

# Caring for Bodies Pushed Beyond the Limit: Behind the Scenes at Cirque du Soleil

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**I**N THE EVENINGS, FOLLOWING THE 17TH ANNUAL MEETING SESSIONS, conference attendees took advantage of the many attractions Walt Disney World had to offer. One was Cirque du Soleil's, *La Nouba*—a stunning work of performance art that draws the audience into a phantasmagorical universe filled with sights, sounds, and otherworldly beings who, through their physical abilities, convince us that they are not mere mortals.

But, of course, these beings are not of another world. They are performers who work to enthrall us by pushing their bodies beyond “natural” limits—about 475 times per year. So what do these performers who fly through the air, leap through windows, and contort their bodies in unimaginable ways do to prevent and deal with pain? And who helps them when they hurt?

According to health writer Daryl Kulak, “The gymnasts most often suffer shoulder-and-wrist inflammation. Jugglers have spinal issues and neck tension. Acrobats and dancers get low-back spasms and injuries in the pelvic region. Trampoline performers have a lot of problems, from sprained ankles to dislocations. Even the musicians suffer from tightness in the upper back. And contortionists? Do you even have to ask? They hurt everywhere. It pained me...that performers saw sprained ankles as just *routine injuries*... not *showstoppers*.”

## BACKSTAGE AT LA NOUBA

While in Orlando, I had the opportunity to interview two of the performing artists and one of the show's three physical therapists.

### Stacey Bilodeau, German Wheel Artist

THE GERMAN WHEEL, performed by identical twins Stacey and Bruce Bilodeau, is first major act of the show. With glowing eyes and dressed in threatening futuristic costumes, the powerful, six-foot brothers perform breathtaking acrobatic feats in perfect unison on a wheels consisting of two, six-and-a-half feet metal hoops.

So, how did twin brothers end up in the circus? When the Bilodeau family moved their three sons back to their native Quebec, Canada, from Nantucket Island, they wanted their energetic identical twin sons, Stacey and Bruce, to learn to French and enrolled them in a French speaking gymnastics class. “Bruce and I learned the language, became quite good at gymnastics, and won some competitions. Cirque picked us up at a national competition in 1989. We were nineteen,” says Stacey Bilodeau, who is not so scary off stage.

Working separately for Cirque, both learned the “tricks of the trade” while being on tour. “We watched other performers and gained many abilities,” says Stacey. “We had done trampoline before but we also learned juggling, stilt



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walking, teeterboard. And we did a lot of character work, so we worked with actors. Whatever we saw, we tried to get our hands on it and add it to our little bag of tricks.”

Eight years ago, at La Nouba, the twins were brought together as the dynamic duo on the German Wheel. “As far as the German Wheel,” Stacey says, “We’ve done it for a number of years, but being as meticulous as we are, we find that there’s always things we can do better. We’re always tweaking the act so we’re very synchronized. It’s still a work in progress.”

The German Wheel, which has been a long-standing competitive sport in Europe, requires enormous balance, precision, and strength, and Stacey and Bruce train as rigorously as all topnotch gymnasts. “I look at Andre Agassi, one of my idols, who was on the professional circuit for 21 years and just retired. I think he lasted as long as he did because of his mental awareness and discipline. Even though we’re not *considered* professional athletes, we do what professional athletes do with their bodies.

While working at Cirque in Las Vegas, Stacey was certified in massage, which he says has helped him understand the muscle groups and communicate with the physical therapists. “As soon as you are aware of any little *hiccup*, you have to understand what it’s telling you,” Stacey explains. “You may need to stretch more or build up the muscle. There’s a lot of people who *listen* to their bodies, but don’t really *understand* them. That’s why here at Cirque, they guide us and offer a lot of

different tools to understand imbalances in the body. We have a physiotherapist, a massage therapist, and an acupuncturist. And if they can’t figure out what’s wrong, they send us to outside health professionals.”

