

FROM CIRQUE GLOBAL TO LOCAL CIRCUS: THE QUEBEC PROFESSIONAL CIRCUS SCENE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC¹

LOUIS PATRICK LEROUX
Concordia University

Given the success of its artistic and commercial models, the reach of Quebec's circus has extended across continents to the point that it is now nearly impossible to imagine it being restricted to Quebec alone. However, COVID-19 took its toll on what had previously been an assertive and expansionist development. The pandemic brought circus artists home to reflect and reinvest in circus practice and involvement in Quebec, usually outside of institutional structures and without a contract. The Quebec circus's global reach and aspirations were confronted with the brutal economic reality of a world without touring as circus refocused locally, and artists and institutions were forced to reconsider the existing model. This article draws on an extensive collection of data concerning all circus activity (virtual, hybrid and *in situ*) compiled during the two years COVID-19 most affected Quebec's society. It offers a record and analysis of the impact the beginning of the pandemic had on the development of contemporary circus in Quebec and what new trends we might expect over the coming years as a result of this disruption.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, resilience, adaptation, Survey of cultural events

En raison du succès de ses modèles artistiques et commerciaux, le cirque québécois a étendu sa portée à travers les continents, au point qu'il est aujourd'hui presque impossible de l'imaginer limité au Québec seul. Cependant, la COVID-19 a eu des

1. A slightly different, shorter, French version of this article is forthcoming in *Réagir, créer, persévérer. La culture québécoise au temps de la pandémie. Réaction, adaptation, normalisation, résistance et hybridation* ("Quebec Culture in the Time of the Pandemic: Reaction, Adaptation, Standardization, Resistance and Hybridization"), edited by Hervé Guay, Louis Patrick Leroux and Sandria Bouliane and published in 2024 by the Presses de l'Université de Montréal. This version of the article was translated by Anna Vigeland, with revisions and additional writings in English added by the author.

Contact: Louis Patrick Leroux <patrick.leroux@concordia.ca>

répercussions sur ce qui avait été précédemment un développement assertif et expansionniste. La pandémie a ramené les artistes de cirque chez eux pour réfléchir et réinvestir dans la pratique circassienne et l'engagement au Québec, généralement en dehors des structures institutionnelles et sans contrat. La portée mondiale et les aspirations du cirque québécois ont été confrontées à la réalité économique brutale d'un monde sans tournée, alors que le cirque recentrait ses activités localement, obligeant artistes et institutions à reconsidérer le modèle existant. Cet article s'appuie sur une collecte de donnée méthodique concernant toutes les activités circassiennes (virtuelles, hybrides et *in situ*) compilées pendant les deux années où la COVID-19 a le plus affecté la société québécoise. Il offre un compte rendu et une analyse de l'impact du début de la pandémie sur le développement du cirque contemporain au Québec, ainsi que les nouvelles tendances que l'on pourrait anticiper au cours des prochaines années en raison de cette perturbation.

Mots clés: COVID-19, Québec circus, Cirque du Soleil, En piste, cirque québécois, pandémie, résilience, Sondage sur les événements culturels

QUEBEC circus offers a dialectic that is not far from a paradox in that it can be both global and local, accessible and experimental, professional and social. Thanks to the success of its artistic and commercial models, its reach has extended across continents to the point that it is nearly impossible to imagine it being restricted to Quebec alone. However, COVID-19 took its toll on what had previously been an assertive and expansionist development. The pandemic brought circus artists home to reflect and reinvest in circus practice and involvement in Quebec, usually outside of institutional structures and without a contract. The Quebec circus's global reach and aspirations (Jacob, 2016; Leroux, 2016) were confronted with the brutal economic reality of a world without touring as circus refocused locally, and artists and institutions were forced to reconsider the existing model.

Methodology and source information

This article draws on data pertaining to circus activity (virtual, hybrid and *in situ*) that was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic by a team of dedicated research assistants at Concordia University (Anna Vigeland, Mathilde Perahia and Joe Culpepper) working under my supervision, as well as Anne-Philippe Beaulieu and Charlotte Moffet, both research assistants at the Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la littérature et la culture au Québec (CRILCQ). I have sought to offer both an overview of circus activity from March 2020 to March 2022 (which marked the first workplace and theatre closures, as well as the lifting of the last ones remaining in Quebec) and an analysis of the impact such a complicated and ultimately creative period has brought to our understanding of the Quebec circus scene.

