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## *Zarkana*

Cirque du Soleil at  
Radio City Music Hall

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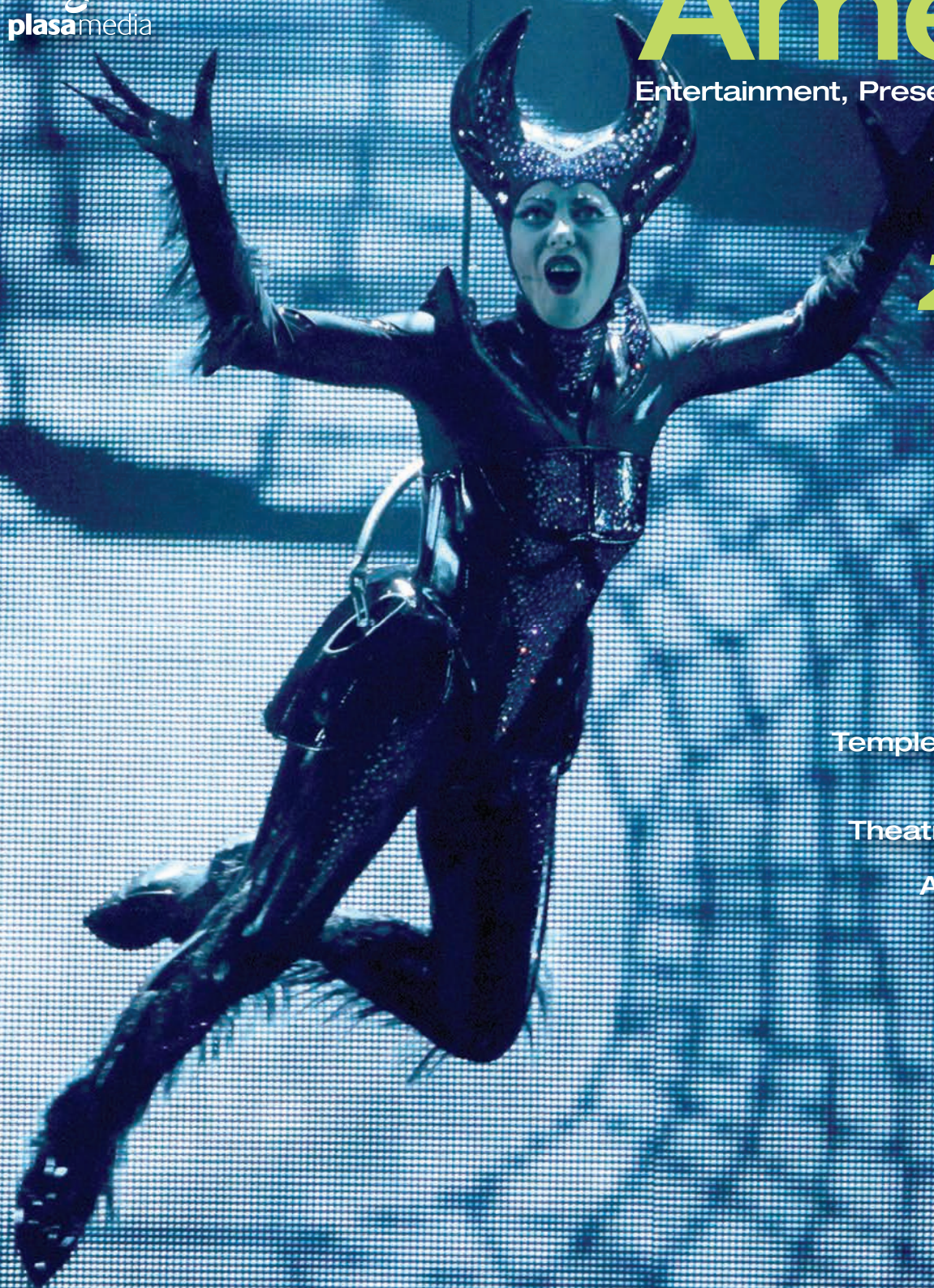
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Zarkana represents  
something new  
in the world of  
Cirque du Soleil

By: David Barbour



# Lair of the Serpents

Photo: Jeremy Daniel

**Z**arkana is the latest in the ever-evolving world of Cirque du Soleil (CDS). Neither a touring tent show nor a sit-down entertainment staged in

a purpose-built venue, it's a touring theatre production, which first came to life in June at New York's Radio City Music Hall. Having spent a successful summer there, it heads to Europe for lengthy engagements in Madrid and Moscow—the latter engagement at the Kremlin Palace—before returning to Radio City for another summer engagement in 2012.