“But a lot of it has to come from the performers themselves. You need to be in tune with your body,” Stacey goes on. “Performers have to *read* what is happening with them on stage. And trying to explain that to the physical therapist can be very hard. But it’s important for the therapists to understand the mechanics of what you are doing.”

One way the physiotherapists accomplish this is by actually going on stage and watching how the performers’ use their bodies. “They watch and then tell you that you may be using, for example, your arm or leg in a certain way, and how that part of your body is working harder than the others. Then you know what you have to do is reinforce that area so you don’t injure it again. The physiotherapy team plays a major role in us getting better. And it’s great to have three of them because each can bring a different idea.

Asked to describe a particular injury and pain that he’s had, Stacey says, “I had a pain in my left shoulder and couldn’t figure out why. My brother saw the problem. He told me I was holding my arm wrong [on the wheel], and I had been doing this for many years. But when you do it so often, you tend to forget the precision, mechanics, and the technical aspects of the German Wheel. I was able to correct it and stop aggravating



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the muscle group as I did before. And I haven't had to go to physiotherapy that often. I do a lot of work on my own. That's how I get a better understanding of my body."

What particular treatments are used to deal with muscle injuries? Stacey says, "You have to figure out what's happening to it first. If there's swelling, you put ice on it. If it's a knot and real tight, you would have a massage on it. After the icing is done, you would reinforce the area. Then you have to evaluate what you do on stage, because that's probably where it's coming from. And it will keep coming back, unless you change that."

Another way that Stacey cares for his body is through a good diet. "There are two extremes here. There are people who don't really care what they eat and just fuel themselves with whatever they want. And then there're those who really do watch what they're eating. I eat foods like fruit, vegetables, organic yogurt. I don't eat many sweets, but sometimes I have to treat myself—you have to have a good balance."

How long is Stacey planning to stay with Cirque? "I'll be here as long as they'll keep me."

## Ballerina Natalya Bashkatova

ONE OF THE MANY THREADS woven throughout La Nouba, is a Romeo and Juliet story of love and loss danced beautifully by the Pierrot clown and a lost ballerina. The ballerina is played by Natalya Bashtakova, who left her dream job as a principle dancer in the Bolshoi a decade ago, when she fell in love with and married Cirque performer, Yuri Maiorov, the "Flying Man," in La Nouba.



Asked about the character she plays, Natalya says, "It's me I'm playing. It's a tale of my life. That's how it is. You see me as a traditional ballet dancer in the beginning of the show. Then my dress comes off and you see the more natural woman underneath. The choreography also changes. In the beginning of the show it's a pure, classical ballet. In the second part of the show, it's a contemporary ballet with more broken lines."

As a student at the highly-selective Ballet School of the Bolshoi for eight years, Natalya was trained in a typical Russian ballet style. "If you got into the school, you knew that when you finished, you could get parts in theaters as a principle or as a soloist, but you knew you were definitely going to be a ballet dancer," says Natalya. "When I graduated, I became a principle dancer in Bolshoi. I danced there for five years and then my life completely changed. I met my husband who was working in Cirque du Soleil. Sometimes in life, when you choose some-

thing it can go in two ways. It can go in a hard way or an easy way. But when I saw that man, it was an easy way for me. I said, *I'm going to be with that man.*

Like many dancers, Natalya has suffered with some pain. Although she's never had a serious injury, about a year ago, she started having pain in her hip and was diagnosed with arthritis. "The doctor recommended some simple cortisone shots. That's what I did and it's gotten better. But now, during almost every dance, I have a pain, but not a pain that I cannot tolerate. I can tolerate the pain, you know. The human body is so unique that you can get used to almost anything. I feel like it's getting better, but maybe I'm getting used to it. I don't know," Natalya explains.