While this article focuses on the Quebec circus, the larger research project was prompted by the sudden closures of Quebec universities and public spaces on 13 March 2020, as well as a desire to document the unexpected. The local coordinators of the CRILCQ at both Université du Québec à Montréal and Université de Montréal asked their research assistants to prepare to work from home for the upcoming weeks and thought that it might be an opportune moment to document the following events and their impact on Quebec's culture and society. Three active CRILCQ members—Hervé Guay (Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières), Louis Patrick Leroux (Concordia University) and Sandria Bouliane (Université Laval)—were asked to take scientific leadership of the project, then titled *Recensement des initiatives culturelles pour contourner l'isolement social causé par la COVID-19* ("Census of cultural initiatives to counter social isolation due to COVID-19"). What was expected to be a short-term project evolved with the pandemic's expanse and the ever-changing sociopolitical responses to the various waves of SARS-COV-2 infections. Ad-hoc documentation would not suffice, and a more rigorous referencing system needed to be implemented. We expanded our reach from the performing arts and literature to include how festivals, drag shows and cinema were faring during the first two years of the pandemic. As the project progressed, its documentary strategy and methodology were inspired by the principle of the participatory archive (Alaoui, 2021), in which both specialists and community members pool their knowledge and experiences. For instance, we reached out to professional associations such as En Piste and l'Association québécoise de l'industrie du disque, du spectacle et de la vidéo, among others, to provide and validate information (Guay, Leroux and Bouliane, 2024). After the first year of collating and documenting cultural initiatives, a scholarly conference was held online, and the data was then opened up to academic and artistic communities for consultation and analysis. The project evolved into the *Recensement des initiatives culturelles mises en œuvre au temps de la COVID-19* ("Census of cultural initiatives instigated during COVID-19"), and a lengthy edited collection on the topic is forthcoming from the Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

In early fall 2022, when we stopped gathering data on pandemic-related performances and cultural initiatives, we had 2,723 events and initiatives that had occurred in Quebec involving 11,279 individuals and 2,310 companies and collectives (Moffet, 2024). Each event has its own detailed file with dates and associated references (articles, press releases, Facebook posts and involved artists). Much effort went into standardizing the files, cross-referencing them and filling in as many "blanks" as we could given the speed and informality with which spontaneous events were announced over private and semi-private networks, especially with contemporary circus artists gaining much autonomy and working outside of institutional contexts. We tabulated over 175 circus initiatives that

informed this analysis. The files are available as open source at recensement.cirilq.org for any researchers or industry professionals seeking permission to access them or wishing to contribute any missing information. This article also draws on much confirmed “insider knowledge,” given how closely its author and research assistants have been aligned with the circus scene.

An inventory of cultural activities that have taken place during the pandemic enabled us to see the extent of networking activities animating a field comprised of actors who are unaccustomed to waiting or standing still. The effects of the pandemic on Quebec’s circus communities varied widely, as we will see. Nevertheless, they revealed the extent to which this once financially autonomous ecosystem received scant governmental support and became vulnerable to economic and social upheaval. We know that the arts sector was the second-most economically impacted by the pandemic (Laurin, 2020), and the circus’s reliance on ticket sales and autonomous revenues put it in a particularly vulnerable place.

Early tremors

The early tremors of the pandemic were felt in the Quebec circus milieu as early as 24 January 2020 with the cancellation of performances of Cirque du Soleil’s Chinese show, *绮幻之境 – THE LAND OF FANTASY*, in Hangzhou. Next came a succession of cancellations and a wave of adaptations as the virus spread, and Quebec-based productions were forced to respond to rapidly changing touring conditions. The phenomena some of these shows experienced in China were soon felt as a warning of what was to come worldwide.

With the declaration of a public health state of emergency in Quebec starting on 13 March 2020, and alongside the closure of all performance venues, circus practice in Quebec came to a sudden halt. Meanwhile, the interruption of touring productions forced hundreds of artists to return to Quebec. No one had any idea how long this pause would last or what would come of it.

Over the past thirty years, thanks to many opportunities to train, work and connect with others in the field, Montreal has become a significant hub for contemporary circus artists. As the circus capital of North America, the city is home to major touring companies including Cirque du Soleil, The 7 Fingers, Cirque Éloize and some thirty smaller companies, as well as the TOHU (the only permanent venue dedicated to circus arts in North America), the *Montréal Complètement Cirque* festival, the National Circus School of Montreal (*l’École nationale de cirque de Montréal*), the Verdun Circus School (*l’École de cirque de Verdun*) and other organizations. Just before the pandemic, the impact of circus on Montreal’s economy exceeded one billion dollars in annual direct revenue, thanks in large part to income generated by shows performed abroad.

To be a circus professional, generally speaking, is to be on the move: to be on tour, to be on the road, to be heading from one place to another. During the first months of the pandemic, many performers stayed in Las Vegas, and others returned to their families around the world. However, for the first time, a significant number of circus community members found themselves in one place, albeit isolated from one another. Montreal became home again to circus workers eager to get back to their active lives, and the repatriation of so many artists became a reminder of the potential for action by individuals who were typically roaming the planet and now suddenly found themselves in the same city.

Shock followed by recovery

During the first few weeks, circus artists, like the rest of society, were in a state of shock. What followed—for example, heightened activity on social networks as people checked to see who had come back from touring abroad—suggested a reactive mindset. Some performers found themselves stuck in locations far from their homes. Social media networks played an essential role in reminding circus artists of the community’s closely-knit ties.