Although it is hardly unknown for CDS shows to traffic in the bizarre, *Zarkana* is informed by a dark, gothic sensibility that results in some of the most arrestingly strange stage pictures in the troupe's history. It also contains a more overt narrative than most Cirque shows and features a score sung in English.

As written and directed by

François Girard (whose credits include the 1998 film *The Red Violin* and the Keira Knightley starrer *Silk* (2007), *Zarkana* follows the adventures of Zark, a magician who has lost the love of his life. With her has gone his magical powers; his search to regain her takes him through a weird underworld populated by strange creatures, who, of course, take part in the kinds of stunts for which CDS is famous. (A cast of 71 is featured, most of them taking part in typically gasp-inducing feats of skill. These include juggling, a rope duet, acrobats, high-wire artists, aerialists, a hand-balancing act, and the ever-popular Wheel of Death.)

According to a press release, "The name *Zarkana* is a fusion of the words 'bizarre' and 'arcana.' The twisted fictional world of *Zarkana* is an elusive destination that is fantastic yet bizarre. The name refers to the irresistibly odd and delightfully strange aura of this

place and its inhabitants." Taking this to heart, the production's design team has provided a series of looks and sounds designed to disorient the audience even as the cast through its heart-pounding paces. Whether such a show represents the future of Cirque du Soleil, we cannot say, but it suggests that, at least from the design point of view, that the company is far from bereft of new ideas.

### Surrounded by snakes

Stéphane Roy, the set designer of *Zarkana*, has a long relationship with Cirque du Soleil, having worked on such shows as *Dralion*, *Varekai*, *Zumanity*, and *KOOZA*. His broad résumé also includes film, television, advertising, and variety shows.

His design for *Zarkana* is an attention grabber from the minute you enter the auditorium. It represents an abandoned theatre, and is meant to exist as a character in its





Above: St. Jean says he uses the eyeball imagery in this scene to draw the audience's attention to center stage. At center: The Pickled Lady.

own right. Thanks to projection technology, the walls of the theatre are alive with movement and color. The main set elements consist of three hand-sculpted arches, representing three of the four mutants who try to divert *Zarkana* from his seek-and-find missions.

The first arch represents Kundalini, the snake lady; it's the largest of the three and is decorated with more than 150' of hand-painted resin "snakes." (These were created using Styrofoam sculptures as molds into which was poured a liquid resin.) The second arch, which is also a video screen, harbors Mandragora, a plant-like creature who comes to life with arms extending out like scissors across nearly 100'. The third arch represents the Pickled Lady, a video-based creature, with six arms, who lives in a pickle jar.

"The first arch is opaque," says

Roy. "It's almost as if it is part of Radio City Music Hall. The second arch is constructed with LEDs behind an opera scrim, supplied by 3M, which has been painted. The third arch is translucent. In other words, the frame is solid. The closer the set comes to the audience, the more real it is; the closer you get to the middle, the more it becomes like a vortex." This effect is aided by the use of the large upstage LED wall belonging to Radio City Music Hall, which is used to such good advantage in the theatre's annual Christmas spectacular. The use of video is delayed until a bit later in the show, adds Roy: "The upstage wall is so huge, and we knew we'd use it, but we wanted to let the video evolve.

"In terms of aesthetics, we are at the beginning of the last century, between 1910 and 1930, midway between Gaudí, Klimt, and Art

Nouveau," says Roy. "The organic shapes are a nod to the master French glassmaker and jeweler René Lalique." These influences extend even to the design of the acrobatic equipment, as can be seen in the accompanying photos.

