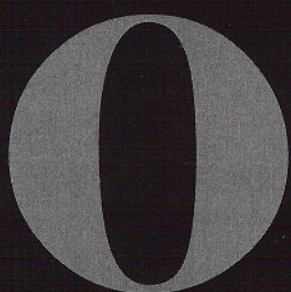


Somersaulting

Ahead Kristi Lanier is won over by the enthusiasm of the team plotting an acrobatic revolution in Shanghai



O n a late July afternoon, the interior of Shanghai Circus World is quiet, the air sluggish and hot. Construction materials lie in scattered, dusty piles. The faded red seats ringing the stage sigh with age. The whole place looks ready to give it all up and go home.

But the theatre's doleful state camouflages the immense creative process underway behind the scenes. Shanghai Circus World

is home to a new multimillion-dollar acrobatic production, the first of its kind in China. The show, *ERA: Intersection of Time*, is a multimedia event featuring dance, magic, drama, martial arts, live music and, at its heart, traditional Chinese acrobatics. Two months before its September 27 premiere, *ERA* is still being birthed.

The show was conceived by the China Performing Arts Agency, Shanghai Media Group and Shanghai Circus World as a permanent world class show, one that could run at least until the World Expo in 2010. To realise their dream, the producers knew they needed to break from the traditional Chinese acrobatic formula – the orderly presentation of one feat after another. To do this, they handed over development, from concept to stage design, to an international creative team headed by French-Canadian director Erick Villeneuve.

Villeneuve has created multimedia shows for 20 years, the last five in the director's chair. He recently finished work on the equestrian show *Cavalia*. Many of his team members hail from Canada's acclaimed Cirque du Soleil, which prompts obvious comparisons. But Villeneuve is quick to deny that *ERA* is just a Cirque with Chinese characteristics. "It doesn't have anything to do with the Cirque du Soleil," he says. "This is a full Chinese show, 100 performers. We're just here for the technology and the artistic part."

Back in the theatre, it's hard to imagine this sagging space experiencing a Cinderella-like transformation. But as Villeneuve talks, his vision sweeps over the room and everything changes. He points to planned features. The motorcycles will go here, he says, the water projection screen there. The performers will come out of the floor directly underfoot. The seats will be a deep blue, and a glittering mirror cage will be the stage's focal point. As he sets the scene, motorcycles growl and whine through the audience, acrobats float down from the ceiling, lovers meet and are torn apart amid light, wind and smoke and a performer launches towards the ceiling with a powerful snap and then lands, the air reverberating with his thud.