Performances showcasing increasing inventiveness, filmed in living rooms, kitchens and balconies, were soon shared on Instagram, YouTube, Vimeo and other platforms. Some people posted video montages connecting the feats of circus performers who were separated from one another. There was a clamouring urge toward external expression in response to the lockdown. Along these lines, we saw new projects emerge, like the Drôladon company’s *Les Balcon-finé-e-s*, a street performance for spectators watching from the balconies of senior care facilities. Other projects followed in the footsteps of singer-songwriter Martha Wainwright’s Montreal balcony singalongs, including the En Piste-led #BalconyCircus for #WorldCircusDay movement (prompted on 18 April 2020), which featured circus artists performing on their balconies and porches. On the other hand, for some, the crisis led to more intimate presentations of circus feats; for example, contortionist and juggler Natasha Patterson and acrobat and video artist Francisco Cruz co-created a short film that renewed the art of contact juggling, providing a singular and personal look at not only the manipulation of juggling balls but also the manipulation of the body while restricted in an all-too-small space. The piece was featured in *Yana* magazine, in which it was billed as a celebration of “emotional juggling”—an apt description of many people’s states of mind at the time.

For some artists, the first few weeks of the “great lockdown” were a time of rest and reflection. Vincent Jutras and Éline Guélat explored new forms with *La*

Croustade, their tandem-based mixing of acrobatics and absurdist comedy. As the weeks passed, their explorations led to *Pouding chômeur*, a twelve-episode web series.

The entire world seemed to shrink in the winter and spring of 2020. The Canadian border closed on 16 March 2020, and all indoor and outdoor gatherings were banned in Quebec on 21 March 2020—a ban that would not be lifted until 22 June, when public gatherings were allowed and theatres reopened with a maximum capacity of . . . fifty people. Public spaces were open again, albeit tightly restricted and controlled. Time was moving slowly for circus artists. Online training, yoga and performances were approached by En Piste in an effort to break the solitude. Cinquantique offered “stay-at-home cocktails” to share performances and discussions.

Free live performances were broadcast online, as were impromptu cabarets. Despite some clear coping mechanisms that could be observed through “media marathoning” (Perks, 2018), the accumulation of “false intimacies” and “anti-cathartic” experiences in online digital performances (Meerzon, 2021) led to digital fatigue and a certain level of despondency in the milieu, as we will see later.

In April 2020, artists from Cirque Alfonse and Le Patin Libre, eager to bring life and a bit of joy to Montreal’s Hochelaga neighbourhood, began to regularly offer unannounced, roving performances in their neighbourhood’s alleyways, each with developed and distinct themes. Their approach followed public health regulations, as they did not stop in the alleys where they performed and never informed the public of their arrival. Performing under the name *Bonheur mobile* (“Mobile Happiness”), the artists took back to the streets in July, setting the tone for the Montréal *Complètement Presque Cirque* festival—*Complètement* (“completely”) having been struck out and replaced by *Presque* (“almost”), which was the festival organizers’ way of acknowledging that the 2020 edition of the event would not be quite the same.

The international festival could not host foreign shows in 2020 and 2021, with borders closed and performance venues unable to accommodate sufficient numbers of spectators. An “Almost Circus” (*Presque Cirque*) program was presented, which drew from artist initiatives like the *Bonheur mobile* roving shows and other outdoor pop-up performances designed to work around large gatherings. Experimental theatre director Brigitte Poupart wrote and directed an original circus-based television series for ARTV, which was filmed on many of the festival’s familiar outdoor performance sites along Saint-Denis Street. The necessary focus on local and national talent due to the difficulty of international travel and changing public health rules was a worldwide phenomenon that could also be observed in other festivals (Rentscheler and Lee, 2021), but its effect on the Quebec circus scene was to bolster alternative and often previously neglected forms of circus.

The first summer of the pandemic led artists and presenters to create by way of adapting, all the while without real recovery yet in sight. Cirque Hors Piste, an organization dedicated to offering circus-based social intervention programs for members of marginalized and at-risk communities, performed the touring outdoor performance *Famille Cirkonstance*.² Meanwhile, the PCU (*Performance circassienne d'urgence*³) performed physically distanced outdoor shows for isolated senior populations in residential and long-term care centres (referred to in Quebec by the acronym CHSLD).

Large-scale circus shows did not fit into the intimate settings of the half-empty theatres and tents that emerged in response to the pandemic. The community responded by exploring short forms, duos, trios and other small configurations. Some gatherings blurred the boundaries between artists and spectators, bringing small groups together through isolated COVID-19 “bubbles” for several days and exploring the possibility of collective happenings. It was this type of gathering that gave rise to *Branché*, a magical moment of communion between the circus and the forest, between individual prowess and collective accomplishment, led by Montreal’s Barcode Theatre and the Acting for Climate Montreal group.

Branché, which was filmed and later broadcast on YouTube, showcased a sense of playfulness and hope for greater harmony and sharing in the world. It was later replicated and performed at the *Montréal Complètement Cirque* festival in the summer of 2021, and then on tour. But it was during the low point of the summer of 2020 that the project came to be, exploring and raising awareness around issues related to sustainable development in an energy-intensive and jet-setting professional world dependent on air travel and replete with shows on luxury cruise ships—an industry whose main economic heartbeat rests in the desert city of all excess, Las Vegas. Some performers decided to stop going on

2. Cirque Hors Piste is one of the few organizations to have maintained its in-person activities (albeit largely adapted to the realities of the pandemic), offering physically distanced hot meals and training in a familiar venue adapted to practicing and performing for members of vulnerable populations. A more extensive consideration of the pandemic’s impact on Cirque Hors Piste’s activities can be found in Perahia, Rivard and Leroux, “Cirque Hors Piste à l’ère COVID-19 : incubateur de nouvelles pratiques sociales et artistiques,” also published in this issue of *Circus: Arts, Life and Sciences*.

