

# The Boston Globe

In ArtsEmerson's 'Machine de Cirque,' the apocalypse is the mother of invention



L'OEIL DU LOUP PHOTOGRAPHY

**The Machine de Cirque troupe features four circus artists and a percussionist.**

**By Don Aucoin GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 23, 2016**

Given the exceptional quality of contemporary circus ensembles that have strutted their dazzling stuff in Boston over the past few years, the bar is set pretty high for "Machine de Cirque," a production by the three-year-old, Quebec City-based troupe of the same name.

With founder and artistic director Vincent Dubé at the helm, “Machine de Cirque” clears that metaphorical bar with ease.

Your mouth will be agape at times while watching this 90-minute show, presented by ArtsEmerson at the Paramount Mainstage through Oct. 2. At other times you’ll likely find yourself wearing a goofy smile as a quartet of high-spirited circus artists and one energetic percussionist team up to deliver an inspired performance of acrobatics and broad comedy.

The production is somber in the early going, befitting the show’s premise: An unexplained apocalypse had arrived years earlier, leaving five co-workers to carry on somehow. Unflinching in their efforts to find other survivors by, among other things, trying to pick up a signal on an antenna, they also try to essentially make the world anew, one stunt at a time.

Now, story lines unfolding in the aftermath of the apocalypse are perilously close to cliché by now, having formed the basis for Anne Washburn’s “Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play,” among many other works. But the pretext serves its purpose in “Machine de Cirque,” namely, to give the immensely gifted performers an excuse to launch into an array of captivating and sometimes spectacular routines, utilizing objects — a teeterboard (akin to a playground see-saw), juggling clubs, a trapeze, unicycles — that just happen to be lying around in the vicinity following the apocalypse. What are the odds?

A consistent level of invention characterizes “Machine de Cirque,” whose cast includes circus artists Yohann Trépanier, Raphaël Dubé (brother of the artistic director), Ugo Dario, and Maxim Laurin, along with percussionist/composer Frédéric Lebrasseur.

They’re a scruffy and endearing bunch, clambering and careening and scuttling about a set that is dominated by a multi-level scaffold containing ropes, pulleys, and movable platforms on each level.

As with productions by Les 7 doigts de la main (whose “Cuisine & Confessions” was at ArtsEmerson just a couple of months ago), Cirque Éloize, and granddaddy Cirque du Soleil, “Machine de Cirque” finds ways to marry circus arts, music, and dance movement. And as with

the best of those productions, “Machine de Cirque” amounts to a serial astonishment when it is clicking on all cylinders.

Because it’s being performed in the 590-seat Paramount rather than a large arena, there’s an intimate human scale to the piece. We can see the performers huff, puff, and sweat — and they’re entitled.

When Dubé and Trépanier embark on a juggling routine, they steadily escalate the velocity, passing the clubs between each other so rapidly that the Paramount Mainstage seems engulfed in a swirling, horizontal snowstorm. When Dario and Laurin partner for a routine on the teeterboard, each sends the other soaring higher and higher, somersaulting and jackknifing in mid-air before landing on the narrow board while we hold our breath, then hurtling skyward again.

The ensemble is constantly upping the ante. Trépanier rides a bicycle backward, then rides it on one wheel while traveling backward in a “Look ma, no hands” style, then rides it while positioned upside down, before finally riding on the handlebars. Later, Dubé hurtles over the others and lands, crotch-first, on a unicycle, then proceeds to shift to another unicycle that is so tall he towers over the stage.

For all that, the highlight of “Machine de Cirque” might be a hilarious peek-a-boo routine late in the show that is built around increasingly frantic efforts by the performers to conceal their naughty bits with bath towels. One narrow escape from full-frontal nudity follows another. Although the sketch runs on longer than seems possible or advisable, it somehow doesn’t run out of steam. Neither does “Machine de Cirque.”

## **MACHINE DE CIRQUE**

Directed by Vincent Dubé. Music by Frédéric Lebrasseur. Production by Machine de Cirque.

Presented by ArtsEmerson. At Paramount Mainstage, Boston, through Oct. 2. Tickets: \$20-\$80,

617-824-8400, [www.artsemerson.org](http://www.artsemerson.org)

*Don Aucoin can be reached at [aucoin@globe.com](mailto:aucoin@globe.com).*