Although never seriously hurt, Natalya has had injuries. "Once, when I had an injury, I hurt really bad. I worked on strengthening the muscle. And right now, it's much better, so I keep my training on a regular pattern, just like my ballet class. And I do a lot of stretching. In dance school and dancing professionally in Russia, we never stretched. It was more about holding the legs in positions. I wish it was like that back then. My life would be much easier."

Natalya may regret the lack of stretching in her early years,



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but as an artist, she has some definite ideas dancers who are stretched too much. "I can tell you, I really don't like over stretched dancers—the way they look on stage. Because whatever you do on stage, you have to know exactly how much you can lift your leg to keep ballet a tasteful art. And when I see girls putting the splits in front of someone in the first row, when everyone can see...this is not tasteful for me. So you can be flexible, but be sure the art is still beautiful and tasteful.

When I interviewed Natalya, she was on her way back to Moscow for a visit. "I love my city. It's a very deep cultural city. Every time I go there, I cannot get enough of the theaters. I have already bought tickets online to one of the performances for the Bolshoi. And the funny thing, I'm going to see a ballet called, "Golden Age," which I danced ten years ago. After I left, this ballet was cut. And now, they have put it back. I don't know how hard it's going to be for me to be in the house, because it's always painful. It's not the kind of pain we're talking about here. It's a different kind of pain—emotional pain. It's going to be like that."

### Nicole Ferguson, Physical Therapist

BEHIND THE SCENES, Nicole Ferguson, a former gymnast, works as one of the three physical therapists who are employed at La Nouba.

Asked how it's different working on Cirque performers, Nicole replies, "They're obviously much more flexible than a lot of other athletes. They're also very strong and a lot of their joints are very hypermobile, so when you go to do a ligament and stress test, you see that what would look like a torn a ligament in a normal person, but with these people, that's what's natural for them. So you have to consider this when you're assessing these people, because it could really throw you off."

Describing a typical day at Cirque—if there could be such a thing—Nicole says, "We have a sign-up sheet and the artists



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will come and sign up for treatment. We usually have a one-on-one half-hour session. The artists who are injured and out of the show will get treated earlier in the day, and the artists who are injured, but who are in the show, will get treated before the first show and then again in between the first and second show.

We do a lot of hands on treatment, but we also offer different preventative strengthening classes. We are trying to move more toward preventing injuries, so we offer Pilates, a 10-minute ab strengthening class, shoulder strengthening classes, low back glut class. We also have an acupuncturist who comes once a week, and two or three massage therapists. These are very popular. On Saturdays, the artists line up outside the door to sign up for massage and acupuncture. These sign-up sheets get filled up right away. Performers find that acupuncture really helps with healing their injuries.”

That’s what happens during the day. During the shows at night, Nicole and the other physical therapists go into the theater with their fanny packs on. “We’re there from the beginning of trapeze to the end of Power Track [a fast paced trampoline act]. Those are the two acts where we tend to have the most injuries,” says Nicole.

When injuries occur, performers are given a full work-up. When the injury is serious, they go right to the doctor. But how badly hurt do they have to be to be taken out of the show? “It’s interesting,” says Nicole, “*The show must go on concept,*

really applies here. It’s always a balancing act trying to figure out whether an artist should perform or not. We want to make sure we are protecting the artists and not harming them. We just try to make the best decision we can. Usually the artistic



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director gets involved. We give her our recommendations and she’ll make the final decision. Sometimes, artists who have been injured will modify their performances or do something else so they can still stay in the show.”

Nicole says that performers are not restricted from taking medications. “It’s not like your in the Olympics. Performers take over-the-counter medications such as ibuprophen, and sometimes, doctors prescribe anti-inflammatories. But artists definitely don’t use drugs that will make them drowsy or dizzy while they’re performing. If they are taking those types of medications, they’re advised to take them before bed.”

“Every day at this job is different. You never know what’s going to have happen. There’s nothing monotonous about it,” concludes Nicole.

So, if any of you PTs, massage therapists, and acupuncturists find that your work is getting too boring—maybe it’s time to think about running off and joining the circus!



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