3. PCU is short for *Performance circassienne d'urgence*, which translates roughly to “Emergency Circus Performance”—this is a play on the PCU or *Prestation canadienne d'urgence* (the *Canada Emergency Response Benefit* or CERB), the financial support program offered by the federal government in 2020 for qualifying Canadians whose jobs or finances were affected by COVID-19. The overwhelming majority of circus workers, as reported by surveys conducted by *En Piste*, were relying on the PCU at the time of *Performance circassienne d'urgence*’s performances, thus the tongue-in-cheek aspect of the collective’s name.

the road, and just as contracts were being offered again, opted instead to try to live off their art locally.

The summer of 2020 allowed some artists to catch their breath, start to get back in shape, see each other in person once again, practice their art and reconsider the power dynamics within and surrounding the field of circus. The artist and the collective were at the center of these re-examinations. Such reflections were sparked during a period when large companies were weakened, and others were in a state of waiting for seemingly impossible viable options. Faced with the same mandated pause as companies and presenters, individual performers began creating and exploring new possibilities.

On 3 August 2020, with 250 spectators newly allowed in performance venues and an anticipated return to the stage for trimmed-down productions, presenters began to announce dynamic lineups. The productions they promoted were adapted to the realities of the pandemic and highly developed, suggesting a deep and thorough creative process. The renewal of the art form drawn out by the pandemic led to accomplished productions. Some works suggested a kind of “artification” reflective of what has often been observed in contemporary circus in France—that is to say, an awareness and position in favour of artistic discourse rather than one based solely on commercial imperatives.

On 1 October 2020, the second wave of COVID-19 forced theatres to close again. The population was still not vaccinated. Antoine Carabinier-Lépine and Geneviève Morin of Cirque Alfonse returned, this time with a playful and essential initiative: the *Lèche-vitrines* (“Window Shopping”) project, a continuous program of acts, artistic events and unusual performances offered to the public through the storefront window of a closed ice cream shop. The creators of *Le Bonheur mobile* were once again working on a project that would bring the circus community together and interact with their neighbourhood (Hochelaga-Maisonneuve) during a period of partial lockdown. The circus would go on, even if it meant setting up shop in the windows of an abandoned business down the street.

Over the next few months, the Quebec government introduced a system of alert levels (green, yellow and red) assigned by region, curfews and other increasingly strict measures, including the unprecedented closure of roads leading across the Ontario border (19 April 2021). The province of Quebec was isolating itself further. Performance venues did not reopen until 28 June 2021, with a required distance of one and a half metres between seats. In September, proof of vaccination became required to enter theatres. This development was accompanied by the loosening of some measures, including new rules which reduced the required distance between spectators (now to one meter) and regulations requiring masks in performance spaces.

This second summer lull gave rise to artistic initiatives similar to those that had emerged the previous summer, but more ambitious. During the previous year, many artists, unable to make a living from their art, had left the circus to pursue training in other professions. Those who remained were eager to find a certain rhythm and establish a return to performing that would extend beyond the summer season. In December 2021, performance venues were forced to close again, holiday gatherings were banned and telecommuting was reinstated whenever possible. It was not until February 2022 that a partial reopening of performance halls was allowed. These measures were not completely lifted until 12 March 2022—a full two years after the first pandemic closures in Quebec.

The Quebec circus adapted, but also crumbled a little more with each wave. Rehearsal and training conditions underwent multiple adjustments. Professional training programs began developing expertise, borrowing from the adapted codes of both professional sports and the broader performing arts community. Engineers were brought in to assess the extent of potential contagiousness affecting performers engaged in dynamic rigging acts. To avoid being separated again, some performers and students formed “bubbles,” and some even moved in together, especially when their disciplines (such as Korean plank or group trampoline) involved multiple performers. In this way, they could train, practice and socialize through their bubbles, escaping the general isolation that plagued most of Quebec’s population at the time.

The fall of Icarus and the new Soleil

At Cirque du Soleil, the fall was sudden and brutal. The for-profit company’s main activities were centred on producing large-scale shows, world tours under big tops, cruise ship tours and a network of permanent performing venues in the United States and China. In early March 2020, Cirque du Soleil was performing forty-four different shows simultaneously around the world, and the halt of ticket sales jeopardized its main source of independent income. The repatriation of performers and technicians was followed by layoffs of many contract workers and permanent employees, with “essential” personnel shrinking as the weeks passed in the face of an uncertain future. Thirty-five hundred employees were laid off (including 1,200 at headquarters), and many circus performers found themselves without an income. They became the smallest creditors of a multinational that, in order to restructure itself, was turning to the worlds of politics and finance.

