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A Gypsy Future

James Tanabe

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Article abstract

A title, even “Artistic Director for Cirque du Soleil”, barely summarizes all the dimensions of James Tanabe. A graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) where he triple-majored in Planetary Science, Physics, and Biology, he seemed destined to continue his work at NASA or at the prestigious Mayo Clinic. However, he drops everything to join the National Circus School of Montreal in 2001 and graduates in 2004. After performing in several shows around the world, he co-founds New Circus Asia in 2007, which produces its own shows in almost every country between Istanbul and Tokyo. Cirque du Soleil spots him and hires him as an Artistic Director in 2009, the youngest one ever hired to that position. A polyglot, he pursues his wandering all around the world and those who were privileged enough to read his writings about his voyages know he is also among the most gifted writers of his generation. At the request of Sens Public, he shared a few thoughts about the future of circus.

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JAMES TANABE

Abstract: A title, even "Artistic Director for Cirque du Soleil", barely summarizes all the dimensions of James Tanabe. A graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) where he triple-majored in Planetary Science, Physics, and Biology, he seemed destined to continue his work at NASA or at the prestigious Mayo Clinic. However, he drops everything to join the National Circus School of Montreal in 2001 and graduates in 2004. After performing in several shows around the world, he co-founds New Circus Asia in 2007, which produces its own shows in almost every country between Istanbul and Tokyo. Cirque du Soleil spots him and hires him as an Artistic Director in 2009, the youngest one ever hired to that position. A polyglot, he pursues his wandering all around the world and those who were privileged enough to read his writings about his voyages know he is also among the most gifted writers of his generation. At the request of *Sens Public*, he shared a few thoughts about the future of circus.

Résumé: Un titre, même si c'est celui de directeur artistique du Cirque du Soleil, aurait du mal à cerner toutes les facettes de James Tanabe. Diplômé du *Massachusetts Institute of Technology* (MIT) en physique, biologie et planétologie, ses études devaient le mener à la NASA ou à la prestigieuse Mayo Clinic. Au lieu de cela, il laisse tout tomber pour apprendre, à partir de 2001, le métier d'acrobate à l'École Nationale du Cirque de Montréal. Après en être sorti en 2004 et s'être produit dans plusieurs spectacles à travers le monde, il cofonde New Circus Asia en 2007 et monte ses propres productions dans la plupart des pays situés entre Istanbul et Tokyo. Le Cirque du Soleil le repère et l'embauche en 2009 comme directeur artistique, le plus jeune de l'histoire de la légendaire compagnie. Polyglotte, à l'aise partout, l'homme poursuit son errance à travers le monde, et ceux qui ont eu le privilège de lire ses écrits sur ses vagabondages savent qu'il est également parmi les écrivains les plus doués de sa génération. A la demande de *Sens Public*, il esquisse ici quelques réflexions sur le devenir du cirque.

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A Gypsy Future

James Tanabe

Imagine yourself a circus artist: a millennial gypsy. Sometimes you sleep in the five-star hotels of the world and sometimes in the streets below them. Tonight you eat caviar and drink Cognac in the finest Russian restaurants but tomorrow you are squeezing life out of three dollars a day in Malaysia. Your only home is the suitcase under your arm.

You know how it feels to balance on one hand and how to fly spinning through the air. You know how quickly and easily a life can be crippled by another's careless mistake. Your only job is to make strangers love you, night after night.

It is 2010 and you are an acrobat. Like a warrior or a prostitute, the history of your profession is as old as that of humanity itself.

Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, we are told; the evolution of a species mirrors the development of an individual. We begin as a single-cell organism. We grow gills, we grow tails, we lose them both, and then we are born.

* * *

Ten years ago: Circus school teaches me how to drink, how to smoke, and how to love a woman only until morning. My classmates and I are the shaggy, unshaved future of the circus arts, sleeping in the hardwood corners of each other's apartments. In the candlelit Montreal winters we vow to fight the good fight together. "The future of circus," we tell each other through late-night veils of smoke and alcohol, "is whatever we make it."

