

Highflying meets highbrow

PRAGUE

A Czech festival shows that circuses can be much more than merely fun

BY LAURA CAPPELLE

This city has a well-documented taste for the surreal. It is, after all, the home of Franz Kafka and the artist David Cerny, whose absurdist sculptures, dotted around town, include babies crawling vertically on a tower.

It should come as no surprise, then, that a festival of contemporary circus — complete with wacky characters and reality-bending tricks — has become one of Prague's top cultural events.

Started in 2004, Letni Letna (a name combining the Czech word for "summer" with the name of the park where most performances take place) has grown steadily and drew 45,000 visitors last year. This summer, a bright lineup of Czech and international companies pitched their tents for the festival's 15th edition and gave a snapshot of a thriving genre.

Traditional circuses, with their succession of unrelated, upbeat acts, were considered lowbrow entertainment, but since the 1980s, companies like Cirque du Soleil and Cirque Eloize have been combining big-top spectacle with modern dramaturgy. Most of the productions at Letni Letna featured shifting moods and narratives; virtuosity was subsumed into larger theatrical visions.

It is a significant development for the performing arts as a whole, because, as Letni Letna's family-heavy crowds attested, circus still often acts as a gateway to theater and dance for younger audiences. In Letna Park, on a hill not

far from Prague Castle, everything was designed to draw them in. Access to the festival grounds and some performances was free; circus workshops and other activities fostered a lively atmosphere during the day.

And in the tents, the productions on display could rival much of the physical theater performed these days on proscenium stages. This year, Letni Letna welcomed a large contingent of companies from France, a country that has actively promoted its circus innovators. Three of them — Bêtes de Foire, Cirque Inextremiste and Akoreakro — could not have been more different in scale and tone, and yet each subverted expectations in delightful ways.

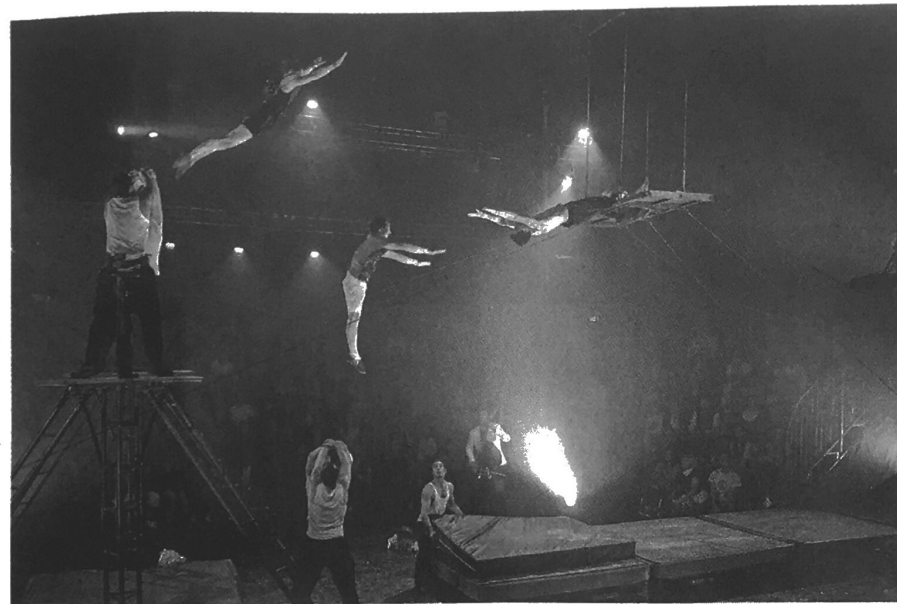
Bêtes de Foire's show, "Petit théâtre de gestes" ("Small Gesture Theater"), created by Laurent Cabrol and Elsa De Witte, is chamber circus: Its tiny tent accommodates just 140 spectators, shown to their seats by the duo themselves. The performance has the feel of a silent film: Ms. De Witte, a trained seamstress, runs what looks like an old-fashioned workshop from behind her sewing machine, while Mr. Cabrol clowns and juggles to her cues.

Both are veteran performers, and "Petit théâtre de gestes" relies on the characters they create to set up an intimate atmosphere. The comedy is gentle and self-deprecating, with little nods to circus traditions. Their poodle, Sokha, plays an unlikely circus animal too lazy to follow instructions, and puppets with wiry bodies and expressive painted faces get their own acrobatic displays.