Patient investors who were prepared to wait for the eventual post-pandemic recovery were sniffing out a good deal. After all, this was one of Quebec’s

industrial flagships, sold to American and Chinese interests (and to the Caisse de dépôt du Québec) in 2015 for more than two billion US dollars and generating annual sales of nearly one billion USD. Cirque du Soleil also benefitted from substantial cultural, social and symbolic capital. The Quebec government intervened by promising \$200 million to save Cirque du Soleil and maintain its headquarters in Montreal. The Caisse de dépôt du Québec and then-owners TPG and Fosun also injected \$50 million to maintain the organization's structure and limit losses.

In May and June 2020, a veritable diplomatic ballet (which sometimes took on the appearance of a boxing match) transpired at the doors of Cirque du Soleil, which was receiving numerous offers. Investors TPG and Fosun, as well as government entities such as the Caisse de dépôt du Québec and Investissement Québec, prepared a debt restructuring offer. Media conglomerate Québecor made its interest known, and its various branches—TVA, the *Journal de Montréal* and the *Journal de Québec*—published headlines about Cirque du Soleil's setbacks and missteps, to the point that they were informally accused of trying to devalue the company's worth to buy it at a better price. Guy Laliberté, the co-founder of Cirque du Soleil, also prepared a purchase offer with discreet partners. He had sold ninety percent of his shares in 2015, and the last ten percent sold for \$75 million in February 2020, a few weeks before the pandemic swept through the Western world. Little-known portfolio managers were also eyeing Cirque du Soleil shares and probing the debt resale arena. Cirque du Soleil tried to accept the first offer from its current partners, but its creditors rejected it.

On 20 June 2020, faced with the realization of its financial insecurity and the inevitable dissolution of its assets and expertise, Cirque du Soleil filed for protection under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act in Canada and Chapter 15 in the United States. Its billion-dollar debt could be contained and managed as long as substantial revenues (about \$100 million per month) were generated and projects multiplied—but as soon as Cirque du Soleil was no longer generating income and had no value other than its name and brand, the multinational had no choice but to move on to the next act.

The lead investor in the deal was the Catalyst Capital Group of Toronto, one of Canada's largest private equity firms, which had already bought some of Cirque du Soleil's debt at a discount earlier in the pandemic. The proposed restructuring included an injection of 375 million USD to revitalize the company, as well as a promise to keep Cirque du Soleil's headquarters in Montreal. In addition, it provided \$5 million in funds for unpaid artists.

Cirque du Soleil eventually resumed its operations: the machine started back up, touring shows went back on the road, and shows located in jurisdictions with less restrictive COVID-19 prevention measures (Nevada and Florida) welcomed audiences as soon as they could.

Nonetheless, a certain amount of trust had been lost within the community, as some had felt mistreated and neglected during the financial dealings. The gap widened between the large transnational industrial producer and the circus community, the latter of which had become more artistically and financially independent since the beginning of the pandemic. The next few years will determine what role Cirque du Soleil will play in the Quebec circus milieu beyond that of an economic powerhouse.

The leadership of En Piste and provincial support for circus

As Cirque du Soleil threatened to collapse throughout 2020, other large circus companies were in survival mode. Artists found themselves in a state of sudden precariousness, not knowing where to turn for essential support. Amid this crisis, En Piste, the National Circus Arts Alliance, showed remarkable leadership and level-headedness.

Fully embracing its political role, En Piste was in frequent dialogue with the Quebec government during the crisis. It reminded the Quebec Ministry of Culture and Communications of the needs of the severely precarious circus milieu, which extended well beyond the sole example of Cirque du Soleil and was already supported by Investissement Québec and the Caisse de dépôt du Québec. En Piste's advocacy undoubtedly contributed to the \$10 million granted in June 2020 by the Quebec government to the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec to support the circus sector, as well as the \$11.8 million for the recovery of circus arts disbursed in April 2021 (out of the \$147 million allocated to culture as a whole). En Piste responded to the first installment in a press release on 9 June 2020 as follows: "For the first time, the distinct issues of our art form have been recognized, and funding has been dedicated to it."⁴ Meetings with various governmental authorities were organized, including the presence of the Minister of Culture at En Piste's annual general meeting (by videoconference, as per COVID-19 restrictions). En Piste advocated for the circus community's needs within the Société de Développement des Entreprises Culturelles (SODEC), the City of Montreal and various arts councils.

En Piste also offered online workshops, conferences, training sessions and referrals to legal and other resources for those affected by the #MeToo movement, as well as opportunities for community members to connect with one another.

4. The press release is available here: enpiste.qc.ca/en/news/137/a-historic-moment-10-millions-for-circus

The crisis within the circus milieu was not limited to Cirque du Soleil. It was much broader and more complex, and it went far beyond economic and industrial considerations or the collapse of Quebec's most treasured company. The survival of an entire ecosystem with ramifications that extended into many fields (dance, theatre, multimedia, fashion, marketing, tourism) was at stake, contrary to the minimal details reported by the media. En Piste became a relied-upon disseminator of the latest news, relaying updates on public health measures while carefully noting the regulations related to the sports and performing arts worlds, with circus sitting at the crossroads of the two. The organization became a trusted source of information in these confusing times.