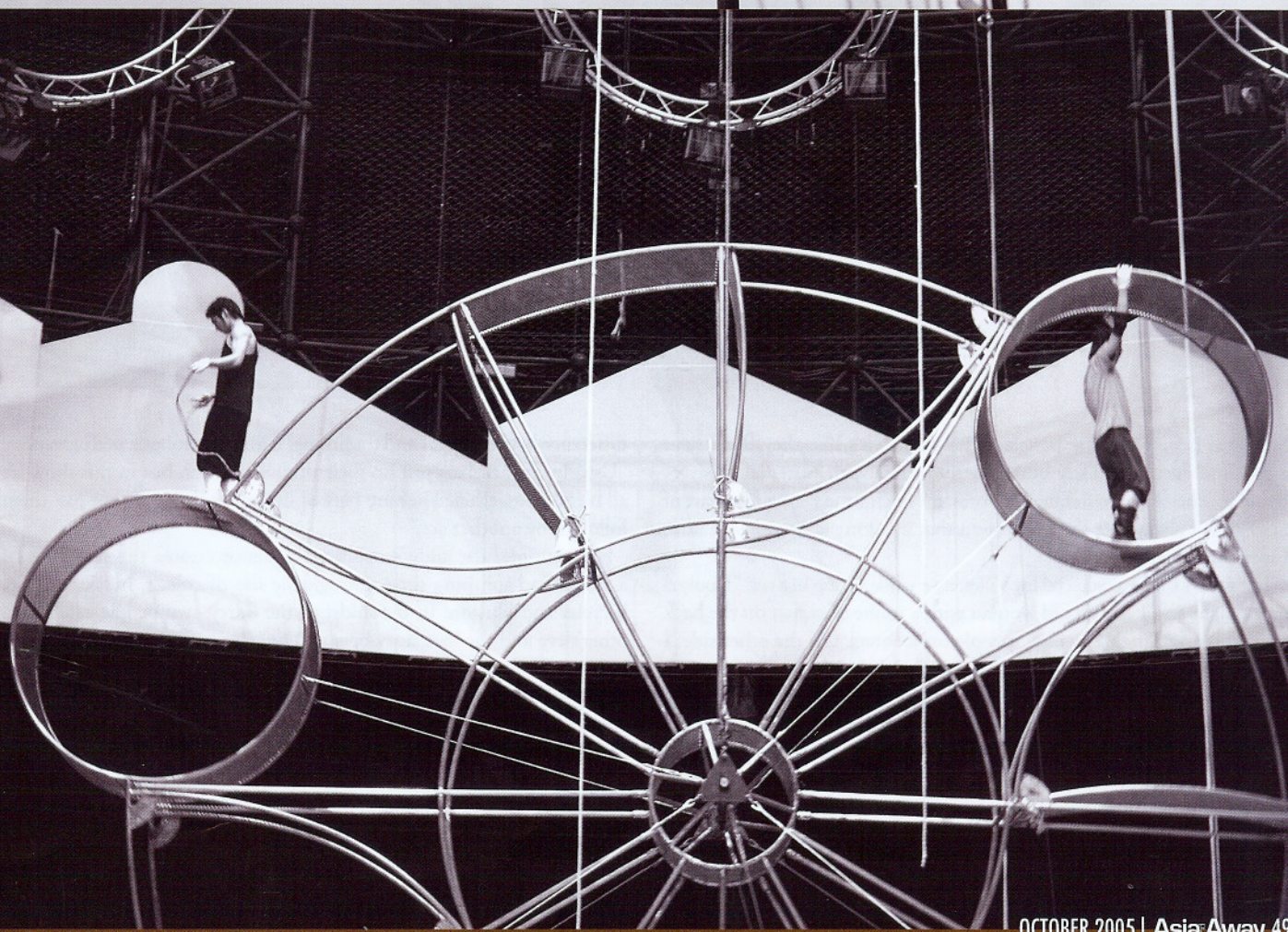
"Shall we go back?" Villeneuve asks. And just like that, the trance is broken and the theatre is quiet again.

In contrast to the main stage, the rehearsal halls buzz. Upstairs, musicians look rankled by our brief interruption. The show features original live music and the practice room is crowded with percussion instruments. Downstairs, a group rehearses the stacked chair routine. After creating a delicately balanced tower, the performers dismount by 'exploding' off the tower in powerful, flying leaps. They're having a bit of a technical struggle with the explosion effect, Villeneuve explains, because the chairs are heavy. The solution, they've just determined, requires the manufacture of new body harnesses.

Acrobatics in China dates back over 2,000 years. Many of the modern feats the Chinese are renowned for – like bowl tricks, chair stacking and hoop diving – stem from ancient daily life. While no one knows, for example, how *exactly* the art of flipping bowls on one's head with a foot while riding a unicycle evolved, it must have started with a few bored farmers.

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Strength, Dexterity and Grace
(top) Performers dismount the
towers by 'exploding' off
flying leaps. The Chinese word
huang (brilliant) is appropriate
prominent in the background
(bottom) Rotating wheel
circles and other symbols of
time are central to the show's
meditations on change



“It’s the friction between the country’s deeply rooted past and supersonic future, particularly in Shanghai, that has inspired Villeneuve.”



