

# RUNNING AWAY WITH THE CIRQUE

Have you ever watched the incredible feats of Cirque du Soleil's performers and wondered just what sort of training they must do? *Trevor Aung Than* goes behind the scenes of the latest Cirque show, *OVO*, with a therapist, coach and artist to find out.

**D**escribed as 'an immersion into the teeming and energetic world of insects', the current Cirque du Soleil show touring Australia, *OVO*, features 54 performing artists from 16 nations and has played more than two million spectators in over 15 cities since its premiere in 2009. Watching the mastery on the aerial trapeze or the power track you might forget that behind each act are hundreds of hours of practice and repetition. Training as an artist for Cirque is no different to any other elite sports arena – Cirque shows have coaches, trainers and medical professionals to ensure that each artist is in top physical condition for each of the ten shows they may perform each week.

So, who are these performers and the people behind-the-scenes? Here, three key team members reveal the work that goes into their roles in the biggest circus in the world.

## The therapist

A Turkish native raised in Montreal, Saro Keresteciyan is an athletic therapist. Saro started with Cirque Du Soleil in 2005 when he joined the touring show *Varekai* and spent four years on-tour. He then joined the show *OVO* during its creation and has been on tour since the premiere. Saro explains what makes a good circus therapist.

### WHY DID YOU CHOOSE ATHLETIC THERAPY?

I became interested in athletic therapy after sustaining a leg fracture playing football, but I had always been interested in helping others. I had worked previously as a lifeguard, and always played sports so it just felt right.

### WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO WORK FOR CIRQUE DU SOLEIL?

After working for the Canadian Paralympic Volleyball Team I worked on an equestrian circus called *Cheval*. When that show disbanded, the creator of *Cheval* – Gilles Ste-Croix – who was also a co-founder of Cirque du Soleil, recommended me for the job with Cirque.

### DESCRIBE A TYPICAL DAY ON THE JOB

At Cirque there is no typical day! The day therapist performs the usual duties of running a clinic as well as treating artists. A second therapist starts later and assists the artists with taping





and warm-ups and necessary treatments. He or she is on-call for any emergencies.

#### WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL JOB SKILLS YOU LOOK FOR IN A CIRQUE THERAPIST?

A therapist for Cirque needs to have solid massage and manual therapy skills, knowledge of strength and conditioning, taping and the ability to perform artist assessments efficiently – in addition to possessing all the usual traits of a good therapist!

#### WHAT MAKES A GOOD CIRQUE THERAPIST?

Being highly adaptable. The daily touring schedule changes often to accommodate media and PR events, and, of course, the artists' fitness and wellbeing fluctuates. Being able to manage these variables is a big part of the job.

#### ANY TIPS FOR ASPIRING CIRQUE THERAPISTS?

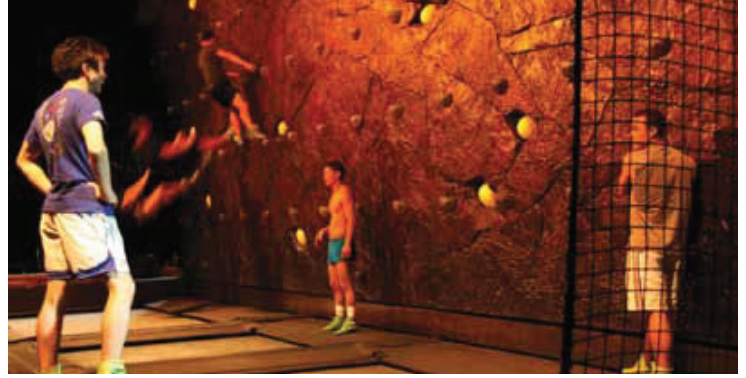
Cirque therapists must be very open to new environments. The artist population at Cirque is so diverse, consisting of athletes, acrobats, gymnasts, dancers, clowns and actors. You cannot treat everybody on the show in the same way.

### The coach

Eric Heppell, the Head Coach of OVO, has been on tour since the premiere in 2009. Eric has been with Cirque for two decades and has seen the company grow from its modest beginnings to the 5,000 employee company it is today. Eric tells us how the circus has evolved from its early days.

#### HOW DID YOU BECOME INVOLVED WITH CIRQUE?

I began my career as a gymnast and then a gymnastics coach for the Canadian Men's National Team after completing my physical education degree at university. I had become somewhat disillusioned with the politics of the sport, and Cirque approached me – and I've been working with them ever since. Obviously it has been pretty decent as that was 20 years ago!



#### WHAT WAS CIRQUE LIKE WHEN YOU STARTED WITH THE COMPANY?

When I joined Cirque, it had three shows – Nouvelle Experience, Saltimbanco and the soon to be opened Mystere. I think Cirque was still finding its feet as a company as it was growing so quickly. Back in 1993, the schedule on Mystere was completely insane – 6 days a week, 2 shows a day – that's 12 shows per week, touring constantly with just two weeks off here and there. After a few weeks of this, you would get to the end of the week and it was like a marathon, you were just exhausted.

