

## Artistic Director Andrew Watson

by Robert W. Cabell



Sitting across from Andrew Watson, the artistic director of Cirque du Soleil, you are struck by a gentle, boyish charm mixed with the easy and languid movements of a practiced athlete, someone completely at ease with himself, the world around him, and totally in love with what he does. How did Andrew Watson, who grew up in the rolling countryside of Wales, become artistic director of Cirque du Soleil?

"My mother would bring me to London or Bristol to see theatre, dance, the symphony; I loved anything in the arts. I even sang in a little band with my friends called 'Blind Alley' back in Wales when I was 15. Then, after leaving school as fast as I could at 16, I went to work with a tree doctor. I couldn't think of anything better

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than to get paid to climb trees. Recently I found these old pictures of me as a kid hanging upside down in the air from a tree in the same position that I spent seven years of my professional life.

I had broken my arm in a motorbike accident and decided I better start being serious with my life so I got on my motorbike and said, 'Bye, mom!' I went to London and got a job in an office for three years. I met a friend there who was a fire-eater; he showed me how to do it, and I went out busking in the streets, eating fire. I was 24, working in an office and bored when I noticed an advertisement in *The Stage* for Britain's First Circus Group. I'd never seen a circus before in my life. So, I went to the audition; as soon as I walked in and saw all the things everyone was doing, I knew I wanted to do that! I went to the director Jerry Couttle and said, 'I'd really like to do this.' He said, 'What can you do?' I said, 'Eat fire.' He replied, 'I've got hundreds of those, what else can you do?' I said, 'Nothing.' he said, 'Go away!' But I went back three times because I knew, I knew, I just knew. I said, 'I know I can do this if you just give me a chance.' Jerry wasn't from a circus background either, so he stared at me and said, 'OK, go and get a contract.'

I worked for 30 pounds a week, living in a bunk wagon, putting the tent up and down manually, driving the trucks, and doing the show. That was my apprenticeship in the circus. I was lucky

enough to find a fabulous teacher, Basil Schultz, who gave me an appreciation not just of acrobatics and aerial work, but performance in general. Years later, my partner and I were spotted by Guy Caron, the then artistic director of Cirque du Soleil. We worked with *Le Cirque* on the 1987-88 tour, the first show that came to New York City. I enjoyed being part of that show, doing all the elements: the dance, mask, everything you don't normally get to learn. At Cirque, under Gilles Ste-Croix, the director of creation, I saw what an artistic director does. I told Gilles I would like to do that sort of thing one day.

After the tour, I went off with my partner and did the act in Germany and then decided I didn't want to do trapeze anymore. When I called Gilles, he had something for me. I started casting for *Saltimbanco* and building acts. I enjoyed doing that enormously. That's when the Steban twins [*Saltimbanco's* contortionists] came to see me. I was just blown away by their enthusiasm for life and their reasons for wanting to make an act. I knew that all I ever needed to make a great act was sitting there in front of me. I'm still extremely proud of it. Another favorite is Isabelle, the girl on the red swags. When it works, that's a beautiful feeling. The circus is one of the only forms of art where the cast is so diverse, coming together from all over the world. Cirque du Soleil capitalizes on these unique individuals to make people dream." ■

