

Circus meets extreme sports in Volta performance



Newest Cirque du Soleil show fuses circus arts and action stunts for next generation

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MONTREAL— Cirque du Soleil's latest show, Volta, will bring a mix of the timeless and the trendy to Toronto audiences this fall.

There are the fanciful costumes, makeup and characters that have become the Montreal-based company's international calling card over three decades. And while many of the acts and performers are firmly rooted in traditional circus disciplines, what sets this show apart is its incorporation of extreme sports more likely to be found on YouTube channels and social-media streams than under a circus big top.

Parkour free runners jump and flip and swing through an obstacle course of steel bars, bridges and surfaces that rise into the sky.

Then a team of freestyle BMX riders make up the finale of the show with a performance on see-through Plexiglas ramps that give the audience a sort of

fish-tank view of the tricks.

"I think when people sat down to think not about how to reinvent Cirque du Soleil but to push the boundaries and try to do something different, extreme sports just came to the surface," said Johnny Kim, the show's assistant artistic director.

It also meshes with the larger story Volta is trying to tell, of a young man learning to embrace his differences in a fantastical take on the modern world, complete with social media, smartphone addiction, and the desires for instant fame and popularity.

The main character, played by Newmarket native Joey Arrigo, finds respite from that world in the uncomplicated freedoms he remembers from childhood.

"It's all about becoming that person that you're supposed to be from when you were a child and, deep down, the

person you know you were supposed to be and that you maybe strayed away from because of outside influences," Arrigo said.

Added Kim: "It's the freedom of riding your bike, jumping off ramps, flying in the air."

Strategically, integrating disciplines such as BMX, parkour and rope skipping into the show allows Cirque to tap into a new generation of circus-goers, but it also elevates the level of complexity in a live show.

Parkour artist Brandon Livanos, who was trained as a high diver and acrobat and has worked as a stuntman, noted that this is the second time Cirque du Soleil has tried parkour in one of its shows.

"There are quite a few challenges, for sure," the South African performer said, noting that the flips and jumps that appear in highlight videos are usually best



BMX riders were put through performance classes alongside clowns, acrobats, aerialists and dancers during creation of Volta at Cirque's Montreal headquarters.

results from dozens of attempts.

“We have to recreate the act every night,¹⁰ shows a week. So the level of acrobatics has to be incredibly high. We need extremely good artists to be able to

execute that level every single night.”

Freestyle BMX rider Steven Moxley, from Oakville, said the inclusion of his discipline in the show is also a powerful platform for the sport, which was re-

cently named a demonstration sport for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

“With something like Cirque du Soleil, which is very well known around the world, a random family comes in



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with their kids and, boom, they've seen BMX and their child's mind is saying, 'I want that, too,'” Moxley said.

It's a great advance from when the 29-year-old started riding at the age of 15, and was viewed as an outlaw and potential public menace.



“Anything that helps grow our sport is a good thing. I've been in it as long as I have and it's just slowly progressing.”

The integration of street-style sports into a tightly scripted stage performance has been a cultural and artistic challenge. Livanos had a laugh when BMX riders were put through performance classes along with clowns, acrobats, aerialists and dancers during creation of the show at Cirque's Montreal head-



Volta, which stars Newmarket native Joey Arrigo, follows the main character as he finds respite from the daily grind in the uncomplicated freedoms he remembers from childhood. It is a fantastical take on the modern world, complete with social media, smartphone addiction and the desire for popularity.

quarters.

“The whole drive of that is sexuality and it's super uncomfortable. So taking guys who have come from the street . . . into this performing world has been an entertaining process,” he said.

Kim said the athletes have surprised their circus counterparts by mastering some of the choreographed moves of the show.

“A lot of these people love what they do, but they have not necessarily been part of a production show or in show business to understand how a theatre operates or what kind of etiquette it involves onstage, backstage or offstage, so that learning curve has been big for ev-

formance

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COURTESY PATRICE LAMOUREUX

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everyone.”

But the BMX riders maintain their independent streak, including maintaining their own equipment and making small but frequent changes to their parts

in the show.

“Obviously we are stubborn and it’s hard for us to adapt to it, but we have to an extent,” said Moxley. “We still try and keep it original and we’ll make a joke before we go out, or challenge each other to do one different trick that you haven’t done in the show. For us, it has to stay fresh. If not, it will literally feel so boring that you’re not going to want to do it every night.”

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