

Cirque du Soleil

In the early 1980s, a group of young street performers in Quebec, Canada, pooled their talent and dreams and founded the “Club des Talons Hauts” or “High-Heels Club,” aptly named because most of them were stilt-walkers. The club also featured fire-eaters, jugglers, and other performers, who were known collectively as buskers. At that time, Quebec did not have a circus tradition, so the club organized a festival where street performers could come together to exchange ideas and techniques. They called it the “Fête Foraine de Baie St-Paul” (the Baie Saint-Paul Fair). That was all a few visionaries needed to hatch the idea of bringing all this talent together under one roof or — why not? — a big top! Cirque du Soleil was born.

Cirque du Soleil was officially created in 1984 with the assistance of the Quebec government, as part of the celebrations surrounding the 450th anniversary of Jacques Cartier’s arrival in Canada. Cirque was based on a totally new concept: a striking, dramatic mix of the circus arts and street entertainment, featuring wild, outrageous costumes, staged under magical lighting, and set to original music. With not a single animal in the ring, Cirque’s difference was clear from the very start. The show debuted in the Quebec town of Gaspé and then was performed in 10 other cities throughout the province. The first blue and yellow big top seated 800.

Since its creation, millions of people around the world have seen Cirque du Soleil’s productions. In 1996, the Cirque du Soleil International Headquarters was completed in Montreal. This \$40 million project made it possible for more than 500 permanent Montreal employees to work together. It is here that all of Cirque du Soleil’s shows are created and produced.

Cirque today runs several simultaneous productions worldwide. Some of the productions, such as *Mystère* and *O* in Las Vegas, *La Nouba* at Walt Disney World, and *Alegria* in Biloxi, Mississippi, enjoy permanent runs. Others, including *Quidam*, *Saltimbanco*, and *Dralion*, are touring in both the United States and Europe. Cirque du Soleil also has released its first feature film, *Alegria*, inspired by the show of the same name, and its first-ever large-format (IMAX) production, *Journey of Man*.

Cirque du Soleil also is known for its commitment to social causes, particularly youth at risk. One percent of potential revenues from ticket sales every year is devoted to outreach programs. Cirque du Soleil can identify with the situation at-risk youth are facing because, in its own way, the Cirque lifestyle is also a wandering, marginal one. The creators of Cirque du Soleil were young self-taught artists who couldn’t be pigeonholed, and before they began playing under sumptuous big tops, their only stage was the street.

Cirque du Soleil’s social action knows no borders, reaching out to youth worldwide. This outreach is proactive and committed, since Cirque chooses its partners and undertakes to work with them long term for a common goal. Just as their shows seek to stimulate the imagination and inspire dreams, so they strive to work creatively with youth at risk, opening up new avenues to help them find their place in the community without forcing them into highly structured and disciplined roles.

Cirque du Soleil wants to achieve a multiplier effect for its social action by building a solidarity network centered around its chosen cause. Alliances have been forged with numerous partners from all sectors of society that share the commitment to helping youth in difficulty.

The international success story known as Cirque du Soleil is above all the story of a remarkable bond among performers and spectators the world over. For at the end of the day, it is the spectators who spark the creative passions of Cirque du Soleil.

Adapted from the Cirque du Soleil Web site, www.cirquedusoleil.com.