Six years Ago: Our growing collective of circus artists dedicated to theatrical expression through circus arts has been tapped to receive funding and international tour support from the French government but is forced to disband when two of the four members accept Cirque du Soleil contracts.

Four years ago: I am homeless in the streets of Tokyo until an expatriate Flamenco dancer from Madrid takes me in. She teaches me how to seduce a woman and how to dance with her close. "You smell like cinnamon," she tells me, and then, like a gypsy curse, "you will be the boss of your own company someday."

Two years ago: I am the boss of my own circus company with projects in fourteen countries and annual revenues over 300,000 dollars. The future of circus, it seems, is business.

Last year: February. I live in an unheated caravan somewhere outside of Basel, Switzerland with no running water or internet access. I am directing a show for the Gassers, one of the last European circus families. In the big top, our breath condenses and freezes on the canvas. In the morning, yesterday's breath melts and rains down upon us. When a storm blows in and the tent collapses, I crawl in the mud on my belly to retrieve our props. This show will run as it has for much of the last two centuries: perform in the evening; tear down and drive to the next site that night; wake at dawn to set up the big top, and perform again. My best friend and co-director, Goos Meeuwsen, a 27-year old Dutch clown who has spent his life performing in the streets, the big tops, and the cabarets of Europe and in the shimmering temples of Cirque du Soleil's Las Vegas spectacles. We drink French wine and cognac toasting to the dream that the future of circus lies somewhere in its past. But from inside this caravan, the future resembles the past so much that it is hard to tell in which direction time is actually headed.

Three months ago: I drink absinthe beside Bangkok's Chao Phraya River with one of my best friends, a French acrobat. Seven years ago we were street performers on the Ramblas of Barcelona. "The future of circus has forever changed," he tells me. We are the last generation of artists who knew circus pre-Cirque du Soleil – just as the generation before us was the last to know the great circus families of Europe in their full glory. The trunk has been severed from its roots.

Tonight: I am drinking Русский Стандарт Водка Platinum on St. Petersburg's White Nights. It is quarter to midnight on the longest day of the year and the sun hangs stubbornly on the horizon. I am the Artistic Director of Corteo, Cirque du Soleil's largest touring show. Two weeks ago, I had just joined the show in Japan where they had been playing to sold-out crowds in five cities over the last 18 months. Three nights ago I made the difficult decision to leave the company. The future circus, for my near future, anyway, lies elsewhere.

* * *

It is 1994 and you want to see something physically impossible; something that transports you to a foreign world running parallel to your cloistered, quotidian experience: a world perfumed by the music of gypsies, of the Far East. Foreign languages and otherworldly costumes swirl in movement. You feel like peeking behind an iron curtain into a world that has languished (perhaps, you have no way of knowing) in the 50-odd years of a Cold War that has just ended.

You want the sophistication that comes from seeing a show that is a work of art; one that others are clamoring to see. You want bragging rights of being the only kid on your block to have seen a show that others have only heard whispers about. "There is a new type of entertainment about – a new form of circus."

There are no animals or sawdust, which makes you feel like an adult, but it's under a tent, which makes you feel the wonder of being a child. The tent is air-conditioned and haze-filled as you enter from the summer heat. Characters break the fourth wall and move among you, inviting you into their world; playing *with* you instead of *for* you.

The lighting is inspired by operas and rock show, the live music borrows from opera, Indian modalities, masochistic Balkan passion, and seductive Latin rhythms. The acrobats are carved from stone, and their performance is more than a spectacle, it is, for you, a window into their life beyond the *piste*; a life of pain, delayed satisfaction, sacrifice, and never-ending training.

These people are the product of a romantic, nomadic ideal – one which was assumed wholeheartedly and with no remorse or backwards-looking. They are *you*, you'd like to think, or at least what you could have been if only you had known as a child what you now know you wanted to have been.

Three hours later, you have been filled like an empty vessel with a story that you understand only with your heart – your mind has been sent on vacation, and you are overwhelmed with the possibilities of the human spirit.

You return home, barely able to contain your excitement about what you have seen. You tell your friends at school and work about it, but your words cannot do it justice – "You just have to see it for yourself," you find yourself saying. "It's *like* circus, but different. Better."