En Piste also commissioned three studies among circus workers and companies in Canada: "Impacts of COVID-19 on the Circus Arts Sector in Canada" in April 2020, followed by a second survey in December 2020 and the "Survey on the Future of Circus Arts" in October 2021.⁵ The majority of respondents were residents of the province of Quebec. These surveys provide an evolving picture of the disruptions affecting the circus sector.

The first survey, which began in April 2020, was conducted among 607 individuals and 109 companies and organizations. It revealed significant insecurity due to lost income and contracts. In addition to the 3,500 Cirque du Soleil employees who had been dismissed, there were 660 reported layoffs in the circus community as a whole. In April 2020, 70% of circus professionals reported having applied for the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB). Once heavily underfunded and proud of its independence, the circus milieu was now forced to ask for support, so much so that at the time of the survey, 62% of individuals reported that they were considering leaving the field entirely.

A second survey was conducted in December 2020, and the portrait it drew was darker. Sixty-five percent of respondents reported experiencing depression or anxiety. The report revealed several issues, namely "loss of meaning and identity in the context of a professional standstill, performance anxiety due to high expectations, [and] the complex body-mind relationship"⁶ (En Piste, February 2021). En Piste encouraged its community to seek help and reminded its members that its insurance plan gave them access to a psychologist.

Despite the modest recovery in the summer and fall, freelance circus professionals saw an 82% drop in income earned abroad. Seventy-seven percent of circus workers reported that the financial losses they incurred had jeopardized their ability to continue to work in the field. Eighty-five percent reported feeling unable to plan their lives due to a lack of confirmed contracts. Eighty-three percent reported an "inability to practice their craft." In the December 2020 survey,

5. The three studies can be viewed here: enpiste.qc.ca/en/publications-and-medias

6. enpiste.qc.ca/en/news/425/sharing-of-mental-health-specialists

94% of responding circus professionals reported that they were considering changing careers. Relatively consistent circus activity would not resume in Quebec until six months after the survey. With the help of these surveys, it was not difficult to imagine the high level of despair and professional withdrawal affecting the majority of circus professionals at the time.

The third survey on the impacts of the pandemic, released in October 2021, a year after the second survey and a few months before the second closure of venues through March 2022, spoke of a progressive return of activities and celebrated “a strong, resilient and innovative community” (En Piste, 9 December 2021). Three hundred and seventy-six questionnaires were completed by individuals, and 81 were completed by organizations. The third survey found that 89% of artists generated income from their artistic practice in 2021, indicating a modest increase. Ninety-two percent of artists experienced a return to their professional circus arts practice, but only 20% percent reported a “full” return, and 90% of respondents reported still experiencing negative impacts related to the pandemic. At the time, 72% of projects had been cancelled or postponed, and nearly 50% of respondents reported having to work in another field to support themselves. Meanwhile, nearly 50% of respondents reported having returned to school or having developed new circus-related job skills during the pandemic. This number likely increased over the next six to nine months as venues were closed again.

The unbiased look at the state of professional circus in these three surveys—and the data collected—helps to document the experiences of circus professionals while more widely illustrating what was happening in the field during the first two years of the pandemic. In short, by implementing initiatives, resources, support and studies, En Piste demonstrated strong leadership as an ally and supported its community.

Buyouts, restructurings and opportunities

The location, scale and scope of activities undertaken by Quebec circuses in 2021 reflect many different realities. During the period in which the curfew had only just been lifted in Montreal (on 28 May 2021), Cirque du Soleil and The 7 Fingers were hard at work getting their international shows back on track wherever regulations would allow. Cirque du Soleil’s resident Chinese show, 绮幻之境 – *THE LAND OF FANTASY*, reopened on 3 June 2020, but it was the exception to the rule and would not single-handedly restore the multinational’s financial health.

The 7 Fingers returned to the stage at a commercial theatre in Moscow with the September 2020 premiere of *Prime Time*, a show inspired by reality TV. The show was an addition to the company’s existing musical repertoire in Russia, including *The Circus Princess*, which opened in 2016. These shows were still being

performed in Moscow when Quebec theatres closed again on 1 October 2020. Meanwhile, also in September 2020, another part of The 7 Fingers' team was preparing for the opening of *En panne* ("Out of Order") in Vancouver. During this process, the production followed physical distancing rules and integrated the experience of the pandemic into its narrative. Since it was impossible to perform the show in Quebec at the time, The 7 Fingers adapted the performance into a film offered on-demand.

A year later, in October 2021, conditions in California led The 7 Fingers to celebrate the premiere of their resident show *Dear San Francisco: The Intimate Cirque Experience* at the iconic Club Fugazi. The show replaced the satirical musical revue *Beach Blanket Babylon*, which had been running for forty-five years. Following the same model, *Dear San Francisco* was planned with a long run in mind, aiming to boost cultural tourism and offer an exciting space for the Greater Bay Area community to experience high-calibre acrobatic circus. The show's co-creators and co-directors, as well as The 7 Fingers' co-founders Gypsy Snider and Shana Carroll, like many of their collaborators, are originally from the San Francisco Bay Area and received their early circus training there.⁷

Taking advantage of the revival of tourism in Las Vegas and its new slender institutional form, as well as a real need to re-establish the production of its shows in order to activate ticket sales (its main source of income), Cirque du Soleil declared on 23 June 2021 that "intermission is over," as if pandemic-related safety measures had been merely an intermission, and all that was needed was to turn the lights off and on again to bring back the audience. Nevertheless, the survival of the multinational and the community it employed was still at stake. An intense effort would be required to return to a necessary regular production schedule and salutary ticket sales.

