

Machine De Cirque Upgrades The Circus

by LUCY GELLMAN | Jun 26, 2015 11:44 am

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COURTESY MACHINE DE CIRQUE

“We are going to survive no matter what happens,” crackled a Cronkitean voice to the half-dark of the University Theater, the determined squeal of a radio signal falling silent after several seconds. Cloaked behind two long, dimly lit curtains, a number of silhouettes leaned in, listening for any last, surprise utterances before the world around them quieted completely.

Then there was the kind of silence you never want to hear, because it connotes being utterly alone. A gust of wind, a burst of thunder, the percussive whirr of a hard rain. No voices, no light. This was [Cormac McCarthy](#) or *Mad Max* 101, and one thing was

completely certain: whatever we had been named on the radio were not all going to survive this. Only the strongest, the fittest, and the most daring would make it out alive. A new high-stakes approach through grace and thrill would have to triumph.

That was the premise that opened [Machine de Cirque](#)'s boundary-shattering performance on Wednesday night. The brainchild of performer and engineer Vincent Dubé, the nascent company — circus artists Yohann Trépanier, Raphaël Dubé, Maxim Lauren, and Ugo Dario (missing due to visa issues), and musician and composer Frédéric Lebrasseur — sought to bring to New Haven a circus fully outfitted for the 21st century. Think much bigger than PT Barnum and his bag of tricks. Forget about [Cirque du Soleil](#). Take a step, or three, past anything you thought was avant-garde. This was something new, and was very, very good. As part of the [International Festival of Arts and Ideas](#), there will be repeat performances [tonight through Sunday](#).



JUDY SIROTA ROSENTHAL PHOTO

“We wanted something completely different, something very centered on the artist. You feel the human in it, you can recognize the people ... it’s something close to the audience. something raw. I like that — you don’t have to put a lot of glitter to make it nice. You feel t’s really human.” said V. Dubé in a post-show discussion of the work.

Set on strong scaffolding that revealed a set of ropes and pulleys, a trapeze, teeterboard, drum kit, gymnastic mats and more, Machine de Cirque told the impossible and beautifully complex story of five men looking for survivors 15 years after the apocalypse has ravaged the earth. As it moved from one physical vignette to the next, it wove

together a narrative of survival through form and hilarity, nostalgia and utter perseverance. The result, which kept Wednesday's audience on the edge of their seats to the finale, was distinct and bittersweet, heavy on the sweet.



Also, brilliant. Not unlike [Ragamala Dance Company](#), which graced the University Theater's stage last week, Machine de Cirque relied heavily on the successful yoking of music to movement. In a show of what Lebrasseur described as "constant communication and improvisation," the group displayed not only immense trust in each other — V. Dubé had only been rehearsing for three days, as a stand-in for Dario — but also a willingness to improvise and tweak where necessary. To Lebrasseur's hypnotic, sometimes rock-edged drumbeats and inventive percussion, the four performers twisted, wound, and jumped around the set in tempered rhythms, revealing the gritty physicality of the human body while performing acts that subverted its limits.

The acrobatics — largely the product of 15-hour days spent choreographing and practicing in a barn — were also exposed in all their rough and radical glory. When the trapeze slipped with someone on it, three performers rushed to hold on with their feet, hands, and teeth. If the teeterboard was uneven, it didn't just get balanced, but balanced by a pair doing backflips and aerial stunts. A progressively daring unicycle routine managed to involve all ensemble members, who moved carefully around the one-wheeled beast, drawing laughs from the audience as they tried to tame it for their fellow performer.



If, in the interest of exposing the nuts and bolts, the circus magic was gone, no one in the house seemed to mind. In one profoundly affecting sketch, Laurin performed a sort of love song to a bicycle that blended contemporary dance and acrobatics. In another, equal parts funny and warm, V. Dubé brought a young woman up from the audience, miming a date wherein the props — tables, chairs, benches — all happened to be human, and very much capable of movement. A third had Trépanier performing a pseudo-ballet with fedoras. A fourth involved all four of them naked at the center of the stage, flipping and folding their bath towels in unison.

Rarely is there an ensemble that can so stunningly give a nod to tradition before blowing it off for something more inventive. Laurin had the key to why, exactly, when someone asked after Wednesday's show.

"We complete each other," he said. "They support me and I support them."



Machine de Cirque's run at Arts and Ideas continues tonight at 8:00 p.m. and tomorrow at 1:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. at University Theatre, 222 York Street. Click [here](#) for more information.

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