty thickly layered in there. There’s a whole set of challenges there in trying to breathe life into something that is being generated artificially, so that it has the same naturalness of a full band playing together.

“The last couple of years I have gotten very orchestral for Smirkus sound. The 'time travel' theme last year lent itself to an epic sort of soaring approach; I was inspired by diverse genres, because we were hopping from one time period to another and each one had its own distinct aesthetic. It was a fun challenge. It lent itself to diversity really well. This year was more of a challenge, trying to find the right palette of sound. My initial ideas didn’t pan out when we got to the phase of hooking them up with acts. So there is a lot of trial and error in trying to discover the sound of each show.”

THANKS TO THE BAND

The Circus Smirkus band consists of just Moore and his percussionist. “I not only plan out the possible mishaps that might need covering, I am also the guy who has to implement some of those things,” Moore points out. “If something comes up that I hadn’t planned for, I just improvise for a while. We improvise continuously throughout the show regardless, but I have the extra security of knowing that given the worst case scenario, I can just play for a while.



“I watch the show closely, because there are multiple cues within each piece. If something deviates from the usual plan, then we are there to keep on filling it in with musical interest until we are back on track. It’s important to have a percussionist who can follow along in an instant and make awkward transitions sound graceful, which is what Parker Bert does.

“Once we get on tour we have more time to explore ways to refine the music’s relationship with the acts. Parts of the score continue to evolve throughout the tour as the acts themselves evolve, largely as a result of discussions between Troy, myself, and the other touring creative staff. The performers understand their acts’ structure as well as anyone else, so I sometimes go to them directly with my questions whenever I need to adjust my cues to better match theirs.”

Much of the Smirkus music is produced electronically. “It’s sampling technology basically,” Moore explains. “Over the years I have gathered and created a bunch of orchestral and electronic sounds. The keyboard I have is a Fantom X7 workstation, which is Roland’s successor to the keyboards that were

being used in *Quidam* when I first saw that show back in 1998. They performed that show using what was called Realtime Phrase Sequencing on the Roland XP-80 keyboards. Partly because I saw that working well, I ended up getting my own XP-80. I started trying to figure out how they did what they did. Later I upgraded to using a pair of Fantom X7 workstations. Everything I am doing now has basically evolved studying what Cirque du Soleil did in terms of bridging the gap between music that is multilayered and semi-pre-recorded with the flexibility of real-time performance. You could just turn on a CD and let it run, but then you can't keep up with the acts where there are tricks that take variable time. Aerial acts are easier for consistent timing because they can choreograph to music if they choose to, but with jugglers you know there are going to be drops, and they will want to go back and try it again. So you need flexibility. Cirque du Soleil has more of a band than we currently have, but they are still using a very similar system to what I am doing here, as I understand it, supplementing live performance with a technological foundation of tracks that have flexible cue points, where you can jump from place to place within the song as you watch the act. Since I am on headphones with the drummer, I can talk to the percussionist and say, "We're going to section B." That way you have the support of a fuller sound that fleshes out what you are performing on the keyboard and what the percussionist is performing on the drums. It's a fairly unique system that I don't believe is used in a whole lot of places other than the circus world right now. Currently I am using Ableton Live music software on my laptop to compose and help perform. Cirque du Soleil has been translating some of their older shows over to that system. I am always interested in what they are doing and so I study what they are doing and try to apply their technological solutions as best I can to our situation on a much smaller budget."