Roy says that he approached this historic venue with care. "It's like a cathedral," he notes. "You don't want to kill it, but you have to make it your own. I quickly proposed continuing the room's many arches in the set design." The use of arches was also intended to forge a feeling of intimacy in New York's biggest theatre: "The scale of third arch is basically the scale of a Broadway stage; it's a scale that people can relate to; it gives them a sense of perspective."

As the design developed, Roy adds, he continued to work in a specifically theatrical language. "There are many curtains that fly in

and out during the show. The first one is an Austrian, like you typically see in Radio City Music Hall. Then we added another one and another, expanding on the language of the space.”

Roy also drew on Radio City’s decorative style. “Going back to the theatre’s roots, I looked into the Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles. Deco is more phallic and Nouveau is more fallopian.” He adds that the arches, with their baroque details, are also inspired by the Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí, whose whimsical structures are one of the glories of the city of Barcelona. “This gives it a sensual feeling, as if the walls are talking. The idea of ghosts in the walls is very Art Nouveau.” At the end of the show, when darkness is dispelled and everything is bright and shiny, he says, “The staircase that comes in is very Art Deco. It’s as if it’s the first day in the history of Radio City Music Hall.”

In addition, there are nods to New York itself in the design. “It’s not so evident,” says Roy, “but, upstage at the opening of the show, you see Zark appearing in a hole; the shape of which is the shape of Manhattan Island, as seen from the sky. There’s also a full moon, which represents Radio City Music Hall.”

Some of the most startling scenic effects take place upstage. One is the “clown curtain;” an Austrian comes in, covered with the production’s clowns, sporting umbrellas and hanging upside down. Speaking about it, Roy says, “We always begin with a blank page at Cirque du Soleil. Someone made a joke that it would be nice to have two clowns hanging upside down, and somebody else asked, ‘Can we hang some guys?’—and it became a project.” During the hand-balancing act, a performer, working downstage, is backed by a series of vertical fabrics from which the clowns dangle in various positions. Another setting, which

amused many in the audience during this past summer of *Spider-Man*, features an aerial act stage in front of a giant spider’s web, with a lady arachnid belting a power ballad as bodies fly through the air.

Interestingly, given its elaborate nature, the production was designed and constructed with touring in mind. “We’re not in Las Vegas, where we can screw ourselves into the walls of the theatre,” says Roy. “We’re working inside a historical monument.” Therefore, he says, “We built our own proscenium theatre; it consist of four legs that are 90’ high and don’t touch the theatre’s interior. It’s like a Rolling Stones tour; we arrived in Radio City Music Hall with our own trussing, which holds our lighting and automation. Only on the far upstage area are we using some of the theatre flies.”

The needs of the show dictated a number of other unusual details, as well. Instead of steel cables, the cradle stations used in the flying trapeze act rely on “hanger tubes” for their rigidity. The structure of the high-wire number installed on the floor of the theatre’s orchestra pit is freestanding, without any anchor. The 60’-by-33’ curtain of ropes that Zark conjures up suddenly drops to the stage like a Kabuki curtain. And the two eagle’s-head bandstands that house the musicians on either side of the stage are 28’ tall and weigh more than 9,000lbs each.

The set was built at Stage One Creative Services, of York England. “The bones were built at Stage One,” explains Roy. “The skin was painted at a number of shops in Montréal. Each day, I went on my milk run, visiting each of the painters who worked on the scenery.”

The set, which makes use of nearly 160 motors, fits into 48 trucks. “It was huge to load in and will be huge to load out,” says Roy, who adds that some redesign will be in order to make the show fit into venues of

various sizes.

“The biggest challenge is New York itself,” adds Roy. “We don’t want to be Broadway, which has its own way of doing musical theatre. We wanted to do a rock-opera entertainment. The challenge was not to do a New York show nor a Vegas show—but we are very close to being a Cirque du Soleil New York show.” It’s a concept that has proven to be remarkably appealing at the box office.

### Pulsating video

Making the set come alive are the projections created by Raymond St. Jean, the production’s image content designer. Himself a film director, he also designed content for *ZAIA*, the Cirque show now playing in Macau. “The video content of the show is highly complex and plays an integral role in the storytelling process,” he notes. “Projections have scenic value. A number of the images projected onto the arches above the stage are interactive and react to what is happening on stage. My goal was to bring maximum credibility to this strange parallel world awakened by the wizard Zark.”

