

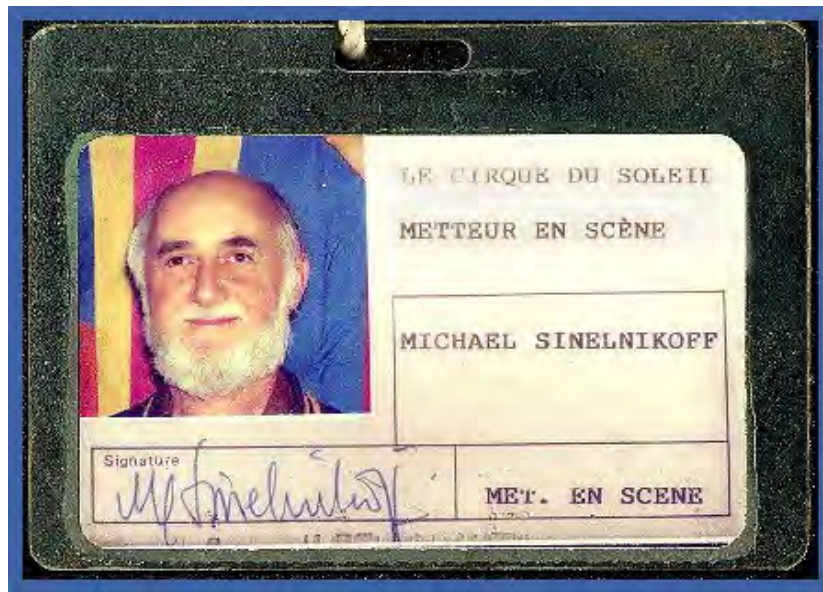


The Dawn of
Le Cirque du Soleil
1984



memoir by
Michael Sinelnikoff

written down by
Malcolm Charlton



It is a simple thing. A small, laminated ID with the picture of a smiling man on it. It says simply "LE CIRQUE DU SOLEIL" and "METTEUR EN SCENE." According to this card, the bearer is the Director. The card was issued by the Cirque as identification. It now hangs on the wall in Michael's living-room.

✱

Michael Sinelnikoff is a grizzled veteran of Canadian Television from its earliest days. As a Producer-Director at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Montreal, Michael produced and directed over sixty dramas, some of them "live", most of them on the cutting edge of television drama, as it then was.

Retired from the CBC in one of its now infamous austerity moves, and at a time when most others are starting to ease into retirement and the weekly canasta games, Michael moved to the other side of the camera and made his name as an actor, most famously as Professor Summerlee in the Canada-Australia co-production of "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's The Lost World".

When and how did he become the Director of *Le Cirque du Soleil*?

The answer will lead you through a engrossing Quebec Showbiz saga.

INTRODUCTION

This is a story that ends at a beginning.. the beginning of an entertainment phenomenon that has inspired, fascinated and thrilled millions around the world.

That ending was the first performance of The Cirque du Soleil.

The Cirque du Soleil has redefined the North American concept of Circus. Through the marriage of superb marketing, Circus style, human performance, and theatrical presentation it has launched a new Circus art-form.. borrowing from traditional concepts, but unique unto itself.

Yet it had a humble and shaky beginning.. as do most endeavors that struggle to break new ground and chart new courses.

As happens with many innovative creations, those who were there at the start.. who breathed life into this young idea.. taught it how to walk and guided its first steps.. have more or less been forgotten or overlooked in the successes that followed.

This document will try to bring them back into the limelight they deserve.

CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY OF THE CIRCUS

Circus!

The word is cloaked in romance, excitement, and conjures up the exotic and the wonderful. It's a word with a deep and rich history going back almost 2700 years. The word itself is Latin but comes from the Greek word *kirkos*, "*circle, ring*," meaning a circular or oval area enclosed by rows of seats for spectators. In the center ring a many different events were held, including chariot races and gladiatorial combats.. spectacles in which bloodshed and brutality were routine.

It reached its zenith in Roman times with the famous *Circus Maximus*, the high point of the Roman entertainment calendar, and remained so until several hundred years after the birth of Christ.

The *Circus Maximus* was a location as well as an event. It was gigantic. Even by today's standards it is hard to grasp the size of the place. Some legends put the audiences at over 250,000. But more accurate archeological research places that figure closer to 150,000².

While the centerpieces of all *Circus Maximus* presentations were the chariot races and gladiator fights, there were also acrobats, wrestling and horsemanship displays to entertain the throng.

But the *Circus Maximus* of Roman times bears only a passing resemblance to the Circus of today. With the fall of the Roman Empire, Circus performers became singular entertainers, performing as solo acts in town squares and wherever they could find work. Slowly, over the centuries, efforts were made to gather these acts together, but the plagues that swept through Europe in the middle ages discouraged public gatherings and certainly prevented the development of the Circus into anything resembling what we know today or, indeed, anything like the great Circuses of Rome. It wasn't until the second half of the 18th century that the concept of the modern day Circus was developed.

Philip Astley (1742-1814) of England is credited with the invention—if one can call it an invention—of the modern day Circus.

Astley seems to be the ideal character to develop a Circus. A Former Sergeant-Major with Colonel Elliott's Fifteenth Light Dragoon Regiment³, he was the son of a cabinet-

² This matter is still in dispute. Some experts believe, and it does have some merit, that the shows were so popular that there would have been a significant standing crowd. Archeological evaluations are based solely on the remains of wooden benches found on the site of the ancient Circus Maximus.

³ Astley served during the Seven Years War (French and Indian War).

maker and an expert horse breaker and trainer. Astley's showmanship was inspired by Equestrian Jacob Bates who had raised trick-riding to a fine art. He and his emulators were performing throughout Europe and horse-riding acts had become fixtures at the *London Pleasure Gardens*.

By 1770, Astley was a star of the London scene. But he quickly realized that to maintain his popularity he needed to bring some novelty to his performances. He hired acrobats, tight-rope walkers, and jugglers and spread these acts out throughout the show which was still predominantly an equestrian display. And.. he added clowns. The modern Circus was born.

In 1793, the Circus reached North America. Londoner John William Ricketts staged a permanent one-ring show in Philadelphia which became a very popular attraction. One of its patrons was said to be President George Washington. And although it cannot be confirmed that it is the same person, it is likely that he introduced the Circus to Canada, for a man named Ricketts staged a Circus in Quebec City in 1798.⁵

The American frontier and the Circus were made for each other. Nowhere was this more evident than in the entertainment needs of this growing country. There was the refined life of the city with its operas, and theatres. Frontier America, on the other hand, was a rough and tumble world. Professional entertainment was scarce and often obliged patrons to travel great distances to attend performances. This was assuming, of course, one could convince entertainers accustomed to the comfortable surroundings of urban life to undertake the hardship of the stagecoach or buckboard travel necessary to reach remote locations.. then, once there, to stage shows in poorly equipped venues.

The Circus, however, made its own venue. It traveled with its own environment. It didn't take Phineas Taylor Barnum or five brothers named Ringling from Baraboo, Wisconsin long to recognize that fact.

Could there be a better match than a eager audience.. P.T. Barnum and the Circus? Barnum had a natural gift for showmanship and was known as the "all-American Huckster" and coined the phrase "*the greatest show on Earth*". He started his career selling tickets⁶ and also performed as a clown in a small Circus.

Sideshow attractions soon followed, attractions that exceeded most imaginations but took the truth to the breaking point and beyond. Fake mermaids, and ladies wearing costume beards were just two of his offerings. Once he advertised a "*Man Eating Chicken*" that drew crowds. What they got, however, was a man chewing on a drumstick..

⁵ We do know that Ricketts was still alive in 1798 as his death was recorded a year later in 1799.

⁶ He was a salesman to the end. His last words were "How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?"

In 1870 Barnum decided to take the Circus on the road and the *Barnum Grand and Traveling Circus* was born. He had created a goldmine. In its first year alone, it took in over \$400,000, a fortune in its time.

By 1880, the time had come to expand and Barnum teamed up with James McGuiness who used the stage name of James Bailey. Thus was born Barnum & Bailey's "*Greatest Show on Earth*." They boasted they had more people, more horses, more elephants, and larger tents than any other Circus, especially the Circus of those five Ringling Brothers from Baraboo, Wisconsin.

