

# From Vegas To Disney World With Scéno Plus

A Canadian architectural design firm plants its mark on two intriguing theatrical projects.

**T**echnology, art and passion are the three words that describe Scéno Plus, the Montreal-based firm that combines theater design, architecture, specialized equipment systems and project management to create unique, trans-

As an architect he does not want to “do monuments,” says Bergé, pointing out, “We start from the stage, then the audience, then put walls around it. We go from the inside out, which is very different from most projects around the world, where they usually start from the outside, then make an image of what they want it to look like. And in the end, if the stage is too small, that is not a problem for them.”

The 1,800-seat Bellagio Theatre was a “purpose built theater,” as Claude-André Roy, Scéno Plus’ senior theater designer, puts it. It was built for the ongoing needs of one show: Cirque du Soleil’s “O,” the wildly popular fantasy in which performers leap not only through the air, but in and out of

the water as well. Because that show will evolve over a multiyear run, Scéno Plus built extra capabilities into the systems.

The original specs were daunting enough: a 1.4-million gallon pool (measuring 141 feet across) as the stage, with four underwater hydraulic lifts (with holes for the water to run through) that rise to transform the pool to a standard stage and back again. Scéno Plus designed a system of different sized stones and gutters at the edge of the stage to both break and silence

the waves created by the performers in the water and the moving water itself. The owner of the Bellagio didn’t want any smell of chlorine, so ozone was used in the water instead. However, ozone attacks plastics, gaskets and the shields of the wiring. To combat this, Scéno Plus devised a now GFCI (ground fault circuit interrupter) protected dimmer that works under these extreme conditions. Up above there is a huge metal trellis cupola, with a central opening through which a chandelier can be raised and acrobats lowered.

Underwater lighting was improved by Scéno Plus injecting air into the water. “If you just put a projector in the water, you don’t see the color changes in the field. So we injected air into the water so that the air becomes the screen,” relates Bergé. “That is how you can change the textures, colors and feeling of the water.”

All that water meant ventilation problems. You don’t want humidity and mist fogging up the air. Scéno Plus created microclimates by splitting the ventilation four ways—two systems for the stage and two for the audience.

Air is pumped from under the seats, keep-



Nighttime exterior shot of the resplendent Cirque du Soleil theater at Florida’s Walt Disney World

formable theatrical spaces. Two remarkably different theaters for Cirque du Soleil—one in the Bellagio casino/hotel in Las Vegas and the other at Walt Disney World in Florida—illustrate their approach.

Both Patrick Bergé, president and CEO, and Claude-André Roy, senior theater designer, are committed to their firm’s mission: to deliver better equipment to the artists on stage. They are succeeding. For their work on the Bellagio, the company garnered a 1998 Eddy Entertainment Design Award and the 1999 Canadian Institute for Theater Technology Award for Technical Merit.

Bergé’s passion for his work started early. Apprenticed at 12 to a theatrical troupe, he was touring with them as a technician by age 16. Soon he developed a passion for architecture, forging a career that would successfully merge this interest with his love of theater.



The shimmering interior of Las Vegas’ Bellagio Theatre

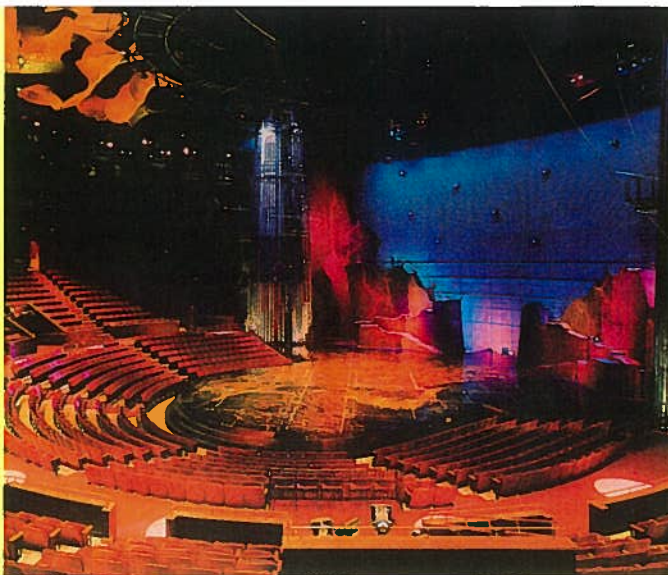
ing the audience comfortable at 70 degrees. This air stabilizes about five feet overhead,

so the trapeze artists up above are comfortable at their appropriate temperature. Performers working in and out of the water onstage can be in 84-degree air.