For example, during the high-wire act, the video arch is gradually invaded by writhing snakes that pay close attention to and react to the artists’ movements. Flames shooting up from the stage are reflected on the undulating forms of the snakes.

St. Jean, who worked on the show for nearly three years, says CDS’ lengthy development is crucial to the achievement of the final effect. Girard, he says, “has done a lot of film and is aware of the needs and possibilities of film and video. We started with his concept of the show, which was drawn crudely on a storyboard; the visual ideas evolved around the basic ideas of each act.” He cites as an example the *Wheel of Dean*, in which a pair of acrobats spins around in what amounts to a

giant hamster wheel. “At first, it was supposed to be a bicycle number,” the designer recalls. “We started with images of gears in the background, all of it synchronized with the action on stage. Then the bike idea went away and the Wheel of Death came in. It became a time machine, then an electrical machine—but always we had the idea of something mechanical. The visual concept went from gears to a clock to a big machine.”

Noting Roy’s idea of placing LEDs into the arch behind a painted scrim, he says, “The ideas are aesthetically intertwined, making video as close a part of the set as possible. We worked together very closely.” Commenting on Radio City’s LED wall, he adds, “It would have been foolish not to use it. It’s 90’ by 40’, so we began by taking that into account; after that, we added the 10mm LEDs in the arch.” There are more than three million pixels in the upstage wall.

The images were developed by the graphic motion company Fly

Studio. “We did a lot of green-screen shooting for the images,” says St. Jean. Alexis Laurence, who works with St. Jean as a multimedia project manager, notes that the upstage Radio City wall was custom-made for the theatre by Panasonic. The LEDs in the arches were a custom project from a manufacturer in China, working with Solotech, the Montréal-based gear supplier. He adds that 118 full panels were required for the arch. In addition, three 20K projectors from Christie Digital, attached to Zap Technologies yokes, are responsible for the show’s relatively few moments of front projection. One reason for these is the sand-painting act, in which a young woman, standing downstage, manipulates colored sand, creating new images in a matter of seconds; her handiwork is shown on a medallion screen on the proscenium.

In all cases, images are delivered by Photon media servers from VYV, a Montréal-based firm. Cueing is handled by a Vizio controller. “We

asked for a big custom MIDI interface,” says Laurence, who adds that each act has its own page of cues.

St. Jean notes that he had to be careful when designing the imagery. “There’s always a concern that the LED wall might upstage a number. At one point, I added images of fireflies, and they were stealing attention from the performers. We dimmed them down a bit. Everything I do is meant to draw attention to the act.” He cites a moment, late in the show, when he covers the set with images of eyeballs floating in water. The idea, he says, is “to have the eyes focused on the act, to draw the audience’s attention to it. It’s the same thing with the hand-balancing act; when we started with it, we worried about losing the performers in this big hall. [Thus the non-video tableau of clowns clutching the vertical fabrics.] Always, we had in mind what we could do to make an act seem bigger.”