Blue Man Group (a division of Cirque du Soleil) reopened its show in Las Vegas at the Luxor on 24 June 2021. Cirque du Soleil's first and longest-running show in Las Vegas, *Mystère* ("Mystery"), which had been running non-stop since December 1993, reopened on 28 June 2021. On 1 July 2021, Cirque du Soleil's most popular show, the aquatic circus *O* at the Bellagio, also returned to the stage. In August, shows inspired by iconic figures in popular music reopened—*Michael Jackson ONE* opened on 19 August at the Mandalay Bay Hotel, and *The Beatles LOVE* opened at the Mirage on 26 August. In total, over the course of the summer, Cirque du Soleil successfully reopened five of its seven shows in Las Vegas.

7. Gypsy Snider and Shana Carroll have lived in Montreal for over twenty years but remain deeply attached to the San Francisco Bay Area, where they grew up and got their start performing with the Pickle Family Circus. A year after the opening of *Dear San Francisco*, The 7 Fingers created a love letter to Montreal called *Mon île, mon cœur* ("My Island, My Heart"), which had a successful run at the Studio-Cabaret of Théâtre St-Denis but did not achieve the same degree of impact on the local community as *Dear San Francisco*.

Given the scale of these productions—which employed hundreds of artists and technicians—not to mention their earning potential with ten performances per week, each in large theatres, it’s easy to understand Cirque du Soleil’s eagerness to reopen them. Robert Lepage’s *KA*, which had been running since 2004, reopened on 24 November 2021. Around the same time, the premiere of Cirque du Soleil’s new production at Disney World, *Drawn to Life*, which had been delayed many times due to the pandemic, was announced. The show replaced *La Nouba*, which ran from 1998 to 2017. In addition, Cirque du Soleil’s resident show, *Zumanity*—the cabaret billed as “The Sensual Side of Cirque du Soleil”—which was directed by René-Richard Cyr and Dominic Champagne and had been running since 2003, closed permanently and was replaced in May 2022 by *Mad Apple*, billed as a “Cirque du Soleil cocktail of New York-inspired acrobatics, music, dance, magic, and comedy.”

Cirque du Soleil’s tours also resumed, with *Alegria* reopening in Houston on 18 November 2021. In April 2022, the company set its big top back up in Montreal with a remount of *Kooza*, which had originally been created ten years earlier. By the summer of 2022, more than thirty Cirque du Soleil shows were back on the road, the sea, and the stages of numerous reopened venues worldwide. The multinational regained its momentum, having undergone restructuring measures and repatriated much of its staff. By March 2023, after restructuring its debt and kick-starting a number of productions (mostly recycling existing ones), Cirque du Soleil announced that its debt had been reduced by \$100 million USD, and it was generating more revenue and increasing its profitability compared to pre-pandemic levels (La Presse Canadienne, 2023). The company’s headquarters, which had gone from close to 1,600 employees in 2019 to less than 200 employees during the first two years of the pandemic, was now employing close to 1,000 people in Montreal.

Cirque Eloize, for its part, took advantage of abandoned conference rooms in venues whose regular conventioners were unable to travel to Quebec due to border restrictions. The organization partnered with the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montreal to present *Céleste*, a cabaret show highlighting several acts that had been created during the pandemic. The show, which ran from 17 February to 27 August 2022, featured singers Coral Egan and Geneviève Leclerc (in rotation), as well as a dozen artists from the circus, comedy and music worlds. Part of the Cirque Eloize team also travelled to Kuwait to perform at the opening ceremony of the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) Games. Contracts were multiplying abroad, and Quebec artists were jumping on board.

Like the co-directors of *The 7 Fingers*, Jeannot Painchaud, the director of Cirque Eloize, sought to connect with his regional roots. In the summer of 2022, he performed his show *Entre ciel et mer* (“Between Sky and Sea”) in his native Magdalen Islands. In addition, he also purchased an old church in the Magdalen Islands and converted it into a cultural hub. The big Quebec circus companies

were resuming their international travels, but following the lifting of all public health measures, they were returning more than ever to the places and communities where their artists were born or raised.

Findings

Despite the rather spectacular ability of Quebec's circus community to bounce back, a few observations must be made.

The pandemic caused a crisis in a sector that, aside from the insecurity of the 2009 financial crisis, had been on an upward trajectory dominated by the prospect of exponential growth. Shows had been getting bigger and bigger, always jumping higher and shooting further than the last. But the pandemic forced a pause and a step back. Sheer magnitude no longer held the same value, and smaller, more intimate forms grew more popular.