But, it's too late. You realize that this band of roving nomad gods has already packed up and moved on to the next city. Perhaps you know someone there and you call them long-distance (remember that?) to let them know that they cannot miss this show. Perhaps you even write them a letter (remember those) with a postscript to check out this show. In any case you are happy that you had this chance; who knows when a show like this might be in the neighborhood again.

This was the world into which new circus was born; the fertile human soil into which it spread its roots and conquered the world. A number of circus companies worldwide came to prominence between 1992 and 2002 – Cirque Eloize, Les 7 Doigts de la Main, Circus OZ, Circus Cirkör, Cirque Plume, all different companies with vastly different histories, but their worldwide success unquestionably facilitated by that of Cirque du Soleil who, at the time, had only 3 touring shows and one resident show – not nearly enough to fill the hungry minds of those who first caught wind of this global artistic phenomenon.

* * *

It's not like finding a dancer to learn choreography or an actor to learn the role – these are just wines that take the form of their containers, the finer the performer, the finer the wine. An

acrobat is everything – the wine, the glass, the bottle which held it, even the barrel in which it was fermented.

An actor or a dancer dies and the role lives on, but a circus artist dies and their work dies with them; the walls of the GOP theater in Münster and the National Circus of Vietnam in Hanoi are heavy with black-and-white photographs of long-forgotten performers. Theirs is a fundamentally fleeting existence.

Yet the business has been infected with a poisonous indifference towards this ephemeral essence of the art. Trying to create a blockbuster show by mixing a troupe of world-class performers with a director of some notoriety is like trying to create an elegant wine by simply storing the finest crushed grapes with the most cultivated strain of yeast.

* * *

A piece of metal twists under tension and breaks; a collapsing rig sends an acrobat on a short flight to an unforgiving floor 10m below where he writhes in the pain of a million fractured bones and teeth.

"The future of circus," says variety-show producer Volker Brümer over coffee outside a Berlin café, "is intimacy; performances that reveal the essence of the performer as an individual."

The 24 year old contortionist sipping a martini across the table from me on the 57th floor of Tokyo's Park Hyatt explains his future in the circus: "I have a condo now. I get by on one gala a month."

Yes, the trunk has been severed from its roots.

* * *

Circus artists used to develop and grow their art for years. "It takes three years to train a scholar," goes a saying from the Chinese Opera, "and ten years to train an acrobat."

Our training involved living on the periphery of society, moving constantly from venue to venue, show to show – more at home on the road or on the stage than we ever could be in an apartment or house. Our knowledge of the art, of the audience, and of ourselves grew with each performance, arrival, and departure; knowledge which we absorbed only to reinvent and redisplayed on stage night after night.

15 years ago, no one came into this business to get rich, but today, the dreams of artists growing up in the era of Cirque du Soleil parallel those of aspiring models or would-be Hollywood actors.

Most professional circus artists between the ages of 18 and 30 now only experience nomadic lives from the windows of tour busses, chartered planes, and four-star hotels arranged by tour managers or casting directors.

* * *

Speaking frankly, pioneers of “new circus” only got rid of the animal acts and added choreographic detail and a thick veneer of theatricality; it seems strange to define a “new” art form only in terms of what it is not and of what has been added to it.

Consider: acting is an art form whereas theater and film are structures. At the turn of the last century when silent films came into existence no one hailed the emergence of a “new acting” or a “théâtre nouveau.” Neither did they proclaim the birth of “new film” upon the development of sound or color technology. No one suggests that the rebirth of 3D films renders previous films obsolete or out-of-fashion.

But so it was with circus.

* * *

It is no great leap to imagine the devastating effect “new circus” has had on those families and artists upon which an empire was built. Once those families and worldly artist-nomads had been eaten up, the industry preyed on young graduates of advanced circus schools. Now that demand for performers outstrips the number of new graduates, athletes with no artistic or performance experience now grace circus and variety stages across the world. Sometimes only a single week separates their final sports competition from their first artistic show.

* * *

“I do not consider what I do to be circus.”