All this is hooked into the control board. "It is one of the first installations where we put the air systems into the hands of the show operators," says Roy. "We copied that in Orlando because it proved so good."

These air system controls are one of the few common points in the designs of the Vegas and Orlando projects. The Disney project exterior is white, exuberant and tent-like, much like a traditional circus big top. "The whole thing started with the white castle outside being the beauty, the more Disney-oriented," says Bergé. "Then Cirque went in the opposite [direction] and made a black castle inside, like everything coming down from the attic."

The Orlando theater is Cirque's first free-standing building. It seats 1,671 in a 180-degree arc of fixed tiers around the stage. Unlike the Bellagio, it has no proscenium.



Inside Cirque du Soleil's 173-by-112-foot Disney World space

What it does have is a steel grid 78 feet off the ground that covers most of the area of the theater. This grid, along with the space under the stage serviced by five lifts, serves as the wings. With its various hanging points, modular trapdoors and movable motors, the grid is very flexible.

"It is like a trap system," says Bergé, "but instead of being on the floor of the stage, it is a trap system in the air." The stage is small, the rows are narrow and because of

this configuration "the response in the audience is very sharp and tight," says Roy. "It gives a lot of energy. It is a very tight relationship between audience and stage."

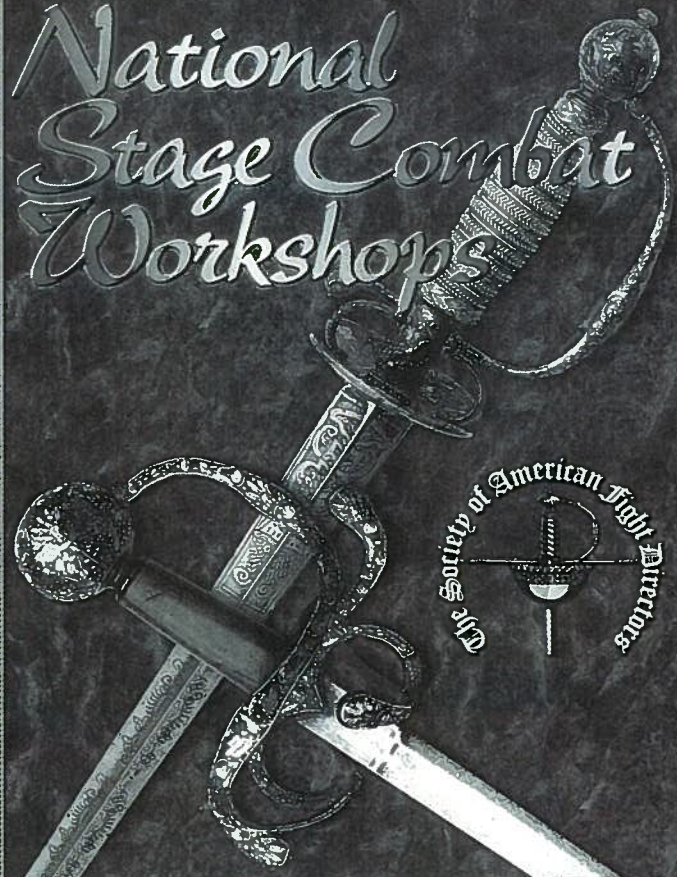
Performers come onstage via elevators and fast tracks, what Roy calls an "intricate, acrobatic ballet" of synchronized mechanical systems. "[With] 75 performers, 50 crew moving fast in darkness and rapidly moving mechanics around, everything has to be safe," he adds. Amid all this technological wizardry, the human factor is a key safety measure. "Every performer and every crew in every Cirque show is encour-

aged to yell, 'Stop!' if you felt there was a danger," says Roy. "We'll deal with what we have to deal with after."

Regardless of the size of the budget, there are always constraints. "You need to do cuts," comments Roy. "You are always on a tight budget. Every dollar is looked at by the people who are putting up money for the show or theater."

Michael Killeen is a freelance writer living in New York City.

# National Stage Combat Workshops



The Society of American Fight Directors  
&

University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
College of Fine Arts Department of Theatre  
AA/EEO  
present

the 22<sup>nd</sup> annual

# National Stage Combat Workshops

For more information about the National Stage Combat Workshops,  
call on-site coordinator Linda McCollum at:

**702-895-3662**

July 9-27, 2001