Their real name was *Rungeling* and they were bitten by the Circus bug when their father took them to see a Circus that traveled by riverboat. Soon the youngsters were producing shows in the family barn and putting on vaudeville acts in their neighbourhood. Al, Otto, Charles, John and Alf had, by 1890, changed their family name to *Ringling*.. and brothers Gus and Henry had joined the team. They had also brought a new travel dimension to the Circus—the railroad.. transporting their "greatest show on earth" throughout the continent.⁷

With the death first of Barnum, then of Bailey, the Ringling Brothers began acquiring some of the properties of the old Barnum and Bailey Circus. They bought the Circus outright in 1907 and operated it independently until 1919 when it was merged into "*The Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Combined Shows, The Greatest Show on Earth*." 1200 people were employed by the combined Circus.. and the train that moved the Show was 100 double-length cars long.

The Circus as a form of entertainment reached its peak in the roaring 20's. But first radio, then later, television, took its toll and the Circus eventually became an entertaining novelty rather than *the* show of the season. In later years, the traditional Circus.. now smaller and fewer in participants, had to face growing opposition from animal rights activists concerned about the welfare of Circus animals.

Yet there has always been a romance to the Circus, to the life of a Circus performer. And perhaps it was this romance, as much as anything else, that inspired the search for a new idea, a new concept, a way to rejuvenate the Circus into a modern art form that could hold its own among the entertainment offerings of the twenty-first century.

⁷ Wisconsin, the Ringlings' home state, became known as "The Mother of the Circuses" with the town of Delavan becoming the Circus capital of the nation at the time. More than 100 traveling tent Circuses spent the winter in the state and it was home to 26 different Circus companies including an original P.T. Barnum show organized there in 1871 by two associates of Barnum.

CHAPTER TWO

A MATTER OF TIMING

By the mid-1980's the forms of entertainment available had become familiar and in some cases commonplace.

Radio had survived the onslaught of television and converted itself to an all-music medium on the FM wavelength and was heading for an all-talk medium on the AM band.

Television now reached into every home and, to many, had become the "vast wasteland" that Newton Minnow¹ had claimed it was, more than two decades earlier. Rarely was there anything new and exciting. Television had become derivative, spoon-feeding formula-produced programming aimed at an increasingly numbed audience. As Edward R. Murrow had feared, it became "*..no more than wires and lights in a box.*"²

In Canada, the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), once a refuge for intelligent thought-provoking television, was so battered by federal budget cuts and a bloated bureaucracy that it opted to sacrifice its prestigious, provocative programming, flush its in-house creative talent, and go in search of financially profitable program fare. In so doing, it lost its original mandate, its soul, its distinctiveness and its *raison d'être*.

Likewise the film industry never returned to the prodigious output volume of the thirties and forties, but as an industry it once again thrived with enormous box-office receipts and merchandising spin-offs that the Hollywood moguls of days gone by could never have imagined.

Theatre, Dance and Music continued to struggle as they had done for the past forty years. Unfortunately, all three suffered—and continue to suffer—from a problem of image and perception. Theatre, Dance and Music are perceived to be entertainment for the wealthy. Efforts have been made to bring the common touch back to them but they have more or less failed. One suspects there are two reason for this. The first has to do with the cost of attending these events. For many, ticket prices are just too high. Besides it seems that the current patrons have little interest in broadening the base of patronage to include folk of lesser means.

¹ In 1961 Newton Minnow as newly appointed Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission in the United States gave a speech wherein he described television as a "vast wasteland."

² "*This instrument can teach, it can illuminate, and yes it can inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is nothing but wires and lights in a box.*" Edward R. Morrow October 15, 1958 in the keynote address at the national convention of the Radio and Television News Directors Association.

By 1984, the so-called baby-boomers were fully participating members of society. The Vietnam war was ten years behind us and a feeling of ennui had set in. An “..is *that all there is?*” mentality had taken hold and nothing seemed to really excite or captivate an audience. The last real entertainment craze had been the British foray headed by the Beatles twenty years earlier.. and nobody had stepped up to capture the imaginations of an entertainment-hungry public.

Enter *The Cirque du Soleil*.

It would be a Circus like no other. Gone were the dancing elephants, the roaring lions and tigers, and stunt horse-riding. Gone, too, were the three rings that were supposed to overwhelm the spectators but only served to confuse them. And gone, too, was the presentation of one act after the other, unrelated to each other except that they were in the same building at the same time.

The Circus would now focus on the *human* dimension.. the human skill and talent.. and marry it with modern day techniques of light and sound in a theatrically coherent whole.

So, gone, too, was the *Ringmaster*. Now, there was a *Director*.

John Dryden wrote, “When fate summons, monarchs must obey”. And it was as if fate had decreed that this new, revolutionary form of entertainment, should meet up with Michael Sinelnikoff at this point in his career.

CHAPTER THREE

MICHAEL SINELNIKOFF

The English-born¹ only child of Russian parents, Michael grew up between the two World Wars in a London of the more privileged classes. His father, from St. Petersburg, had made his first big money with the invention of the mortar-firing rifle, and later became a Fellow of the *Royal Geographical Society* and a Member of the *Antiquarian Booksellers Association* as well as the elite, exclusive *St. James's Club*. His mother's family, from Moscow, were wealthy in their own right. The Sinelnikoffs were accepted in the better English homes. The legendary violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz² was Michael's godfather. For the young boy it was, in his own words, a childhood of *"..fun and good times."*

When World War II broke out in 1939 Michael Sinelnikoff was 11. His parents opted to keep him near London and not evacuate him out to the safer countryside like many other children. *"I went through the blitz and food shortages, clothing rationing and all the rest of it, but I never actually had anything explosive land on or near me, thank heavens, although my mother was trapped under bomb-damage rubble for a few hours until the Fire Service freed her."* To a young boy who understood only imperfectly the horrors of war, *"a lot of it seemed like an adventure.."* he recalls.

Through his parents young Michael was introduced to the Arts at an early age. So when he opted to take up studies for the Stage it came as little surprise. He attended the *Italia Conti Stage School* in London for a year, where students were thrust into professional productions as part of their learning experience. He found the Conti practice of placing their young students in professional productions and collecting agents' fees, much more rewarding and fulfilling than that of the *Royal Academy of Dramatic Art* which forbade professional work.

But Michael's father, who was footing the bills, decided that Conti's procedures were too frivolous and insisted that Michael change venue if he was to continue his studies for an acting career.. So he auditioned for and was accepted by RADA.. the *Royal Academy of Dramatic Art*.. for their two-year program, in the company of fellow students Alan Bates (*Zorba The Greek* and many other starring roles) and Bernard Bresslaw (featured in the famous *"Carry On"* films).

After two years of compulsory military service in the Royal Air Force which Michael thoroughly enjoyed, he had a series of jobs, among which was Publicity Manager for

¹ August 1, 1928

² Heifetz was a world-famous concert violinist. RCA, the company for whom he recorded, awarded him the title of "Violinist of the Century".

Karma The Lightning Hypnotist. This job taught the young Michael an important lesson: never upstage your boss.. to attract an audience into the show he gave an advance publicity address with an demonstration of hypnotism that was actually better than the professional hypnotist's own performance.. and was fired..

Things at home were tough: his father was terribly hurt, angry and embittered by his wife's desertion.. and Michael, despite his empathy for his father's agony, felt trapped. His mother, now divorced and living in Canada with her old love and new husband, Col. Allan Wilmot,. invited him to come and live with them. He accepted. So in 1952 he left England for ever and, after a very rough Atlantic ocean-liner crossing during which he was constantly seasick and which he barely survived on a diet of Bovril and dry toast.. arrived in Ottawa for a joyful reunion with his Mother.

His first job there was to land the rôle of 'Horatio' in the CRT's (Canadian Repertory Theatre) production of "Hamlet". (The CRT, at that time, was the only professional theatre company in Canada). This was followed by several unsuccessful stints as a department-store salesman in various Ottawa stores.

Then came a lucky break—a job with the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) as a bilingual (French/English) announcer. He got the job thanks to a close friend, Robert (Robin) MacNeil, who was working there and who later went on to host the highly acclaimed MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour on PBS.

Michael wanted to do more than be an announcer, so when he was offered a Production Assistant opening in Halifax, Nova Scotia, he moved East. Five years later he was a Producer doing "everything".. farming reports, news, sports, fish shows.. He hated it. The time had come to move on.. so he made the big leap to Toronto where, after several lean months of unemployment, he spent two years as a free-lance Director/Story Editor with the two highly acclaimed CBC television drama series "Festival" and "Playdate".

After producing and directing two dramas: "*Willow Circle*" and "*Epiphany*," he was offered a position in Montreal where he produced and directed 68 original weekly half-hour television productions for *Shoestring Theatre*, whose name he quickly changed to *Teleplay*. "I was a one-man band," he said. "I commissioned the scripts, worked with the set designers, hired, rehearsed and 'shot' the performers in studio and did the post-production editing, mixed the sound and music and got the shows on the air like a string of sausages."

