



Defying death to swing, swoop and dance on air

Danger is no stranger when you're a Cirque du Soleil aerial contortionist, writes **John Bailey**.

MASHA Terentieva's make-up table is a mess. The 21-year-old Cirque du Soleil performer apologises for the countless photos, clothes, accessories and newspaper clippings strewn around her workspace, in contrast to the clean surfaces and neatly arranged pinboards of most of her fellows. But the organic chaos of her personal space is a surprise in a world so focused on detail and exactness.

Cirque du Soleil's image is that of a well-oiled machine composed of the finest parts. Anyone who has caught a show might be startled to find that the performers do their own make-up. "At first it took me like 2½ hours," Terentieva says. She's got it down to 40 minutes now, but gives herself a full hour, "because I like to take my time."

That hour at the make-up table is also when the performers mentally prepare for the show. Most listen to music through headphones. Terentieva's tastes range from classical to French chansons to "really terrible music . . . like '90s rave hits".

With no encouragement, she begins dancing French tektonik style and laughs at its cheesiness. In rehearsal, she's just as spontaneous. Spinning from an aerial rig connected to another artist, she squeals in delight. But when the practice is over, she hears a sharp call. "You both have to be secure before you unhook!" cries her dance captain after she detaches her harness prematurely.

"I'm sorry!" she responds.

Cirque du Soleil is an international juggernaut, blending high-end spectacle and physical perfectionism, plucking the most promising performers from around the globe to create shows that will translate into any culture. Detractors see it as the Starbucks of entertainment, eschewing local tradition for a more globalised, franchised mode of entertainment. Others praise its revitalisation of the ailing

form of circus, forgoing the use and abuse of animals and drawing together culturally divergent circus styles in a slick, accessible way.

In any case, Cirque du Soleil has made its Quebecer founder and 95 per cent owner, Guy Laliberte, a billionaire. It's no wonder the brand's image is carefully managed. Last week in Las Vegas, the company issued a formal apology after celebrity magician Criss Angel launched an on-stage tirade against audience member and notoriously bitchy gossip blogger Perez Hilton.

It can be unnerving to be allowed a peek through the curtain, to see what really goes on behind the manned gates and staff-only signage of Cirque du Soleil's *Dralion* production. Beyond the glamour of the big top, the Cirque camp operates with the precision of a full-scale military operation. The 65 performers are supported by another 80 touring staff and about 100 employed locals.

Seventy shipping containers form a maze crowded with physio and massage tents, portable administration offices and a marquee mess hut serviced by five chefs. A whiteboard lists the day's training schedule and performers can be spotted catching some shut-eye under trampolines or bundled on couches.

Circus is a dangerous business. The performers' entrance to the main stage is lined with medical equipment — a defibrillator, oxygen tank, first-aid boxes. But injuries are the one topic that Terentieva won't discuss. The Russian-Canadian is an aerial hooper, performing contortion feats high above the hard stage below. No net. No safety gear.

"Everyone gets injured, but we don't talk about it," she says. "It's just so disappointing. It sucks so bad to be injured."

It's the day after *Dralion*'s 10-year anniversary of continuous touring. "And I've only been here four months," laughs Terentieva.

Her accent is a mixture of Russian, French and English — she speaks all three languages fluently.

Her story isn't the cliché of running away to join the circus — her father was a clown in Cirque du Soleil's show, *Alegria*, and after leaving Russia when she was 12, her family toured the world with the show for three years. She wasn't a part of the production but scored some training from Mongolian contortionists. After returning to Canada, she finished high school and moved to Montreal on her own to study at the city's acclaimed circus school, across the street from Cirque du Soleil's head office.

Given her family connection to circus, it's odd that her father was opposed to her career hopes. "At the start, he was against me going to circus school. Which made me want to do it even more, right?" she says.

But those teenage years on the circus trail had left their imprint. "I was missing it. I wanted to travel!"

Touring, of course, takes its toll: "When you're on tour it's a bit of a social vacuum. You make friends outside and then you're probably never going to see them again."

Dancing in a hoop, dangling dangerously high, is a thrill she wouldn't trade for anything, though. "I like to be in the air, I like to fly around, that's what I do. I like to scare the audience."

Perhaps Terentieva is a wild card in Cirque du Soleil's carefully prepared deck. While warming up for her aerial hoop act, she leaps from the stage, planting her headphones on my noggin so I can hear the David Guetta dance hit that she has been obsessing about recently. She might be part of the most successful entertainment machine in recent history, but she's still a 21-year-old who likes to dance. Try to stop her.

Dralion is playing until June 14 at Grand Chapiteau, 435-507 Docklands Drive. \$55-\$119. Phone 1300 130 300.



Sunday Age
Sunday 26/4/2009
Page: 21
Section: General News
Region: Melbourne Circulation: 227,100
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 381.68 sq.cms.
Published: -----S

Index: 1.3
Brief: CIRQUE
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**High-flying
dancing queen
Masha
Terentieva.**

PICTURE: PAT SCALA