#### HOW DO YOU FIND THE BALANCE BETWEEN JUGGLING ARTIST NEEDS VERSUS SHOW NEEDS?

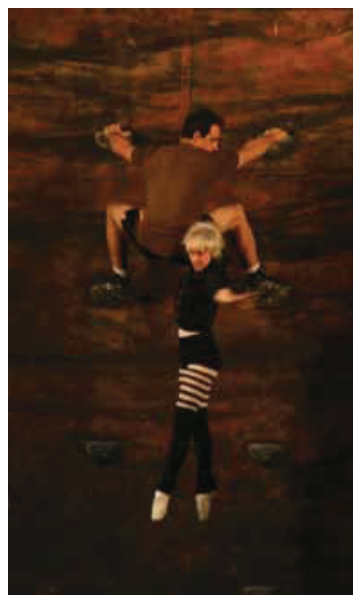
It is difficult. Cirque is a big company so there is a business side of things, the side that sells tickets – which we love of course because it pays our salaries! The other side is the artistic side that produces the shows, the beautiful product that you see on stage night after night. There has to be a synergy between the two.

#### WHAT MAKES A GOOD CIRQUE ARTIST?

No simple answer to this! You can have an artist that might not have the greatest stage presence, and is not the greatest artist – but who is the only person in the world that can do a certain trick on the teeterboard, for example. On the other hand, you have the generalist, who can turn it on on stage and is a fantastic showperson. At Cirque you need both of these profiles. You also need the 'wow' factor.

#### WHAT IS YOUR PERSONAL CONDITIONING PHILOSOPHY FOR ARTISTS AT CIRQUE?

Well, with therapy sometimes it can feel like playing patch-up with the artists, as they are constantly stressing their bodies' with the demands of the show. So we need to address the physical conditioning of each artist while being mindful of not 'force-feeding' them. We know the standard, cookie-



cutter approach to conditioning has limitations, so we usually have a variety of specialist coaches to assist the artists.

## The artist

Cirque artist, Yahia Icheboudene, performs as one of the high-jumping crickets that help to bring the show to its spectacularly energetic finale. He competed with the French national gymnastics team as a tumbler before joining Cirque as one of the original cast of OVO in 2008. Yahia talks about his training philosophy and offers his tips for aspiring Cirque artists.

### HOW DID YOU START TRAINING IN GYMNASTICS?

I started very young, when I was four years of age. I was in preschool and there was a brand new gym facility built next door to my school. My school did a special tour of the gym and I saw the trampoline and other equipment and I told my parents I wanted to join. Then, when I was six years old, I started competing – and continued competing in tumbling until I was 24.

### HOW DID YOU START WITH CIRQUE?

I saw Saltimbanco when it was touring and it was after seeing that show I knew I wanted to work for Cirque – but I also knew I wanted to finish my career as a gymnast. In 2007 I received an offer from Cirque to work with the creation of their new touring show, OVO, so I joined Cirque in 2008.

### WHAT IS YOUR TRAINING SCHEDULE LIKE DURING A SHOW?

At Cirque we are doing eight to 10 shows each week, so our training schedule has to take this into account to reduce the risk of artists burning out. Right now, I would do one to two training sessions per week on the power track and one session per week training for my new straps act. I try to do specific strength training three times each week, but it is dependent on the show and other events.

### WHAT IS YOUR OWN PHILOSOPHY ON CONDITIONING AND TRAINING?

Well, right now I am really mindful of overtraining and I try to calculate all my training during the week depending upon the show. I try to do the same warm-up routine every time before a show. I believe this gives a certain rhythm to the body, as the goal in the business of performing is longevity. If you give your body routine it helps, I think, with longevity.

### ANY TIPS FOR ASPIRING CIRQUE ARTISTS?

Sure, there are many different ways to join the company. You can send videos and it is important to stay in contact with Cirque. If you are hard-working and talented at what you do, such as gymnastics and acrobatics, it will help of course! You also require a diverse skill set – singing, dancing and acting. Even though I am already working with Cirque, I always update my resume when I can do a new trick or act (such as straps), because you must continually update your skill set.

### DO YOU STILL GET NERVOUS BEFORE PERFORMING?

Yes, even after 1,200 shows I still get nervous every day before the show. I think it is normal to be scared; the day I am not scared before the show is the day I would retire, as I believe it is healthy to feel this way before a performance. **■**



### Trevor Aung Than, BSc Physio

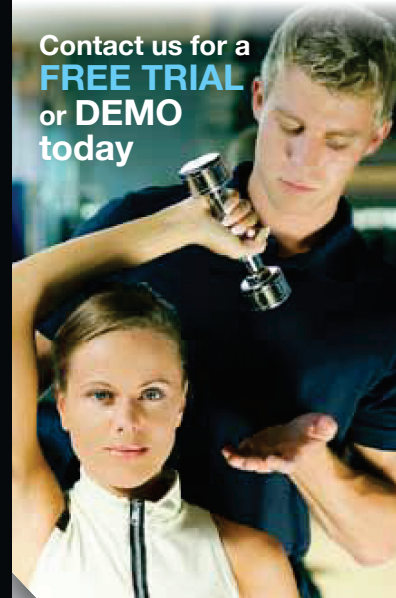
Trevor is a physiotherapist and the owner of Circus Conditioning, a company offering unconventional fitness and conditioning classes in Perth, WA. He was previously a performance medicine therapist for the Cirque du Soleil show, ZAiA, in Macau, China and has recently been working with the West Australian Ballet. He has distilled what he has discovered over the years into what he now teaches at Circus Conditioning. To learn more visit [www.circusconditioning.com](http://www.circusconditioning.com)

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