Along the way, Sinelnikoff managed to somehow find the time to continue his involvement with stage performing and directing in a number of productions in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, and Halifax.

In 1962, He won four prestigious *Dominion Drama Festival Awards*: Best Director, Best Production, Best Set Design.. and Best Actor for his presentation of John Osborne's "*Look Back in Anger*."

And, as if that wasn't enough, he was also active as a writer.. adapting and translating a number of French dramas for English television.

In 1978, Sinelnikoff won the CBC's highly-prized Anik Award for Drama for his production of "*The Fun of Being with Oscar*" a one-man show featuring a brilliant young actor: Maxim Mazumdar. This would lead to his next venture.

In 1979, Michael was a member of the founding faculty of the Summer Arts Festival in Stephenville, Newfoundland. The Festival was the brainchild of Mazumdar who saw it as a venue for professional quality productions and a training ground for a broad range of theatre skills. Sinelnikoff became a valued resource, teaching the students the basics of acting and vocal technique, and directing several critically acclaimed productions, most notably Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*.. (The Stephenville Festival continues to this day..)

In 1982 and 1983 he worked as Music Advisor and Director of the Quebec musical *Vendredi Soir*, which had several venues, ending up at the prestigious Place des Arts, and also *Le Garçon d'Appartement*, which had a similarly successful run in Jonquière.

By 1984, Michael Sinelnikoff was ready for new challenges. His experience in the theatre, in television, in front of an audience and behind the scenes, called out to be tested in new avenues and to be stretched to new limits.

It was now that fate summoned.

CHAPTER 4

THE CALL

(Excerpt from the Cirque du Soleil Website)

"1984: Le Cirque du Soleil is born with the assistance of the Quebec government, as part of the celebrations surrounding The 450th anniversary of Jacques Cartier's arrival in Canada. The Cirque is 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, the Cirque's difference is clear from the very start. The show debuts in the small Quebec town of Gaspé, and is then performed in ten other cities throughout the Province. The first blue-and-yellow¹ big top seats 800."

It was music that really brought Michael Sinelnikoff and *the Cirque du Soleil* together. As Michael recalls, "I was sharing an apartment with a friend who took me to a music show given by a talented and charming singer called Léo Munger. I really liked everything about her performance. And when I heard she was starting a run in Quebec City, I decided to jump in my car and go up there and meet her. At any rate I wanted to attend her concert.

"I don't remember very much about the performance itself except I liked the music very much. And the program told me that most of it had been written by René Dupere. Well, it turned out afterwards his name was René Dupéré, but I had missed the accents..."

Dupéré also led a brass band that marched around the theatre lobby at Intermission. They called themselves *La Fanfaronie*—a play on the word "*fanfare*" which means "brass band" in French.

Sinelnikoff describes what happened next. "When the show was over, I went backstage to pay my respects to Léo, and I also wanted to meet this man, René Dupéré, who had written most of her lovely songs. He was a quiet, unassuming, friendly, instantly likeable person and so was his then partner, Andrée-Jo Milot."

There was an instant rapport established between Michael, René, Andrée-Jo and the rest of the gang. When they decided to head out for an after-show drink in a local bar they invited Michael along.

¹ In fact the First Big top was red, white and blue.

The time just seemed to fly by and eventually Andrée-Jo suggested that instead of driving back to Montreal that night, that Michael stay over at her and René's place.

Also staying with them was a big blonde Belgian in his thirties, Phillipe André. He was the boss of a small street-theatre company in Brussels called *Le Cirque du Trottoir*² (Théâtre Attrape) and he performed under the stage-name of Stanislas (Stan). His other special talents were magic and fireworks.

Michael picks up the story:

"He and I got chatting and he told me he was here at the invitation of some people in Baie-Saint-Paul³ who had been entertaining for a few years at *La Fête Foraine*⁴. They were fire-eaters and stilt-walkers and that sort of grass-root entertainers and they were putting together something called *Le Cirque du Soleil* which was to be a Quebec Circus without animals and they were looking for a director. Stanislas, as one of the founding group, had been charged with the task of finding somebody for the job.



"I had dinner with Stan—Stanislas—in Montreal, and we went fully into my qualifications for taking on this rather bizarre project, and I convinced him—and I think myself!—that I was the right person to do it in view of the fact that nobody on their side (Stan was acting on behalf of the people from *the Cirque du Soleil*) really knew how to go about tackling the *theatrical* assembly of a massive project like this.

I felt that I had an idea how it should be done, largely based on my own experience of successfully directing grass-roots projects ("theatre in the middle of a field..") on extremely low budgets.

"By the end of the dinner it was decided.. and he recommended me (with further backing from René Dupéré and Andrée-Jo Milot) to Guy Laliberté and Guy Caron, who was the Artistic Director."

Being recommended was one thing; signing a contract was another. At first Laliberté liked the idea of Sinelnikoff for the production, then, for reasons which were never made clear, changed his mind. Michael was taken aback but Stanislas confidently assured him that whatever Laliberté's objections were, he would be able to overcome them. He was as good as his word.. he was successful in convincing Laliberté and Co. to stick with their

² Sidewalk Circus.

³ Population 7300, 100 kilometers north-east of Quebec City.

⁴ a busking festival that gave rise to today's *Cirque du Soleil*

original decision and hire Sinelnikoff. Michael never found out what the problem had been. And he never asked..

An agreement was reached whereby Michael would direct for a fee of \$125.00 for each day worked—a ridiculously low sum.. even by 1984 standards. But it was a new concept—an innovation, and the challenge was enormous and irresistible. It was pocket money, as Michael still had his CBC salary.

CHAPTER 5

GUY LALIBERTÉ

(extracted from www.Cirquedusoleil.com)

"Guy Laliberté was born in Quebec City in 1959. An accordion-player, stilt-walker and fire-eater, this daring visionary founded Quebec's first internationally renowned Circus. With the help of a small band of kindred spirits, Laliberté recognized and groomed the talents of the street entertainers from the Fête Foraine de Baie-Saint-Paul and created the soon-to-be-famous Cirque du Soleil in 1984.

Already a multit talented artist, Guy Laliberté quickly plunged into the business world to maintain and plan the growth of the young company. Despite the group's lack of experience, he managed to convince financial institutions to back the project, winning them over with the originality and audacity of youth. He also developed a network of partners around the world to help the Cirque du Soleil make a name for itself abroad.

Laliberté put his organizational talents to good use, guiding his colleagues through the labyrinth of the entertainment world to turn a troupe of street entertainers into a cultural corporation whose productions are acclaimed around the world. With the backing of a young, dynamic team, Guy Laliberté has used his great gift for bringing people together to make the Cirque du Soleil a jewel in the crown of Quebec culture.

In 1997, he received the Ordre National du Québec, the highest distinction awarded by the Government of Quebec.

From Baie-Saint-Paul, Quebec to the capitals of the world, Laliberté has clearly demonstrated that the blend of Circus arts and street theatre is every bit as rich and valuable a form of expression as the more established, recognized artistic disciplines."

Interesting to note, at this point of our narrative, that there's no mention of Luc Campeau (who literally saved the Cirque.. as we shall see later on) and Michael Sinelnikoff, who shared this feat with Campeau.

CHAPTER 6

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS

A project this new means entering uncharted waters. It requires minutely detailed planning of exactly what the concept is and how it is to be executed, if it is to stand any chance of success. In the case of *the Cirque du Soleil* this was compounded by the fact that it was large, diverse and eclectic. To breathe life into Guy Laliberté's brainchild would require all the talents, skill and expertise of people from very different backgrounds and with very different objectives.

Traditionally, any production begins with a series of creative sessions and meetings. These were held in Sinelnikoff's apartment in downtown Montreal, where he set the guest bedroom aside for these brainstorming sessions. They were long, and tiring. As is always the case on these occasions a copious amount of coffee was consumed "I remember well," Michael recalls, "I served them endless cappuccinos. I used my new espresso-maker nearly constantly," he laughs.. "I was very popular because everyone liked my cappuccinos."

These first meetings were stimulating. Michael was playing a primary part in the creation and design of what was essentially a new entertainment concept. In Michael's words: *"The only firm idea the organizers had was, that they wanted no animals in the new Circus. We had to develop and expand that basic concept and blow it up in all directions."*

These sessions with Guy Caron, Gilles Ste-Croix, occasionally Guy Laliberté, and René Dupéré, in venues at Michael's home and later at the YMCA's on Park Avenue and St-Viateur in Montreal's Mile-End district.. generated the performing and executive concepts still used by *the Cirque du Soleil* today, albeit in much more elaborate and costly settings than its humble beginnings in 1984.

