



AND MYSTERY





In an empty US Airways Center, during an afternoon rehearsal for the opening night of the Phoenix leg of Cirque du Soleil's "Dralion" tour, 10 acrobats rehearse their routines for the popular hoop diving act of the show, where one acrobat after another dives like an arrow through small wooden hoops, piled up like the five Olympic rings stretched to their limit.

But there's something in the stance of the third acrobat from the left, post hoop-leap, that signals an injury or pain to Colleen Creighton, performance medicine specialist for Cirque.

"Are you alright?" she calls to the young Chinese man, who silently nods "Yes."

"Liar," Creighton mutters under her breath, shaking her head.

After four years of overseeing

the onsite therapy clinics for various Cirque du Soleil touring shows, Creighton has developed a keen eye for spotting injuries, which most of the traveling circus troupes' members tend to hide. Do the performers ever lie about their injuries in order to ensure, in the grandest show business tradition, that the show must go on?

"Oh, all of them," she says, with a laugh. "Every day of their lives."

Painful truths

"We work with people who all want to come back to work," Creighton explains. "So if they think telling us the truth is going to keep them off stage, then they'll lie to us. It's the nature of the beast."

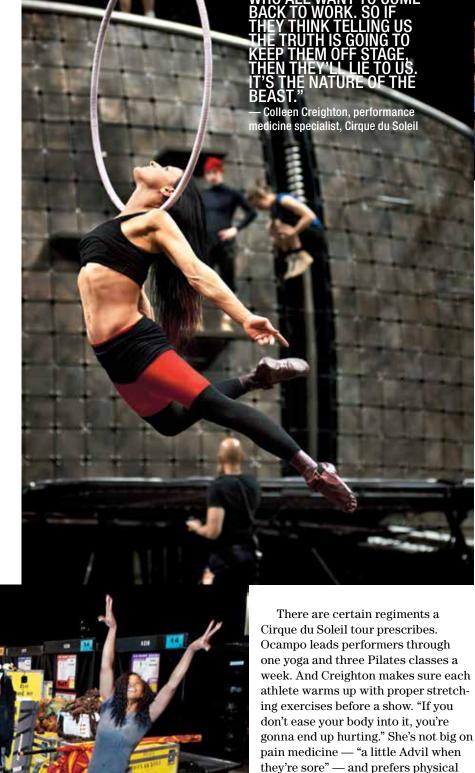
While most mere mortals look at Cirque du Soleil performers as masters of physical strength and grace, many of the performers in today's premier circus are in fact second-acters; gymnasts, trampolinists, and tumblers who may, in fact, be beyond the prime of their careers — average age of the athletes is 32 — but are still looking for ways to continue performing.

"A lot of these people come from competitive sports, but they're no longer in competitive sports," says Michael Ocampo, 40, who himself worked for 10 years as an acrobat with Cirque Du Soleil before switching, after experiencing career-threatening back pain nine years ago, to acrobatic coach. "You're doing what you've done all your life, acrobatics. But you're doing it to make other people feel good for a few hours."

Defying age

So how do these slightly-past-theirprime acrobats manage to deal with the pain of performing superhuman feats, night after night?

To some extent, they just accept it. "Get over it!," Ocampo says. "If you have an injury, if you sprain your ankle, that's different. We have therapists and strength and conditioning clinicians who can make sure the artists keep in shape for performances. But if you have soreness or stiffness, it's usually like, 'That's nice. Now, get out there and train!"



therapy. "In every city we go to, we hire a massage therapist, which helps."

Find your comfort zone

But mostly, the performers, who've each shown a dedication to continue working their bodies to the max, are encouraged to follow whatever works



for them. "They train so much, and they know their bodies and their acrobatics so well, that injuries are actually super rare," says Ocampo.

For Lorant Markocsany, 27, a Hungarian acrobat who performs in a nightly aerial ballet that's a centerpiece of the show and also serves as a strength and conditioning coach for the troupe, what works best is a daily balance of strenuous exercise and common sense precautions.

"I work out a lot, but I also do a lot of stretching and try to sleep seven to eight hours a night," says Markocsany, who also sticks to a healthy diet of meats, rice, and salads and avoids sugar, save for the occasional energy boost.

On tour, Markocsany devotes at least two hours per day to training for his act, but says that doesn't always provide the best overall workout. "You kind of do the same thing all the time in the show. So at home, it's good to work on different movements."

Optimum performance

A typical tour can be grueling — six to 10 shows a week, often for 10 weeks in a row. But even on vacations, the performers are advised not to rest too much.

"Their bodies are so conditioned to the schedule that we're on, that any change in that schedule makes a big difference," says Creighton. Adds Ocampo, "If you do nothing, it's really hard to come back."

From a group of 20 street performers at its beginnings in 1984, Cirque du Soleil is a major Quebec-based organization providing high-quality artistic entertainment. The coÜany has 5,000 eÜloyees, including more than 1,300 artists. More facts:

Cirque du Soleil's Montreal headquarters is home to close to 2,000 employees.

More than **100 types** of occupations can be found at Cirque du Soleil.

The average age of employees is 37.

The company's employees and artists represent close to 50 nationalities and speak 25 different languages.

More than 100 million spectators have seen a Cirque du Soleil show since 1984.

Nearly 15 million people attended a Cirque du Soleil show in 2012.

Source: Cirque du Soleil



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