Lights are reflected in the stage pool of the O Theatre at Bellagio hotel-casino.

Cirque Work

Inventiveness is the hallmark of the architect who designed the theaters housing Cirque du Soleil's 'O' and 'Mystere'

By Kirk Baird
LAS VEGAS SUN

If the Bard was right when he said all the world's a stage and we are merely players, then Patrick Bergé should feel right at home.

That's because Bergé is president/co-founder of Scéno Plus, an architecture and engineering firm based in Montreal that designs theaters —150 of them worldwide so far.

Two of those theaters house the Las Vegas productions of Cirque du Soleil's circus-style "O" and "Mystere" at the Bellagio and Treasure Island hotel-casinos, respectively.

Bergé is particularly fond of both.

Whether it's Scéno Plus' involvement with these theaters, the difficulties faced with each construction task or the pleasure he gets from working on such "crazy" projects, Bergé is passionate about the entire theater-building process and it shows; he routinely throws out words such as "energy," "magic" and "theatrical" to describe the theaters and the desired effect he hopes they have on audiences.

Bergé will speak about that, as well as the future of

Patrick Bergé

theater building at the Steel Plus Network Convention Monday at the MGM Grand hotel-casino. (It is not open to the public.)

But he also doesn't take himself or his job so seriously that he loses sight of the humor involved. For example, Bergé laughingly recalled his first trip to the City of Lights, when he was going to pitch his ideas for the "Mystere" theater. "When you fly into Vegas what you don't realize if you've never been is that every hotel has a theater. I was like, 'Hey kid, what are you doing here?' " Bergé said in a phone interview from his office in Montreal.

But when Bergé met with representatives from Cirque du Soleil and Treasure Island they convinced him that what they had in mind was vastly different than a «normal» stage, and what they wanted was too complex for them to do on their own. An added factor in Bergé's favor is that Cirque also hails from Montreal, so it seemed a perfect marriage: two French-speaking groups "crazy enough to do this," he said.

So the two began collaborations; Cirque provided the vision for the show and the theater, while it was Scéno Plus' job to help make it possible by designing a theater capable of handling all Cirque's requests.

"At the beginning of the process we worked more out of Montreal," Bergé said. "(Scéno Plus would) come in at the beginning and work with set designers and people who would do the show. After that, once the conceptual (aspect) was done, we would continue going in to do coordination with all the mechanical, electrical and structural engineers. We're kind of the reference for all the technical infrastructure."

This would include building a showroom that could routinely be changed to fit any new stage theatrics, lending the theater a sort of work-in-progress design, which is something Scéno Plus has become known for.

Despite the acclaim that Scéno Plus received for its job, Bergé is quick to point out that his company merely acted as a conduit between Cirque's ideas and its realization. "There was a very big collaboration between the Cirque designers; they have the ideas and we put the image to their ideas," he said.

It was a union that worked so well that the two reteamed after "Mystere" for "O." Here, Scéno Plus, in addition to creating a transformable theater, faced the daunting task of incorporating a large pool into the mix. This meant designing an air-flow system to keep the audience comfortable while maintaining the water level near 86 degrees Fahrenheit and dealing with any humidity that would form as a result. There also were the safety hazards involved for the performers who worked in a pool with lights.

All in all, it took about eight years for both theaters to be completed, Bergé said, with him having to fly in every three weeks. But he didn't seem to care. In fact, these projects represent the fruition of an idea he had when he was a child: to make a better theater environment for the artists.

Bergé was born in 1958, to a father who was a physics teacher and a mother who worked as a theater costume designer. At the age of 12 he was introduced to theater when he started touring as an apprentice-technician for the theatrical troupe "Theatre d'Aujour-d'hui," and two years later he became a technician.

He then decided to combine his two parents' professions when he went to Laval University in Quebec City, studying architecture with a specialization in theater design. He graduated in 1981 and four years later co-founded Scéno Plus.

Then he began to build theaters in Quebec to help preserve the culture of the 3- to-4-million Francophones in a 300-million Anglophone environment.

Using grant money from the government, Scéno Plus focused on this for about 10 years and built such theaters as Cinematheque quebecoise, Theatre d'Aujour-d'hui and Theatre du Rideau Vert, Usine C, which received the Quebec Order of Architects' Award of Excellence in 1991.

During this period Bergé noticed that his clients often did not have the time to look at plans on a regular basis, so Scéno Plus added a fourth branch to its team of architecture, specialized equipment and project management — a sort of theater-design group that used specially-created 3-D software to create animation and 3-D renderings. "So instead of bringing plans to the client," Bergé said, "you bring them to the virtual world."

In addition to its work with theaters, Scéno Plus is moving toward other areas: cinemas, shopping malls and even a large power station in London. While these may seem like departures from its regular clientele, Bergé said that they all want the same thing: "theatrical spaces," which is what Scéno Plus does best.

"That's why we're now so close to entertainment, because even in shopping centers they're trying to create theatrical spaces, things that move, things that come down ... special effects," he said. "Look at the Forum Shops — it's an event. Now we're working around the world with moving parts and lasers, (and asking), 'how do you use the perspective and make it different and make it move?'

"It's our vision of entertainment," Bergé said. "You don't always want to come to the same place.(You want) something exciting, something that makes you smile because it's moving and transforming. It touches you."