To Sinelnikoff, it quickly became clear that he couldn't handle all the logistics by himself. Acts would be coming from around the world—Switzerland, Belgium, Vancouver, Quebec.. There would be stilt-walkers and jugglers, trapeze artists and balancing acts. A Quebec clown, Rodrigue Tremblay, who went by the name of *Chocolat*, was supposed to be quite a handful to control.. in fact he was a intelligent, talented and amusing fellow.

There was a contortionist named Angela who was able to twist her body into the most unusual and provocative positions.. and there was *La Fanfaronie*, the Marching Band from Quebec City led by Dupéré, who would play on, and off, the Ring. And there was a slew of different acts too numerous to mention here.

Then there was the question of language. Whereas Sinelnikoff speaks, reads and writes an excellent French, he felt that "although I speak French quite well, if I was going to deal

with a lot of incoming people I was going to need an assistant. To say nothing of the fact that the actual job would be far too much for me to handle alone.”

Sinelnikoff wanted Luc Campeau. He had come into contact with Campeau several years before when he was directing for the Theatre D’Eté du Mont Jacob in Jonquiere². At the time, Sinelnikoff needed a “*taped*” rehearsal hall in Montreal. This is a large space whereby the set-design elements: walls, doorways, etc., are outlined on the floor with colored tape in their actual size.. Vital set-pieces and props, such as beds, chairs, crockery etc., must likewise be physically there to enable the cast to use them and get their actions right.. and to give them an accurate sense of the space in which they will be later performing on the actual stage.

Michael had been referred to Campeau who was in hospital with a severe leg infection after a skiing accident in which he incurred multiple fractures. Luc had to remain there for several months. During one of his visits to see Campeau in hospital Michael told him of his problem of finding a rehearsal hall. Michael continues, *“Luc then proceeded to magically organize this. He actually rented me a rehearsal-hall in my own apartment building! And somehow, mysteriously—all done from his bedside in the hospital—he had everything marked out and all the furniture and rehearsal props in there.. To this day I have no idea how he did it, and he would never tell me!”* It was then that Michael realised that if he was going to make the project work, he needed Campeau.

It took some convincing, Sinelnikoff remembers, but eventually the *Cirque* management gave in and Campeau came on as Assistant Director and, as Michael puts it, “from that moment on he was glued to my side. He provided me with the greatest freedom a Director can have.. to able to work with nothing in my hands.

Campeau brought to the production not only his industriousness and ingenuity, but also a rare tool in those mid 1980’s: a home computer. It was a Commodore 64™: primitive by today’s standards³ but in 1984 it was sheer magic. *“It actually displayed letters on the screen, 40 characters to the line, which it then wrapped. Hell, I didn’t even know what “wrapped” meant, then!”* says Michael. This new tool would prove invaluable later on when schedules and script changes needed rapid adjustment.. measures we take for granted with today’s technology.

Sinelnikoff was of course delighted with the choice of Musical Director. René Dupéré, whose songs he had enjoyed so much at the Léo Munger show, would compose and arrange all the music and his marching band, *La Fanfaronie*, would be the Circus’s on-ring ensemble.

² A summer theatre in the Lac St.Jean Region of Quebec.

³ The Commodore64™ Had 39K of operational memory as compared to today’s computers which run into gigabytes.

Now began the process of weaving the disparate, possibly conflicting threads into a theatrical tapestry. These were all solo acts.. and the trick was to bring them together in such a way as to make them stand out individually yet be part of a greater whole. "I call it *sequential dynamism*—which involves the tension that is generated when you go from one act to the next.. the sustained interest that prevents the audience from going away, which they can do in their minds just as easily as physically walking away," Michael said.

Frequently this is done by elaborate staging and special effects (the trade-mark of today's *Cirque*), creating what some describe as the "oohh! effect." This is, however, expensive and the budding *Cirque du Soleil* was not exactly flush with funds. There was very little money to be spent on the production, despite the grant from the provincial government. *The costume budget was zero dollars..* everybody had to wear what they wore in their own solo acts. There was some money for sets, but barely enough to make a visual splash. Even the Lighting concept suffered from the slim wallets of the financial managers.

All this meant that the *content* of the show had to pick up the slack and be very stimulating so as to overcome the financial shortfall. Every page of the script had to have something that would excite and captivate the audience—a hot-spot—as Sinelnikoff says, "to keep the audience focused and in their seats, captive to the magic spells we would weave."

Shortage of funds was one thing. Operating—creating—in a new milieu was another problem Michael had to face, as well as working out a scenario for people he'd never met. A director must always bring strong ideas to a production on how he or she believes a show should go—on how the creative theme should develop and unfold.

A wise director also knows the importance of getting a clear grasp of what his creative collaborators' ideas are, and what the producers want the show to be. After all, they are paying for it! *The true measure of a director's skill, talents and creativity is, in many ways, how he or she can reconcile his or her own personal view of the production with that of the other key players and their effect on the spectators.* This is especially true when working in unfamiliar territory. Good instincts and intuition are of the essence.

Sinelnikoff's experience told him that *listening* is sometimes the best way to start out a production.. and that's exactly what he did. He also needed to know the strengths and weaknesses of his team of artistes.. remember that they hadn't yet arrived on the scene.

"The initial meetings were very important for me to very carefully question Guy (Laliberté), René (Dupéré), Gilles Ste-Croix, and Guy Caron who knew some of them, to find out what these folks did.. what their strong (and weak) points were," Sinelnikoff explained. From this he was able to sketch out an initial very basic, broad, two-act scenario with an intermission.

Again, Luc Campeau and his Commodore 64 were a priceless help, allowing Michael to shift items and re-arrange acts to his heart's content. It was his first experience with a computer, and in many important ways, perhaps his best.

The trickiest.. certainly the most diplomatically sensitive problem that had to be dealt with at this stage was *time-allocation* for each individual act. The show was to last about 2 hours, and that meant subdividing those 2 hours into segments and then assigning the segments to individual acts. The greatest challenge was that Sinelnikoff and his team were dealing with what were essentially *solo acts*.

These folk were used to doing their own thing in their own time, be it a full evening show or a twenty minute 'quickie'. Now they were going to be asked to limit themselves to perhaps seven minutes in the first act and maybe eight minutes in the second. Michael remembers.. "...they were going to have to not be stars in their own right, but stars as part of a constellation, and I knew there was going to be some inevitable ego-bruising." And this was only the beginning..!

CHAPTER 7

UP ON ITS FEET

With a working order of what the show might look like, it was now important to get into rehearsal. Rehearsals are seen by some performers as necessary evils, by others as the most enjoyable part of the theatrical process. *But they are essential.* Insofar as the Cirque du Soleil was concerned, a good production was even more crucial.. the *Cirque* was part of the *Quebec 450* celebrations marking the 450th Anniversary of the discovery of Quebec by Jacques Cartier. In fact, the *Cirque* would be the centerpiece of the festivities in Gaspé—the place where Cartier first made landfall back in 1534. And to really increase the pressure, it had been announced that the Premier of Quebec, René Lévesque, would attend one of the performances. In fact, it would be the *only* show he would attend in the Celebrations, and it was scheduled for the day after the opening night!

A lot was at stake for everyone.

That show would be in Gaspé--and here everyone was still in Montreal for the rehearsals, 450 miles to the west! In late spring of 1984, cast and crew assembled at a junior high school in Ste-Thérèse, a community just north of Montreal, where they would live and work together for the next few weeks. There were dormitories for sleeping and a cafeteria for dining. Sinelnikoff remembers "it was like being on location on a movie, but on a much lower budget."

"It didn't take me long to discover what a wonderful and talented group of people we had," says Michael. Also, as in the case of a show of this nature, different acts come into readiness at different times. "You could clearly see that some of them were getting better than others more quickly, and some were inherently better than others, and some different from what had originally been planned." This on-going process constantly changed the dynamics, so show-orders and planned sequences had to be constantly thought and re-thought. Michael continues, "I had to do my best to predict where it might go over the next few rehearsals and make up new schedules.. it was a never-ending balancing act."

"I think this is where skill as a Director lies: being able to anticipate and coordinate so that you are always *ahead* of the shape the show is trying to take. A show has got an organic shape and needs to be allowed to develop itself the way it wants, but always under clearly defined measures of *control*."

