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Cirque's Amaluna a Shakespearean classic with a woman's touch

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Cirque du Soleil's Amaluna

Laurence Labat / Cirque du Soleil

Step right up folks! Be among the first to discover Amaluna, the matriarchal circus partially inspired by Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, wherein 75% of the 52 performers are women and a spectacular utopian vision of world harmony rules.

While describing her first Cirque du Soleil show at a recent media event in Montreal, New York theatre director and Harvard professor Diane Paulus said the most beautiful thing about working on it has been collaborating with performers from around the world (15 countries to be exact). "I've done a lot of theatre," she said, "but I've never done a show with this many people from this many countries."

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She reflected that if members of her international cast can find a common harmony as they relate across language barriers in building the world of Amaluna, it will be "a little tribute to the power of theatre and art to promote that kind of communication." On a more basic level, the show's creative director, Fernand Rainville, remarked: "We're just going to go in there and rock the house

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Previews of *Amaluna* begin April 19 under the big top at Montreal's Old Port before heading across the country later this year. Expectations are high, though successful happenings are something that Paulus handles well, having directed the Tony Award-winning revival of the musical *Hair* on Broadway in 2009. Her most recent triumph, a controversial, truncated version of the Gershwin musical *Porgy and Bess*, has won many accolades. Plus she is about to receive the Drama League's Founders Award for excellence in directing, a huge honour in American theatre.

Paulus is also known for her Shakespearean adaptations, such as *The Donkey Show*, a disco take on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. So it's not surprising that *Amaluna* revolves around a female sorcerer named Prospera. But to give credit to men where such is due, it was Cirque owner Guy Laliberté who came up with the idea of a circus that would pay homage to women. And Rainville claims bragging rights for having recruited Paulus (the artistic director of the American Repertory Theatre at Harvard since 2009), after Laliberté sent him out to find a female director for the project.

Cirque CEO Daniel Lamarre is confident that the show's \$25-million to \$27-million budget is being well spent. "It's an average budget for a tent show," he said. "But it's not an average approach to creation because I think we're really going into a new world here." He described Paulus as "a very strong woman who is not afraid of challenges."

Rainville, who was first introduced to the world of mega-spectacle as assistant director for Montreal's bilingual *Les Misérables* in 1992, has worked with Cirque since 2005 on various events such as the children's show *Wintuk* at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

At Cirque, directors come up with the vision (Paulus worked with her favourite dramaturge and husband, Randy Weiner, on the *Amaluna* narrative). Creative directors such as Rainville help to assemble the creative team, put together the "acrobatic skeleton" of the show, find the talent to make it work and collaborate closely with the director.

Asked how *Amaluna* differs from other shows, Rainville replied, cautiously: "Working with women principally gives you a situation where there is more discipline. I found that throughout the process here there is a level of concentration that is — different. Women retain more. I would call it a certain discipline that allows you to move forward more rapidly."

Are the men feeling downtrodden? (The normal ratio for Cirque performers is two men to one woman.) "The men are doing fine," he replied. "There are a lot of men involved in the overall production (including 14 male performers). There are men everywhere, in the creation team and so on. No, we certainly don't feel overwhelmed."

In some areas, men still rule. Of the show's 21 technicians, only three are women. The band is an all-girl ensemble, and all three singers are women, but the music is composed by two men (Guy Dubuc and Marc Lessard), who call themselves Bob and Bill. For men who appreciate female attention, "There's a lot of that," Rainville admitted. "It's great." More important, "In this project and in Diane's vision, there's something that speaks to our common humanity, something that we all share on an emotional level, whether male or female. What's being put forward is a vision of a community with its own rules and its own mythology. It's sort of like being part of a world that's being created. And that world has a lot to do with the sense of community, the sense of common purpose."

On the practical side, yes, more washrooms were needed backstage. Also, there's only one *Amaluna* act that requires a "porteur" (a strong-limbed acrobat or catcher who lifts and tosses other acrobats). But in that particular Icarian (foot-tossing) act, from China, the porteur is a woman. "We were surprised to find that out," he said. "Usually the porteurs are male."

Other acts are more egalitarian. "A lot of strength and force moves are done on straps," he explained. "And 'straps' is an equal opportunity type of performance thing. Women can do it much as the men do, and in a very powerful way. You should see their arms."

There are only two clowns in *Amaluna*, but both are women, one of them in male drag. They play the servants of the two lovers, Miranda and Romeo.

Why Romeo, not Ferdinand? Rainville defended this oddity with: "Romeo is an iconic young lover's name." Up until recently, the pair didn't even have stage names, he added. And, of course, the show is supposed to be a mashup of Shakespeare, Greek mythology and *The Magic Flute*. Anything goes.

Amaluna, after all, is a hybrid word whose combined meaning adds up to Mother Moon.

Nov. 23. For more information, visit cirquedusoleil.com.



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