During the first year of the pandemic, artists found themselves in highly precarious financial situations. They suffered significant losses and often did not have access to adequate training facilities. Circus performers, like athletes, must train regularly to avoid injury when they resume their (often extreme) physical activities. As we have seen, many left the field entirely, while others returned to their studies or followed other professional training programs. Most circus artists were forced to consider other careers, often complementary to their profession (coaches, specialized trainers, yoga and physical training instructors, administrative workers in cultural organizations, and so on). In the coming years, it will be interesting to follow their contribution to the development of circus arts beyond technique and the circus act.

Experimental forms of circus also emerged. These intimate, shortened forms developed after lengthy gestation periods and did not necessarily follow the logic of traditional acts. In this way, a late-coming but genuine "artification" was established in Quebec circus practice. This artification had been brewing for about a decade, often with stronger and more radical artistic, social and political positions (see Perahia, 2021a, 2021b and 2022; Leroux, 2022), but the first year of the pandemic gave new space to emerging artists and non-formulaic experimentations.

Like a house of cards, the rapid collapse of *Cirque du Soleil*, a Quebec industry cornerstone, and the company's momentary inability to protect its employees and pay its most fragile creditors—the artists—significantly affected its relationship with the circus community. Some of the company's workforce did not return after *Cirque du Soleil*'s recovery, and the multinational no longer held the power of attraction it once had with young artists, who increasingly began to consider creating small, collective companies in line with their values. In time, things will return to a certain degree of normalcy, but a breach was

opened that allowed more room for emerging companies and aesthetics to fill many non-circus spaces such as theatres, dance studios and cabarets.

En Piste, the National Circus Arts Alliance, demonstrated needed leadership and became the community's rallying point for information, resources and political advocacy. The growing presence of En Piste, which aims to represent all actors in the circus industry, has created an interesting and necessary balance in a field long dominated by large institutions. The pandemic's circumstances gave way to value being placed on artists, their well-being and their place within the community.

The pause that resulted from the pandemic allowed many individuals to reflect on their lifestyles and consider choices based on their values and desires. Many performers rediscovered their cities, especially Montreal and Quebec City, renewing long-neglected ties. They moved with ease between professional, semi-professional and amateur circles. They developed new affinities, and many professionals began to work closely with marginalized youth, whereas previously, the social circus world and the world of professional performance had been more divided.

During the first two years of the pandemic, the Quebec circus community also experienced a somewhat discreet and concentrated #MeToo movement. Many artists began to reflect further on their working conditions, on training dynamics that might sometimes be considered toxic, and on the often-complex interpersonal relationships generated by a work environment that is both permissive and disciplined.

Digital learning became part and parcel without being fetishized. There was a transition from a modest practice of digital cultural outreach tools to real digital cultural production, as the pandemic allowed artists and companies to update their media and digital knowledge to promote their work. Digital technology did not replace the live experience of circus, which was more important than ever to artists looking to reconnect with live audiences.

The refocusing and sustainability of a milieu

It is possible that the COVID-19 pandemic, which violently and repeatedly interrupted circus activities between 13 March 2020 and 12 March 2022, will have lasting effects on the entire circus milieu, especially since there is still doubt as to whether new waves will appear that could once again force the closure of venues and tents. Firstly, Quebec's global circus has refocused on its original territory, encouraging artists and companies to reinvest in familiar nearby places with which they often have emotional ties. Secondly, many artists used the time and space offered to them to take ownership of the shaping and valuing of their own creativity, which in the past had been mainly integrated into shows put on by more established companies. New faces appeared and were noticed on social

media networks and in re-emerging cabarets. New themes emerged, including body diversity and trans-identity. As a supreme act of provocation toward circus arts as practiced in Quebec, the limits of prowess were pushed aside and no longer fetishized as they had previously been by a technically-driven circus.

Along these lines, training based on an elite sports model was called further into question, which will influence the preparation and technique of many acrobats to come. Large companies have grown more responsible and more aware of the environmental and economic impacts of their actions. After letting go of thousands of employees during the first two years of the pandemic, Cirque du Soleil has had to make amends with those it lost and those it will want to recruit in the future by offering more sustainable working conditions. Artists are now more reluctant to accept certain terms, and some are even making the environmentally conscious choice to stop flying commercially, which poses a real challenge to an industry inclined to rely on international touring.

The idea of sustainability has taken on increasing importance. The ephemeral and fragile nature of an entire milieu that was once based on physical prowess and surpassing oneself has been exposed; what about sustainability from a climate change standpoint, or sustainability for the careers of artists who have invested their bodies and souls into the circus? The social body has also been affected by the SARS-COV-2 virus and efforts to contain it; physical bodies have been quarantined, gestures and movements confined. The bodies of circus performers have been at rest for quite some time, and many have probably fallen a little out of shape. For a considerable period, they did not reach the limits of their capabilities, were not put in danger or caught in the perpetual movement of shows and tours. During this extended pause, circus artists asked themselves questions and searched for the ground under their feet—a new ground, a more local ground, one to tend to, tread on and invest in differently.

After praising the impact and outward expansion of Quebec's global circus and then seeing it struggle under an unforgiving economic system not adapted to constant commercial growth or pandemic lockdowns, we have discovered and learned to value its local character and deep roots in a land that demands presence and longevity.

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