This control is especially difficult when dealing with different groups all determined to get their own way. Michael recalls, "We had so many disputes and complaints I had to set up a system to deal with them." Many of their issues were absolutely justified but, with so many issues outstanding and the pressure of deadlines, they couldn't all be dealt with on an ad hoc basis. **Luc Campeau**, he says, was an great 'buffer' in many regards. "He took on the role of *the bad guy*, so I didn't have to be.. Luc is such a charming fellow and always wears a devil-may-care smile that, in fact, it was hard for anyone to see him as *the bad guy*."



To avoid confusion, Michael set up a system.. one single representative of the performers meeting daily with Michael each day after breakfast to make suggestions or air any grievances. This didn't solve all the problems, but it did bring the complaint level down to a manageable level.

"One of the worst experiences I had," Michael recalls, "was when I had one really stupid idea. The *Cirque du Trottair*, headed by Stanislas, had just arrived from Belgium to "plug in". I got a small rehearsal hall and put the other artistes through their paces to show the Belgians what we had achieved so far. To my dismay, I watched their faces grow grimmer and grimmer, and when we finished Stanislas told me that it was dreadful! I did my best to explain to him that it was only the roughest of sketches at this early point, but they remained skeptical until a much later stage of rehearsals in Gaspé.. when they could see the show taking shape.

It taught me a lesson I've never forgotten—to be very careful about showing *anybody* work in progress! Later, Stanislas was to prove extremely helpful and supportive and became a good friend, which he is to this day.

Who were these people of diverse backgrounds and disciplines brought together to form a new entity? The *Cirque du Trottoir*—a group of street performers who probably provided the seed for The *Cirque du Soleil*. There was Ben La Barouette who specialized in balancing a tower of chairs—an act which almost didn't come off. Gilles Ste-Croix was a stilt-walker of great dexterity who amazed and delighted everyone, including possibly himself, when he was able to do a back-somersault while on stilts.. **Angela Laurier**, the



marvelous contortionist; the *Theâtre Tel Quel* from Switzerland—and many others whose names were on the first program (that I have never been able to find anywhere..)

And then there was Chocolat (Rodrigue Tremblay)—a brilliant clown—one of the best—but who was never happy with his time allotment. Michael recalls, “He was always trying to get himself further into the spotlight—as soon as we had his act fully tied down and we all knew exactly what he was supposed to do, he would show up at the following rehearsal dragging a huge box on wheels and, with the air of a magician producing a rabbit out of a hat, announce that he had a special new trick or apparatus or whatever, and demand that it be put in the show. This was usually followed by Luc or me saying (in French), ‘Chocolat, take your box and go away!’ Unabashed and grinning, he departed—until the next day.. but we didn’t really mind as it was all in fun on, both sides.

Every performance needs staging support. Michael was quickly aware of the fact that there was a real shortfall in this area. Then chance played him a lucky card. “I was invited to a performance,” he recalls, “by some students who were studying the techniques of Circus at the *Centre Immaculée Conception* on Papineau Street in Montreal.

They ranged in age from 12 to 16 and it struck me that here was our on-ring stage-crew! I suggested this to the *Cirque* producers who quickly latched on. It would turn out to be a wonderfully symbiotic relationship. They became our Ring Attendants, helping the staging of the show and doing the scene-changes, while learning what it’s like in the real world of the professional. This would be the first integration of students with *the*

Cirque du Soleil and eventually led to the establishment of the famous *École Nationale de Cirque*. Michael is rightly proud of his spontaneous idea and what it grew into.

He realized quickly that his chief task with *the Cirque du Soleil* was, above all else, to be a “super traffic-cop”. It would also prove to be a major learning experience for him and require all his skills of adaptability and versatility acquired over the years. He explains.. “My experience dealing with “theatre in the middle of a field with two-and-a-half people”.. two employed full-time and one part-time! as well as with the Dominion Drama Festival in the early days.. of working with almost no money and under very limiting conditions.. taught me to be adaptable and to learn quickly. What I brought to the Cirque was my ability to *stay on my feet*. The constant need to be soothing to artists and management (which was one of my prime responsibilities) nearly killed me.. I was learning patience late in my life and career!”

One of the earliest issues discussed was the performance venue; exactly what type of structure was going to house the Circus? When Michael raised the question, the Laliberté team told him that they had ordered a beautiful blue and yellow Circus tent (the French word for it is “*chapiteau*”) from Italy. It would arrive in time for rehearsals and it would be later moved to Gaspé for the opening performance.

Michael has a great deal of respect for the Italian sense of design, performance and theatre, but at this point he was really doubtful about their ability to deliver on time. His doubts were well-founded. The tent was *weeks* late and so the first rehearsals took place in a junior college gymnasium in Ste-Thérèse.. about a 45-minute drive from downtown Montreal.. much longer in rush-hour.

Anyone who has been anywhere near shows in rehearsal knows how tough, yet how energizing they can be. They are at once fatiguing and awakening, boring and exciting, creative yet repetitious.. you don’t always enjoy being there but you can’t afford to miss them. They beat you down and they build you up. The rehearsals for the *Cirque* were no exception.

Rehearsals are marked by significant events during their course.. the first reading.. the first walk-through.. costume fittings and the like. They are marked with successes and occasionally with spectacular failures.

Michael recalls, “Guy Laliberté had some kind of idea in his head that he wanted the *Cirque* to open as a kind of ‘dream thing’ —that there would be some smoke, and a little girl would emerge and be taken by the hand by a clown who would sit her down and talk to her about the Circus.¹ This had been done in Europe by the Knie Circus, but it would be new to Quebecers. I felt that something more dynamic was needed.

¹ A later production of *The Cirque du Soleil*, *Quidam*, would have a similar opening.



Somehow the concept changed to a big ball which would roll out of the entrance through the smoke with the little girl inside it. It took forever to make the ball and delay after delay gave cause for serious concern. But Gilles Ste-Croix, who later went on to be the *Cirque's* Artistic Director, but who, in 1984 was responsible for set and prop construction as well as being a performer.. was confident and insisted it would be ready.

"He eventually produced a ball," Michael says, "which to me looked *far* from round, and I was really worried about *how* it would roll, specially with a little girl inside it."

"We got it set up, convinced a very nervous little girl² to get inside and hang onto the bars and tuck her feet into the stirrups. We closed it up and gave it a good push. Oh yes, it rolled indeed, but in a totally erratic manner and we heard loud screams. When the ball was opened the child, in floods of tears, shot out like a bee out of a bottle,. That was the end of that idea.. the smoke alone would have to do".

Now it was rehearsal time for the tent crew. This was a road show and they needed to learn how to put up and take down the tent, as well as maintain it. It was one such rehearsal that Michael recalls.

"I came back to my room at supper time. It should have still been quite light, but outside the sky was very dark. The heavens opened and there was a torrential downpour.

² Her name was Faon and she was the daughter of the then wardrobe mistress.

I remember thinking that I hoped that somebody had had the good sense to take the tent down. I didn't know exactly what needed to be done, except that *some* action should have been taken to prevent the rain from collecting in the now-bulging canvas and creating an incredibly *heavy* mass of water..

"The story I got at the time was that the Technical Director (over the protests of our tent expert, Gérard Bétant) had let the crew go to dinner.. oblivious of the ominous sky.. with the tent still standing. When the tent ceiling started filling up with thousands of gallons of rain water it became so heavy that the two main support upright poles were seriously bent.

The uprights, being crucial, had to be repaired. A blacksmith in Ste-Thérèse was found to do the job.. but this would, later, bring the *Le Cirque du Soleil* to the brink of disaster.

CHAPTER 8

RENÉ DUPÉRE'S WONDERFUL MACHINE

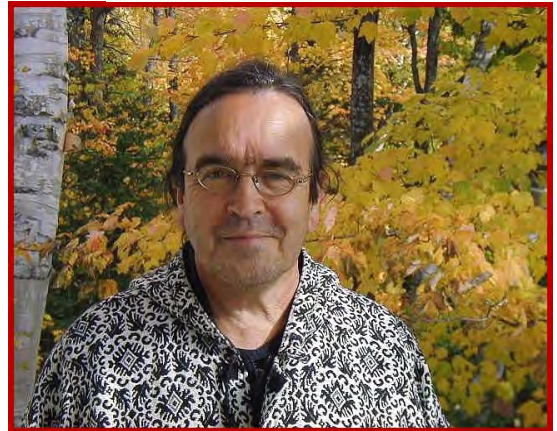
René Dupéré is the epitome of Gallic charm. A gifted and talented musician, song-writer and composer, he remains to this day on the cutting edge of music composition. While others eschew the newer technologies, Dupéré embraces them and masters them, viewing them not as threats but as tools to express his art in better, fuller ways.