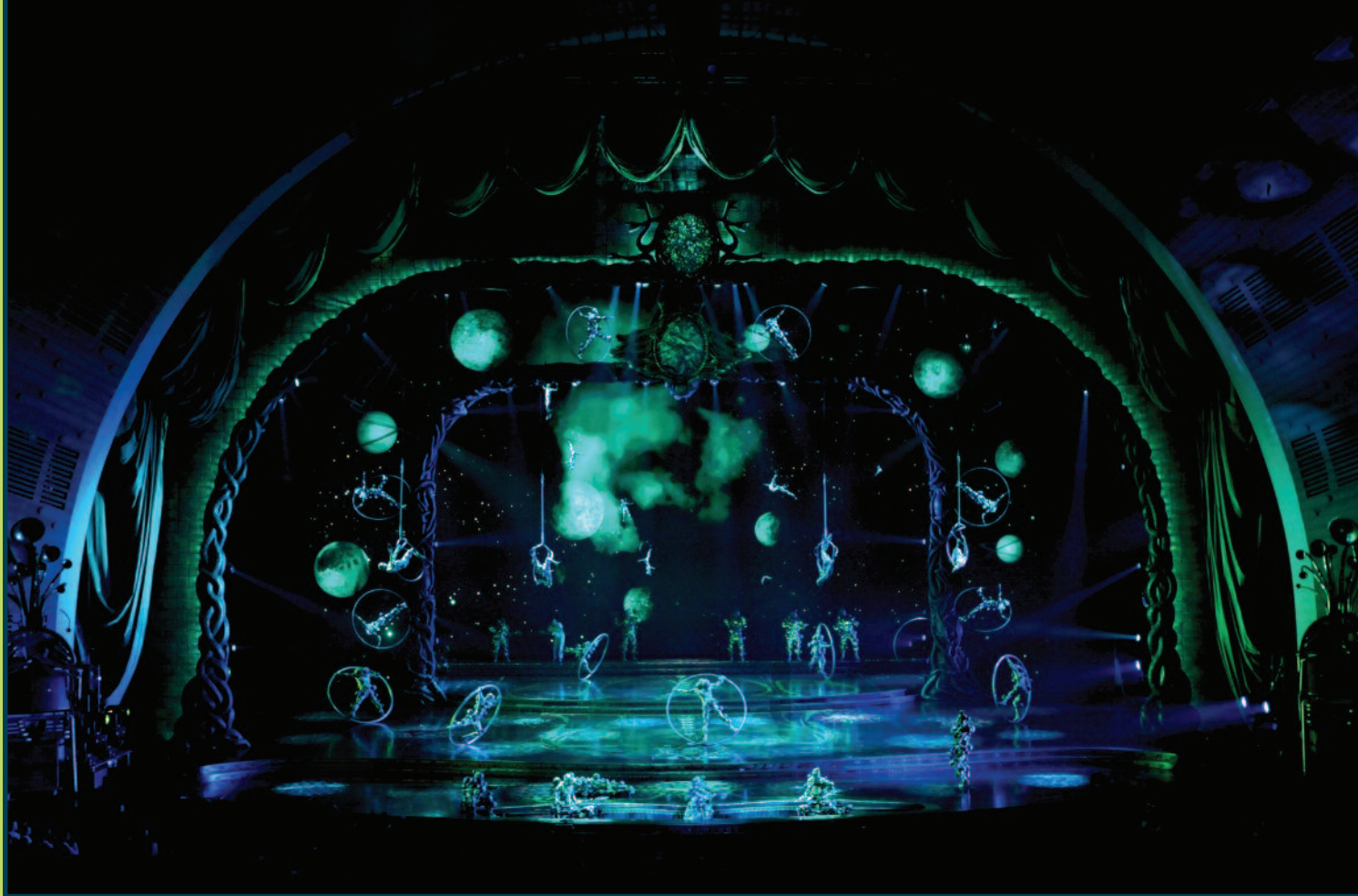
## Acrobatic lighting

Alain Lortie, *Zarkana*’s lighting designer, has a multitude of credits in live performance, working with such notable artists as Michel Lemieux, Robert Lepage, and Victor Pilon. His history with Cirque du Soleil includes the arena tour show *Delirium*. “The lighting designer is brought in at the end of the race,” he explains. “And it’s the urgency of the final sprint that I find very stimulating.”

He must have been especially stimulated on *Zarkana*, given the number of challenges posed by the show. “Because our set is so large, from extreme left to extreme right and from upstage to downstage, it was an issue to be able to cover the entire stage area,” he says, adding that he installed lighting units in every possible location. There are fewer of these than you might imagine. “With circus acts, we have to be sure that the lighting is not a problem for the acrobats,” he says. “It doesn’t matter



The clown curtain.



The above image gives a sense of the depth of *Zarkana*'s stage pictures, using Roy's multiple-arch design. Lortie creates colorful wash looks using a rig composed heavily of Philips Vari\*Lite fixtures.

if it looks good, if the acrobats are not able to perform their act.”