Ironical-sounding words from famed circus director Daniele Finzi Pasca (Cirque Eloize’s Nomade, Rain, Nebbia, Cirque du Soleil’s Corteo), but he is dead serious.

“What interests me is not the form, but the underlying acrobatics that are present in all cultures whose rituals are very old. In some cultures, young boys go into the jungle to fight wild animals to prove that they are men. There is some of this same mythical quality in what an acrobat does.”

We are having a discussion over a pasta carbonara and sushi dinner at a chic St. Petersburg rooftop terrace. The World Cup is on. Argentina destroys Mexico on the projection screen behind us.

"Why are we surprised and why do we dream when we see an acrobat? This is a psychological question, perhaps."

I am struck by my own conviction that this mythical quality which audiences sense and about which Pasca speaks is tied more strongly to the depth of experience of yesterday's nomadic acrobats – those artists of yesteryear, who they truly were and the realities of the life which they were forced to lead – than to starry-eyed aspirations of fame shared by the newest generations of fresh-faced artist-athletes.

"New Circus broke the legs of circus."

So is there no hope for a gypsy future?

* * *

It is 1994 and you want to see something physically impossible; something that transports you to a foreign world running parallel to your cloistered, quotidian experience: a world perfumed by the music of gypsies, of the Far East.

Now, it is a different story. If you want a quick fix of humans doing the impossible, you can search YouTube for acrobatic stunts performed by suburban teens with a webcam and the guts to risk injury and death for 15 seconds of internet fame. iTunes has democratized and flattened the world music and remix scene.

Those languishing communist countries which bred your stoic acrobat-gladiators of 15 years ago have risen to become billionaire-spawning world leaders and in doing so, lost some of that Cold-War mystique that made us love the White Night lives of their tortured artists.

Worldwide there is a glut of contemporary circus companies, many of which have production values hovering around that of a community college production; they put the word "Cirque" in their name, and the poor audiences of South Bend, Indiana flock to them in droves. Their audiences might not be able to articulate the lower quality themselves, but they certainly don't feel the need to run home and tell all their friends about the experience they just had, any more than they would have if they went to see one of the three interchangeable shows of the 100+ year old train-driven spectacle of Barnum and Bailey.

Cirque do Soleil, a pioneer in the field for 25 years, now has 19 shows on all continents. Internet overexposure and fan sites of their shows and their artists in them have robbed them of their mystery. Artists keep blogs and have thousands of Facebook friends – no more sad-eyed mystique to charm people with their love of life.

The internet sets up expectations of jaded mega-fans who are hungry to knock down the next production that does not meet these expectations. Producers are all too obliging. Opinions fly worldwide with a click of a mouse. "One cannot lead," to paraphrase former UK Prime Minister

Clement Atlee, "who is afraid to fail." Circus shows are mired in a perennial muck of inevitability – skippable commodities rather than indisposable luxuries.

"A victim of its own success" is the mantra of those critics who care, but I have to disagree. It, like everything else that rises like a meteor only to stall and sputter ten years out, is a victim of its own failure: a failure to kill its babies in order to nurture its future sages.

Contemporary circus is not beyond saving, but it faces difficult decisions about what it is today, how it began, and how it wants to survive.

* * *

It is 2:30 AM on June 22nd in Russia and the sun is rising. My bottle of Русский Стандарт Водка Platinum runs dangerously low, we are in the midst of the greatest financial crisis in 80 years, and in five months I will be out of a job. Thank God.

Circus at its best is an oxymoron – placing what is genuine and real onstage before a paying audience. Its machinery is its acrobats and their collective experience is its only fuel – the essence of what they put before you night after night until their last, anonymous, dying breath.

If today's world is a cloak of artificial knowledge which deadens our drive to seek out the archaic and unknowable, why shouldn't it be philosophical acrobats who lift up the corner of that veil and venture forth to lose themselves in the catacombs of homeless, visceral bliss? Their lives are already dedicated to self-reliance, self-denial, and self-knowledge, so why not put themselves to the test in the real world as onstage? Their own future depends on re-exploring and resurrecting a whole world at risk of being forgotten – for the future of circus itself is to be found in the very stories they will tell.