His association and involvement with the *Cirque du Soleil* go back to a time even before Michael Sinelnikoff's and lasted for several years after. And



when he and Michael went their separate professional and creative ways after that inaugural year, their time together in that summer of 1984 created a bond of personal and professional friendship.

Dupéré began his professional life as a music teacher in the Quebec City area, but decided that he wanted to write and perform music rather than teach, and set out on his own. He spent six months in Europe touring with the Belgian *Cirque du Trottoir*, playing his tuba in the streets and making a living the hard way, before returning to Quebec and joining *La Fanfaronie*.



Show business, and especially the music business, has a reputation of turning many people bitter and jaded. Yet, René remains as youthfully excited and charged up as you suspect he was twenty years ago. There is very much the Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland "Let's-put-a-show-on" atmosphere to him, yet one recognizes early on this is not naivety but a pure sense of joy in doing what he does and a love of entertaining people.

And let's not forget that it was Dupéré's music for Léo Munger that captivated Sinelnikoff in Quebec City and began the process leading to his involvement with the *Cirque*.

During those rehearsal days in Ste-Thérèse, Michael recalls that René introduced to him a innovative piece of equipment. For Michael, who was only just coming to grips with Luc Campeau's computer, this was yet another avenue to explore. He recalls, "It was like a somewhat shortened piano keyboard with buttons on it that, when selected, would

sound different instruments when you pressed the keys. René told me it was a *synthesizer*—and one night he invited me to play with it for a whole evening while he was rehearsing with *La Fanfaronie*. I really had a peculiar spine-prickling feeling that this was the beginning of something new and important in the world of music. We all know today how significant that technology became..

CHAPTER 9

WHICH WAY TO GASPÉ?

If one looks at the map of Quebec, it's hard not to notice that the outline of the province resembles the profile of a person. The Gaspé Peninsula, known simply as "The Gaspé" is what forms the lower lip of the human impression.

It is a rough, isolated part of Canada and Quebec. Copper-streaked cliffs reach up from the frequently stormy Gulf of St. Lawrence and give way to pine and spruce-laden plateaus. Winters are long and brutal with monumental snowfalls and numbing cold. Summers, on the other hand, are at times magnificent. Because of its location, the sunrises are breathtaking and the air is rich, clean and full of the taste of life and nature.

Then there's the ocean. Almost surrounded by water, it's easy to conclude that you've reached land's end. In fact, the word "Gaspé" comes from the Mi'kmaq (Micmac) word "*Gaspeg*" which means "*the place where the land ends.*" It was the Mi'kmaq who greeted Jacques Cartier when he arrived in Baie des Chaleurs in 1534.

Reports of the time say the Mi'kmaq greeted them waving beaver pelts and speaking a type of pidgin Basque. How they came to speak Basque is a mystery although some believe they may have had contact with John Cabot in 1497, or with his followers, who arrived in Newfoundland shortly thereafter.

Although mining concerns have siphoned off its copper resources in Murdochville, and the pulp and paper industry has established some processing mills on the Baie des Chaleurs side of the peninsula, the region still relies heavily on the fishing industry. As in the past, ships today set out from the small towns and hamlets that dot the north shore of the St. Lawrence and the Gulf. Today the catch is smaller as fish stock is dwindling. Efforts to spur tourism have met with mixed success.

At the tip of the peninsula is the city of Gaspé itself, the focal point of the entire region and, interestingly enough, a city with an area so vast that in land mass it is the largest city in the Province of Quebec. It also marks the place where Jacques Cartier and his French followers touched ground in 1534.

This was where, for Canada, the new world had its beginning. And this was where *the Cirque du Soleil* would have *its* beginning.

In early June, cast, crew and management of the *Cirque* headed off to Gaspé, with the exception of Michael and Luc Campeau. For some reason, still unclear, they were not told *when* to go to Gaspé. Days went by and still no word. Efforts to reach management failed. Finally, in desperation, Michael called Campeau and said, "Look, we'll just *go..* and straighten things out when we get there. I'm the Director. You're my Assistant. They can't

get this show on without us!” So, in spite of Michael’s painful foot (owing to a recent operation for Morton’s neuroma)¹, he and Luc set off for Gaspé, buying their own airline tickets.

Arriving in Gaspé, they decided to head to the centre of town where they believed they’d find someone from the *Cirque* who could bring them up to speed on accommodation and other arrangements.

Had Michael and Luc *not* taken that plane, it would probably have been the end of the *Cirque*, as it turned out that some of the performers had been making plans to return home to their respective countries, and it took Michael and Luc quite some time and effort to round them all up.

However, as Michael recalls, “Instead, when we got to where the tent was supposed to be erected, there was absolutely no sign of anyone from the *Cirque*—all we saw was the two main vertical posts of the tent standing forlornly in the central plaza— but no canvas tent! I was soon to learn that the tent had been condemned by the city of Gaspé as unsafe because the two main support uprights, bent in the rain storm in Ste-Thérèse, had not been straightened properly by the blacksmith who had worked on them, and were sufficiently deformed as to be officially declared a hazard.”

That was the moment when both Sinelnikoff and Campeau realized they had their work cut out for them if the show was to take place.

¹ A Morton's neuroma is an irritated, swollen nerve, classically described as a severe intermittent pain in the ball of the foot located between the third and fourth toes. Cure necessitates an operation (Source: Allentown Family Foot Care)



It was back to basics. Both Michael and Luc concluded that their first task was to locate the performers. Eventually, by asking around they did manage to locate a small office for the *Cirque* in Gaspé. Michael recalls, "We found it staffed only by the accountant, Daniel Gauthier.. he became General Manager of the *Cirque du Soleil* in later years.. but we found the reception rather cool, especially when we told him we wanted to claim our airline tickets and collect some *per diem*. We got both, but I remember getting the feeling that they thought they didn't need us anymore and they were going to open the Circus without the Director and without the Director's assistant."

Events would show just how disastrous such an attitude would have been.

CHAPTER 10

CLOSING IN ON OPENING DAY

The concern Sinelnikoff and Campeau had for the production at this point was real and deep. There was a sense of defeat in the air heightened by the austerity of the two condemned tent-poles standing forlornly in the town centre.. (*see the photo on the previous page*). And the situation was quickly deteriorating.

The accommodation Michael and Luc were provided with was in a motel miles out of town. "Way the hell and gone, and no car!" Michael says. And many of the cast, as they would soon find out, fared even worse.

At this point Michael realized that the future of the show depended to a large extent on everyone's ability to remain focused on the ultimate goal and not to get distracted by the problems, no matter how daunting.

Michael was adamant. "We had people from various parts of the world who had worked enormously hard to create this project and had come out to Gaspé to put on a show. By God, we were going to put on a show!" But where were these people? They were not to be found in the town of Gaspé! And without them, there would be no Circus.

Sinelnikoff and Campeau knew they had to be somewhere not too far off—so they set off to find them. The *Cirque* Management, for reasons known only to themselves,¹ had scattered the performers about in outlying hotels and motels and generally let them fend for themselves without any information or advice. One group of performers were billeted in the basement of a farmhouse where they shared accommodation with an aggressive growth of mushrooms.

Luc and Michael finally managed to locate them all, but found that morale was very low. Most of them had traveled great distances to take part in what they believed was an exciting new venture, only to find themselves virtually abandoned in an isolated part of rural Quebec. "And it took Luc the best part of two days to track down Management. "Where had they been, and what were they doing? It remained a mystery to me," recalls Michael.¹

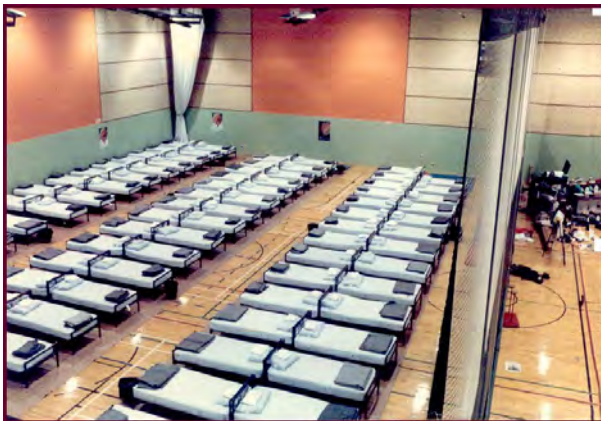
Michael knew that his first task—and a most crucial one—was to rekindle the artistes' professional spirit.. and energize them. He felt that a general rally and get-together was called for, so he organized a barbeque on the beach one dull, grey afternoon. This proved to be an important event in the creation of an *esprit de corps* for the first *Cirque du Soleil*. There was a drizzling rain, but it was not going to ruin this day.