Still, Lortie says he enjoys a challenge. “I like to work with parameters as a conceptual matter, instead of being a victim of the situation,” he says. “In other words, I prefer to work it out. In fact, the set is a big canvas for lighting.” Like the other designers, he cites CDS’ lengthy and methodical development process as a key to the show’s success. “We had a number of workshops in Montréal, in which we found the recipe that allowed LEDs, lighting, and scenery to work together, not against each other. At some points, we have video and lighting on the scenery, and it’s hard to which is which. That was one of our goals.”

Lortie, who is essentially self-taught, notes that he works in an unusually hands-on way. “I’m a lucky lighting designer, because I program my own lighting console. Also, I was

involved in operating the show during previews.” The lighting in the show is controlled by a grandMA 2. “My assistant and I each had a console and were banging away, doing cues, for four months,” he says. The reason for this intensive process is simple, he adds. “I don’t want to be the one stopping the rehearsal. On such a big production, we want to be the department that, when it’s time to go, we’re ready to go.”

He adds that his rig consists almost entirely of moving lights, about 160 in all. The list breaks down to four models of Philips Vari\*Lite units: the VL3000 Spot, VL3000 Wash, VL3500 Spot, and VL3500 Wash FX. In addition, he makes use of an enormous complement of LEDs. “There are about 900 LED fixtures, but most of them are hidden in the set,” he says. These include Chroma-Q Color Force and Color Block units, which are distributed by A. C.

Lighting, and LED drivers from eldoLED, based in the Netherlands. (RC4 Wireless DMX data links are built into the show’s design; the company also supplied a number of props and practicals.) Lighting gear was supplied by Solotech.

“The music for *Zarkana* has provided me with a wonderful catalyst,” says Lortie. “It is definitely one of the driving forces of the show, and it inspired the lighting I’ve designed both for individual scenes and for the overall ambience of the show.” He adds that, thanks to the nature of the acts, there is a fair amount of connectivity between design disciplines: “We get SMPTE time code from the band and MIDI from the sound department.” This guarantees that everything unfolds as it should, helping to anchor the safety of the performers.

“My goal is to be done on time, on budget, with a bit of taste and a lot of

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pleasure,” adds Lortie. “Everywhere I go, I try to deliver that.” Clearly, he feels this mission was accomplished on *Zarkana*.

### Textured sound

Steven Dubuc, like Lortie, is essentially self-taught, having worked as a sound engineer in concert touring, as a production sound man on the Canadian tour of *Les Misérables*, a project manager for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, and in many capacities with Cirque du Soleil, most recently as sound designer on *ZAIA* and senior theatre consultant on *Viva ELVIS* in Las Vegas.

Dubuc describes *Zarkana* as a “highly textured” show. His role is to

integrate the sound with the lighting, video effects, costumes, music, and band cues triggered by the movements of performers—and, at the same time, to meet the demands of the theatre.

There’s another challenge, too, which has to do with the unique nature of *Zarkana*. “This is a crossover into musical theatre,” he says. “It’s more like a rock opera. The other Cirque touring shows have lyrics written in an invented language; at shows like *The Beatles LOVE* and *Viva Elvis*, you already know the songs. This is more like a rock show, and we didn’t want to have a big separation between vocals and music; we had to find a middle

ground, because the audience needs to follow the story.”

Speaking of the Radio City auditorium, Dubuc says, “The acoustics, in general, are not bad. One particular characteristic of the room is there’s a lot of flat echo, but there aren’t any reverberations that go on forever. The roof is kind of parabolic, so you get reflections in some parts of the house that aren’t found in other parts. The ultimate goal is for everyone to hear the same things in every seat, and, because of those reflections, we had to be careful not to put too much energy in the room.”

For his loudspeaker rig, Dubuc makes use of Meyer Sound MICAs



The hand balancing act, featuring a variation on the clown-curtain concept.

Photo: Jeremy Daniell



This scene makes use of both the LED panels built into one of the arches and the upstage custom Panasonic LED wall that is part of Radio City's house inventory.

on the proscenium, with left and right hangs of 16 cabinets each—in two arrays—and a center hang of eight more Mica boxes. The latter, he says, “isn’t a center channel, but a set of downfill boxes to fill the house in the middle. I also added stacks of four [Meyer] UJM-1Ps on the ground at left and right; this is because most of the shows I’ve seen at Radio City used only flying arrays and, as the characters were singing on stage, the voices were coming from above, where the array was. The UJM-1Ps help to bring down the images of the vocals.” The PA is driven by eight Meyer Galileo loudspeaker management systems. “What I like about Meyer is they make a product I can use, and I can get really good support,” he adds. “If time is short, and I need to do a MAPP, they can do that. Also, their products are very versatile.”