Shanghai is between the past and the future. It’s like they don’t have a present,” he says. “They build for tomorrow with yesterday’s way of doing it. They have to define their present. Each time I see a new part of Shanghai, I always get the impression that if I don’t take a picture now, I won’t see it again.”

The show’s theme coalesced for Villeneuve while sitting in a car. “I looked to the right and I saw an old woman with a tonne of carpet on the back of her bike and then 20 young people on scooters. On the other side, I saw a Porsche driven by a fashionable young lady,” he says. “Everyone was looking ahead and they’re thinking about where they came from and where they’re going. When the light turned green, they all started at a different rhythm except for the lady with the bike, who was blocking the way. Two young guys stopped and helped her push it. That day I chose the name of the show, *ERA: Intersection of Time*.”

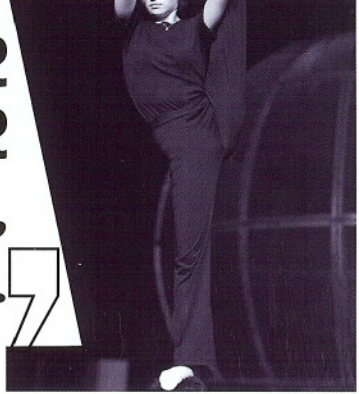
Villeneuve blends the acrobatic disciplines with multimedia effects and then infuses the whole with a theme and story. And therein lies the

difference between *ERA* and traditional Chinese acrobatic performances. “Usually, the acrobats just do their [individual] act, but in this show it’s all blended together. They are part of the entire show. It’s not just them followed by another act.”

For example, the show’s opening sequence creates the sensation of a storm and spinning time through the use of colour, music, texture, bicycles and illusion. In the midst of the flurry, two people catch each other’s eye and the love story begins. The relationship unfolds, jumping between the future and the past. “Two people fall in love among that urban development,” says the show’s choreographer, Sandra Botnen. “You see the difference between people who get deadened by it and people who find love in spite of it.”

The Chinese acrobats are masters of technique and understand teamwork, but generally only in the context of their individual specialities. Getting the acrobats to see their performances as part of a connected whole is a major focus of the Canadian team. “I started by teaching classes,

The show's opening sequence creates the sensation of a storm and spinning time through the use of colour, music, texture, bicycles and magic.



creating a sense of ensemble," Botnen says. "We've pushed them more to be performers. This is physical theatre. It's an interconnected cosmos that gives rise to different acts. Like in a musical, the story will provoke a song. Here, the acts are motivated by relationship."

Communicating an artistic vision is tricky enough when everyone speaks the same language. But communicating a vision that is both a dramatic departure from the norm and in three different languages (Chinese, English and French) is a double handicap. "We went through a phase after three weeks when we felt the full impact of lost in translation," Botnen says. But the language of a common art and the arrival of an 'artistic' translator has bonded the two groups.

Both Villeneuve and Botnen are in awe of the Chinese acrobats' commitment and their willingness to embrace the foreign team. "There was an openness and a generosity from the beginning," she says. "Once we were able to communicate the inspiration, things got even better. One

comment they made was, 'We want to be invited into your dream'."

It's Villeneuve's goal for the audience to be invited into the dream too. "The audience is part of the show, not in that we bring you onto the stage, but because you are watching, and you will have an emotion, and you will build that show."

But as he also points out, it's not China or Canada or lighting effects or music that draws people to the circus. "It's universal," he says. "Each child playing, climbing, jumping, running. We want to fly. That's why the circus will stay in the heart of young people, old people. It's the opening of a dream."

ERA: Intersection of Time will premiere at Shanghai Circus World (2266 Gonghe Xin Lu, by Shanghai Circus World subway station) on September 27, 2005. Daily performances begin at 7.30pm. Tickets cost RMB 80-580 and can be purchased online at www.circus-world.com.