¹ Efforts to determine *why* this occurred have been rebuffed by the then and current management of The *Cirque du Soleil*. In fact, the *Cirque* refused to co-operate in any way with the author in the production of this document, in spite of repeated requests.

Michael remembers, “We bought a lot of food (Stanislas bought 50 lobsters!), rounded up everybody from the outlying hotels and motels and got them to this party. It was a real reunion. It became apparent that many had doubts that the show would actually happen. I assured them that now that Luc and I were here, there was definitely going to be a show. Frankly, Luc and I weren’t as confident as we let on, but we kept that well hidden!”

Performers rely on the Director and his team. The Director gives a focus to the endeavor and channels creative energies. He also instills confidence in the ensemble, a task in this case made all the more difficult because of the sense of desertion they had experienced before Luc’s and Michael’s arrival. Sinelnikoff felt it essential to get back into rehearsal—to get the performers up and *doing* something. Besides, the show was far from complete and a long way from being ready for an audience. But how.. and where? Besides there was no tent—and that alone was a huge problem yet to be dealt with.

But first—rehearsals. The resourceful Luc Campeau finally managed to locate the missing management.. urgent arrangements were made to use the gymnasium of a local Junior College so that rehearsals could start again. There was one problem: the gym was also being used as sleeping quarters. The French Navy was in Gaspé for the French government’s participation in the *Quebec 450* celebrations and they had been billeted in the gymnasium—rows of hundreds of camp-cots. Fortunately, they and their officers were most cooperative and the gymnasium floor was divided into two, with the sleeping quarters separated from the rehearsal area by a large tarpaulin and net.



"During the rehearsals, I suddenly realized that we didn't have a musical theme—a piece of title music that would be identified as the signature of the *Cirque* and that would be played at the start of the show, and would repeat from time to time.

I took René Dupéré aside and explained the problem to him. "What did you have in mind?" he asked. "I can give you anything you like." I explained that it should have something of the feel of *Barnum and Bailey*, but most important, it should have the unique Québécois & Dupéré flavor. René just nodded, smiled, and disappeared.

The following day we were rehearsing a juggling act when the door of the gymnasium burst open, and the whole of *La Fanfaronie* marched in—in their red uniforms—and took up a position to play. I was totally taken aback, but René raised his arms and the band played a splendid Circus March that had us all riveted as we stood there and clapped our hands to the rhythm. I had no words—I just hugged him. What a morale-booster—and what an incredible surprise: he'd composed it, and they'd rehearsed it, secretly—all in just 24 hours.. And that was the theme that was used throughout the First Tour".



(Michael still has it on a 45 rpm disc which was autographed for him by all the members of the Fanfaronie)

CHAPTER 11

A TENT BY ANY OTHER NAME

As the final rehearsals progressed, the nagging problem of the performance venue kept getting more and more serious. It was fine to *rehearse* in a gymnasium, but where were they going to *perform* this much-publicized show in front of an advance-booked, paying audience?

Despair had started to loom as the day of performance approached; it was now June 14th—just 72 *hours* away from opening night—and there was still no word about a replacement tent or where the show was going to be performed.

It was clearly time for a miracle.

Michael explains, “Luc, who is one of the most ingenious people I know, took a walk around the top of the hill—Gaspé is built on a kind of a mountain—and came back an hour later and excitedly told me there was a Canadian Government environmental tent just around the brow of the hill. And that it could do the job. I was a bit incredulous, but I went there with him and looked down from the cliff onto this tent and, yes, it was a fairly decent-sized tent—not really the shape of a Circus tent but it could indeed do the job..!”

Sinelnikoff and Campeau clambered down the hill to the tent and looked inside and it was empty.. standing on gravel. Here was the answer to their prayers—a big red, white and green tent. It wasn’t as pretty as the Italian one, but it was just as large—even larger—and it would do! It was a TENT!.. a beginning.. we could make it work.



However, politics is never far from anything in Quebec, and the *Cirque du Soleil* was no exception. When Michael told Laliberté of Luc's discovery it presented a terrible problem for both the Cirque's and the *Quebec 450*'s managements. *That tent was the property of the Federal Government of Canada.* The *Quebec 450* celebration, of which the *Cirque du Soleil* was a part, was a Quebec provincial project and the Quebec government of the time was dedicated to the Separation of the province from the rest of Canada.

Michael threw the ball into Laliberté's court. "Look, you settle it—it's your Circus—I don't give the orders around here. We're standing by, but we're running out of time. We've got to have an answer or we're just not going to open. And who gives a damn about who *owns* the tent? We have been literally *saved* here!"

48 precious hours later word came down that a deal had been struck and they had their tent for the opening the following day. But it was standing on gravel, and there was absolutely *nothing* inside it. There was an enormous task ahead which had to be done at lightning speed.

Michael immediately rounded up Gérard Bétant, the tent expert, and Claude Accolas, the lighting director. Over dinner at the Auberge des Gouverneurs they discussed the possibilities. Everyone realized that they were running out of options and they wanted to be sure that any recommendations they made to management were based on solid, workable information.

Bétant confirmed that, as far as he was concerned, all he required was *for the tent to be in place*. And it was indeed in place, just where we needed it.

It wasn't so simple with Claude Accolas, however. He said he needed a day to rig the lighting bars and focus the lights, but it was a day he didn't have because that night—the night of the opening—he was supposed to be in Montreal for another show.

Michael asked, "Well, *supposing* you didn't leave? *Supposing* you stayed?"

After only the briefest of pauses, Accolas replied, "Well, I *suppose* I could."

"All right! Technically, then, what do you need?"

"I need fifteen thirty-foot long steel bars, two inches thick, and a crew of twenty-five. I've got the instruments (lights) and the cabling and we can get it up in time," Accolas answered.

Michael spotted Guy Laliberté walking through the hotel with his walkie-talkie. He called him over to the table and explained he needed fifteen steel bars and a twenty-five-person crew to install the lights. Laliberté called through on the walkie-talkie and ordered the steel bars and a *crew of fifteen*.

Michael exploded. "NO! Not fifteen—twenty-five! We need EXACTLY what I told you!"

Laliberté, somewhat startled, to his credit, corrected the order.

The countdown to show time had begun.



Claude Accolas, Michael Sinelnikoff & Luc Campeau

CHAPTER 12

HEADING TO SHOW TIME

Twenty-four hours to show time and work was under way in the new tent. Campeau had arranged with Hydro-Québec to install a power switch-box at 7:30 a.m. That would handle all the essential electrical circuits for lighting and sound equipment, and the Stage Manager arranged for the installation of the stored bleachers in the new tent.

Claude Accolas had his lighting crew rigging the lights bright and early and the setup of the sound system was underway. It was the setting up of the bleachers that astounded Michael. Every single performer and crew member of the Cirque banded together and dragged, pushed and manhandled the bleachers into place. It was an inspiring and moving piece of cooperation and loyalty, showing just how determined everyone was to have this performance take place.

But events weren't trouble free. The Technical Director advised everyone that he couldn't guarantee good sound because there wouldn't be time for a full technical rehearsal where he could set all the levels. Michael told him, "Never mind, just get the

sound in. We'll wing it and you can adjust things as we go. It wouldn't be the first time I've seen top professional shows where the sound was terrible for the first ten minutes." (For an extreme example, the professional touring show of EVITA which I attended at the Montreal Place des Arts Theatre was a sonic disaster until the start of the second act..)

This was a day Sinelnikoff will not likely forget. He had understood early on that his presence was imperative as much as a confidence-raiser as an authority figure, like it or not. He started by asking a stage-hand to paint a red star in the centre of the Ring.



Then, as soon as the paint had dried, he moved a canvas-backed Director's chair over the painted star and had a telephone line run out to him.

"And there I sat all day—in the chair, on the star, in the ring.. wearing my best suit which I had dragged along for opening night. Sandwiches and coffee—*lots* of coffee—came and went. I made a heap of fake phone-calls as I had to give the impression that I was somehow running things. In fact I was just sitting in that chair, trying to hide my anxiety. I was afraid that if I went away everyone else would go away.. I may or may not have been right about that, but I was definitely right to be there, because I found out afterwards that people found my presence reassuring. They believed that as long as I was

there things were “on the rails”. I had no such conviction.. I was terrified. But I hid that and just kept smiling. I only left my chair to go to the toilet a few times”.