For underbalcony coverage, he makes use of the EAW JF60s that are part of Radio City's house gear. “If you wanted to take two weeks to install your own boxes, you could,” he says, “but sometimes the jelly isn’t worth the jam.” Similarly, for surround sound, he uses the in-house Dolby system, “It was installed about 20 years ago and is made up of about 90 Tannoy speakers. They sounded good, and, anyway, we didn’t have the ability to install that many boxes.”

On-stage foldback for the performers is provided by six Meyer UPQ-1Ps, acting as side fills, and two UPAs, located downstage for coverage down front. This system is important, Dubuc notes: “With 70 artists, the performers can’t work with packs or in-ears. They need to hear what’s going on, the beat of the song. With this set-up, the stage is well-covered and everyone can hear

what’s going on.” He adds that the singers use in-ears, either by Shure or Ultimate Ears, depending on individual preference.

In addition, the singers make use of DPA 4066 mics, a product that is very popular in Broadway shows. “On *ZAIA*, I was using the Sennheiser HSP 4, but in that show the singers don’t have a lot of physical activity. The Sennheiser mic has a small gooseneck before the capsule and it is cardioid. When the actors move and their mics go off-axis, the results aren’t so good. On *Zarkana*, there are multiple costume changes and lots of movement up and downstairs, so the mics were getting knocked around. The 4066 is an omni unit; it picks up, it has lots of gain, and it sounds good. Also, it has that leeway to be off by a quarter of an inch here or there, and it won’t kill you.”

On the band, Dubuc uses a variety



In Roy's concept, *Zarkana* takes place in an abandoned theatre; he used a specifically theatrical language—see the curtain look above—for all of his designs in the show.

of mic types. These include the Shure SM91 on the kick, Neumann KM 184 or Sennheiser MKH 8040 on the percussion. "I also have the Neumann TLM 102, which isn't too expensive for a large diaphragm condenser. A classic I really like is the Audio-Technica AT404, as well as Sennheiser 409, which I use on guitars and some percussion." The band consists of six players, plus the conductor, who is on keyboard. The musicians include a second keyboard, a bass, a drummer, a guitarist, and a percussionist. A backup singer also plays guitar and percussion. The band is broken up into two on-stage locations, at left and right.

Controlling the sound is the Meyer LCS Cue Console. "Cirque has gone in that direction, meaning everyone in the company is trained on the same console," says Dubuc. He adds, "This system is different. At the front of

house, the surface is a Cue Console, but the back end is D-Mitri," referring to the company's new audio processing and distribution platform. It was a choice that caused the designer a spot of anxiety. "Of course, I like to do cutting-edge things, but this was something that nobody had tried before," he says. "There was a bit of a leap of faith. Meyer had to do a few things to get AVB working over Ethernet the way it is meant to do; a tech from Meyer came in and did the configuration of the system." He adds, "Knock on wood, this system has been more rock-solid than the old LX300," which previously provided the internals on the Cue Console. "I was surprised," he admits. "I was expecting to have more problems than we did."

Because of the show's size, Dubuc says, CDS' normal rehearsal studios in Montréal weren't big enough, so the

company went to the former Amway Arena in Orlando. "We brought the band, so it was beneficial to us," he notes. "We could all work together prior to working in a full-size venue."

Looking ahead to the engagements in Moscow and Madrid, Dubuc says, "We'll have to reimagine the design to some extent. We can break up the main PA and hang it in different configurations. In Madrid, we may have to add more delays on a truss, but I think we have enough power to cover any eventuality. Ultimately, the challenge is to make everything seamless."

Then again, one imagines that Cirque du Soleil is ready to face any challenge as it takes *Zarkana* on its world tour before returning to New York. For years, the company has hoped to establish a beachhead in the city. With *Zarkana*, it may finally have done it. 🎪