Cirque Inextremiste's sense of humor is far less politically correct. "Extension," created in 2014, brings gas tanks and an excavator to the stage, and revolves around the revenge of a paraplegic performer, the charismatic Rémi Lecocq. His wheelchair is stolen by the two other performers at the start of the show, leaving him to hop around in a bucket. ("Extrémités," Cirque Inextremiste's previous production, subjected Mr. Lecocq to similar jokes.)

Mr. Lecocq returns with the excavator to wreak havoc on the thieves' balancing acts, performed with wooden planks positioned on the gas tanks. When the machine hauls one of the planks, and the two men, high up in the air and then spins them around, their devil-may-care nonchalance is as impressive as the feat of equilibrium.

With Mr. Lecocq's fully realized character at the wheel, Cirque Inextremiste also does inclusiveness without the rev-



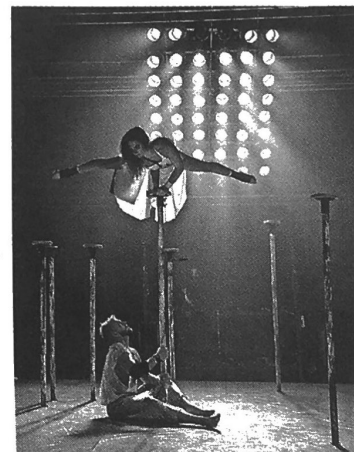
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MILAN JAROS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Clockwise from top: Akoreakro presenting "Dans ton coeur"; members of Losers Cirque Company in "Vzduchem"; and Elsa De Witte and Laurent Cabrol of Bêtes de Foire before the start of "Petit théâtre de gestes."

erence so often reserved for disabled performers. Even after the curtain calls, this sardonic show can't resist one more uncomfortable joke: He reappears in his wheelchair as the janitor tasked with cleaning up confetti, and (jovially) makes the children in the audience feel guilty enough to join him.

Akoreakro, which presented "Dans ton coeur" ("In Your Heart"), seems like a far more traditional circus troupe by comparison. It specializes in acrobatics, including trapeze acts, which require a larger cast. Unlike other companies at the festival, it also chose to bring in a theater director, Pierre Guillois, to shape this new production's narrative.



"Dans ton coeur" loosely follows two factory workers who fall in love in a production line scene akin to the one in Charlie Chaplin's "Modern Times." Their domestic life is set up in an entertaining section in which Claire Aldaya (the only woman in the cast) performs aerial tricks around the house; she has her heart broken when her partner cheats on her with a drag queen. (Who knew a trapeze could double as a sex swing?)

Mr. Guillois and Akoreakro do well to

integrate impressive feats into individual scenes, and they can rely on a live band for musical support throughout, but "Dans ton coeur" is a reminder that circus doesn't necessarily lend itself to realistic story lines. The characters have little depth, and their ultimate reconciliation is far less interesting than the final, virtuosic trapeze display. Ms. Aldaya also has to contend with scenes in which she is chased by menacing men. While she ultimately challenges them and is victorious, that's not exactly consistent with the character that's been set up.

Since its inception, Letni Letna has also encouraged the development of contemporary circus in the Czech Republic, a country with a long mime tradition: Jean-Gaspard Debureau, the 19th-century mime who performed under the name Baptiste and was a key figure in Marcel Carné's film "Children of Paradise," was born in Bohemia (now Czech territory). Jiri Turek, Letni Letna's founder and director, is himself a former mime artist. Through the event, he has nurtured a number of young Czech companies that now tour abroad, including La Putyka (not present at the festival this year) and Losers Cirque Company.

Losers Cirque Company is already a mature ensemble. The show it presented, "Vzduchem" ("Air"), was among the most poetic offerings, blending circus with contemporary dance. Its central character entertains dreams of flying, spurred on by an encounter with a quartet of birdlike performers. With vertical metal bars and a large net, they created a wistful, shifting landscape.

Czech talent also populated the Children's Stage, a tent dedicated to the youngest audience members. Bratri v tricku (the Trick Brothers), a duo formed in 2009, brought offbeat energy to a juggling show, "Praseci cirkus" ("Pigs' Circus"), that featured flying pigs and pink flared pants.

It was, like much of the contemporary circus at Letni Letna, character-driven and compelling beyond the virtuosity on display. This takes some of the pressure off the performers: Even if a trick goes wrong (and some did, inevitably, over the weekend I was there), it's not the end of the performance.

On the contrary, the magic that happens when circus skills and dramaturgy blend is as potent as any performance genre. Contemporary circus is neither lowbrow nor highbrow. It's merely good theater, and if children flock to it, so much the better.