“And then there was Jacques Renault and the other officials from *Quebec 450*. They were desperately worried about ‘their’ 8:30 show and kept pestering everybody—especially me!—with questions as to the show’s readiness. They weren’t only fretting about the opening night, but also about the special show for Premier René Lévesque the following day.. their necks were on the line. But I couldn’t allow myself to think about *their* problems. I kept telling them to *please go away and leave me alone*,” Sinelnikoff goes on. “I didn’t know exactly when we’d be able to start. I said it would probably *not* be 8:30, but it would not be long after. *‘There will be a show*: that, I promise you. But don’t keep asking me every ten minutes. It’s not helping”. And I went on making fake phone-calls and drinking coffee”.

One of the early problems had been making sure everyone knew exactly in what order the show was going to run.

“Luc and his computer were nothing short of a lifesaver at this point in time,” Michael recalls. “We were able to adjust the final order up until the last minute and then print out copies and tack them up on both sides of the stage entrances—a flexibility new to me and one which proved vital to the Cirque’s actual performance.”

At some point late in the afternoon, and after consulting the crew, Sinelnikoff called the Quebec 450 people aside and told them that there would not be an 8:30 start to the *Cirque*. But he did guarantee a 9:30 start. They were a bit upset but Michael had a suggestion. “I’m sure the good people of Gaspé will understand. We’ll explain to them that this is the first time this type of show has ever been performed—we’ll offer them some refreshments and they won’t mind waiting. A delayed opening is not unheard of..”

The officials were somewhat reassured and went off to make the arrangements. Now the show could go on.

Or could it?

CHAPTER 13

SHOW TIME

The hour was quickly approaching when the *Cirque du Soleil* would make its first entry into the world of entertainment.

As evening of June 17, 1984 approached, Michael decided the time had come to leave his spot in the centre of the ring and have a pre-show talk with the cast who were getting ready in their dressing rooms. He was not prepared for what greeted him. The Stage Manager met him and told him not to go in.. there was a serious problem.

"The performers were upset," Michael relates, "but not as upset as I was when I found out they refused to play because they hadn't had a full uninterrupted run or a dress rehearsal". He stifled his frustration because the bottom line was that he really did see their point of view—as a performer he would have felt the same way. He said he needed ten minutes to think.

"So then I'm sitting there, close to tears," he recalls, "and the Stage Manager comes up to me and says, 'Michael, why don't you *call it a rehearsal* instead of an actual performance? Sell it to the cast as a *dress rehearsal* and they will play". *Of course! Brilliant!* That was the turning point, and I hope that Stage Manager, wherever he is, knows how crucial his suggestion proved".

Michael asked the Stage Manager to present the idea to the cast. They were at first dubious. But then he went back to the dressing rooms and informed the performers that he'd make a little speech to the audience beforehand and explain that this was really going to be a dress rehearsal (*une générale*) and the audience would, in effect, be backstage. "Audiences love that", he told them.

In theatrical productions the Director normally hands the show over to the Stage Manager thirty minutes before curtain-time, at which point he or she has no more responsibility for it officially, beyond giving notes to the actors after the performance. However, as this was a rehearsal, Michael reminded them he would be sitting on the edge of the Ring, clipboard in hand, taking notes and, if necessary, stopping the show to put things right if anything really went off the rails.

This solution broke the stalemate and the cast agreed to perform. The show had finally been set in motion. And not a moment too soon..

At 8:00 the audience started arriving and by 8:30 they were all in their seats on the bleachers. Michael delayed as long as he could.. then he stepped out into the Ring and told the audience (in his best Anglophone French!) about the delay, and was rewarded with the fact that they didn't seem to mind waiting. In fact when he presented the idea

that they were going to be part of a dress rehearsal they seemed delighted, and he was surprised and deeply touched when they gave him a round of applause.

Sinelnikoff remembers, "At 9:30, I took my place ring-side with my clipboard, the lights went down, the smoke and music started and the miracle began to happen. I didn't really need to be there at all because the whole show went like clockwork. The audience forgot I was there. *I even forgot I was there!*"

As the show was winding down, Michael suddenly panicked and realized that he hadn't had time to even *plan*, let alone rehearse, a curtain-call (*rappel*) for all the performers. He rushed backstage and asked René Dupéré and La Fanfaronie to be on standby.

At the end of the performance when the applause for the last number had died down, Michael turned to the audience and told them there had been no time to work out a curtain-call and said: "But this is what we're going to do.. the performers from the *Cirque du Soleil* would love to meet you. Why don't you all come down into the Ring: La Fanfaronie will play for us and we'll all dance together and talk for as long as we like!"



"And that's exactly what they did. The dancing went on for the better part of an hour. Everyone enjoyed it enormously—they were able to dance and chat with the people who had entertained them for two miraculous hours."

It had been a miracle indeed. Three days before there had been no tent and only a group of highly skilled professional performers with an unfinished show. Yet here they were, dancing and celebrating not only the realization of a show that almost never happened, but, in essence, what was the birth of a whole new genre of entertainment, now known the world over. The *Québec 450* people were jubilant, Michael was

overwhelmed with relief. The *Québec 450* officials came up and hugged him.. the performers were delighted with their new show and the Management were thrilled that in spite of everything the show had gone so well.

Michael reminisces, "When I look back on it now it all seems a most unlikely, even improbable farrago.. all we went through to get to that final triumphant point.."

There remained only one more dilemma to deal with.., the *Cirque* had been asked to put on a special performance the following day for the then Premier of Quebec, René Lévesque. It was to be at 3:00 pm, but because of the Premier's tight schedule, it had to last no longer than forty-five minutes. Once again the problem of what to cut and what to keep presented itself. Clearly not everyone could do everything they had done in the "big show".

"A lot had to be removed," says Michael. "So we did what we did the previous night: we put a printed show-order (Luc Campeau's computer again!) up on each side of the entrances to the Ring and the artistes just followed the order, with René and La Fanfaronie filling in the gaps. Again, we were successful, and the *Quebec 450* people were once more overjoyed. So was M. Lévesque, who had been responsible for funding the production." He left, smiling. Michael's job was essentially over—and he headed for the nearest bar to down a Scotch.. or two..

The show was set to run in what turned out to be the first Quebec tour.

The concept meetings in the Sinelnikoff apartment, the seminal rehearsals in Ste-Thérèse, the scramble for a tent in Gaspé, the opening-night success, the laughs, the tears, the pain, the joy, all breathed life into the idea of *Le Cirque du Soleil*, a Circus without animals.

We've forgotten it all for too long.

EPILOGUE

Michael and Luc stayed on in Gaspé to organize a proper curtain-call for the second night, then returned to Montreal. Later on, Michael would complete his contractual obligations by directing two touch-ups on that inaugural tour of Quebec—*Le Grand Tour*.

The touch-ups were not really needed.. by that time the performers had taken the show into their own hands and were making it better at every performance. And that's the way it's supposed to be in Show Business!

A new blue and yellow tent (with straight poles!) was finally part of *Le Cirque* when it arrived back home for a performance in the Port of Montreal (*Le Vieux Port*). Sinelnikoff was in the audience at opening night in the Port.. it was a resounding success. There was a lengthy standing ovation for the performers and Michael was asked to take a bow. It was one of the best and happiest moments of his career.

He returned to his Staff position as a CBC Producer/Director and the following year the Cirque hired the talented (and experienced!) Franco Dragone as Director, in which position he remained for many years.

René Dupéré stayed with The Cirque for a number of years composing their original music scores—one of the best known is probably *Alegria*, the recording of which went platinum.

Luc Campeau splits his time between the Florida and Montreal film communities and has become one of the best production professionals around anywhere.

Guy Laliberté was asked, but refused to be interviewed for this document.

Michael Sinelnikoff, now in his nineties, continues to enjoy both his good health and Retirement.

Nowhere in any published records of the Cirque du Soleil is there any mention of the production team of that first show back in 1984, and many of the original artistes are given no credit. They have been literally ignored.

This story is dedicated to them. They deserve it, and so much more.

One thing remains certain: if Luc Campeau and Michael Sinelnikoff had not boarded that plane and gone to Gaspé, there would have been no Cirque du Soleil and this document would never have been written.

Thank you for taking the time to read this small slice of Quebec History.

Malcolm Charlton

(R.I.P.)



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Performers of the First Quebec Tour in 1984