

1998 EDDY Awards

The Creative Team Behind Cirque du Soleil's *O* and the Bellagio Theatre

Water and electricity are not considered very good bedfellows. In fact, one usually conducts the other to all kinds of nasty behavior. But Cirque du Soleil and Scéno Plus have found a way to marry the two with fantastic results in *O*, which premiered in October 1998 at Bellagio, the newest hotel in Las Vegas.

From a ragtag band of French-Canadian street performers, the Cirque du Soleil has evolved into one of the most enchanting troupes of daredevil artists ever to perform under the big top. Guy Laliberté (founding president), Franco Dragone (writer and director), and Gilles Ste.-Croix (director of creation) began taking their inventive circus productions on around-the-world tours in 1987, and caught the eye of gambling baron Steve Wynn, who has made them an indelible feature on the Las Vegas entertainment scene. Cirque du Soleil met with great success performing *Nouvelle Expérience* in a tent behind Wynn's Mirage Hotel. This resulted in the construction of their first permanent home at Treasure Island (another Wynn property), where *Mystère* premiered in 1994.



The *Mystère* theatre also launched a long-term collaboration between Montreal-based architectural firm Scéno Plus and Cirque du Soleil. Their latest joint venture is the spectacular 1,800-seat theatre serving as Cirque du Soleil's second permanent home in Las Vegas. Steve Wynn has placed his bets on another successful show, this one performed in, on, around, and above a 1.5 million-gallon pool of water, with high divers and synchronized swimmers adding to the fun of *O* (a phonetic spelling of the French word for water, *eau*).

What makes the new show and the new theatre so spectacular is, without a doubt, the water. "We created a theatre where people would feel taken away to another era, when romance and beauty prevailed, while combining classic architecture with the most advanced and state-of-the-art technology," says Patrick Bergé, president and general manager of Scéno Plus. "The challenge was dealing with the large body of water."

Michel Aubé, senior architect at Scéno Plus, worked

on the design of the theatre with Michel Crête, scenic designer for Cirque du Soleil. A highlight of the theatre's design is the oval ceiling feature with two layers of galvanized mesh and metal ribs which shimmer over the audience.

The real challenge for both Scéno Plus and Cirque du Soleil was how to do successful underwater dimming and see the light in the pool.

A light tunnel under the front lip of the stage has large Plexiglas windows that allow fixtures to flood the pool with light. Bubbles added to the water help the lighting effects be seen, but make the pool somewhat like swimming in a glass of champagne.

Underwater dimming was even more of a challenge; the task of solving it fell to Bob Barbagallo, lighting system designer for Scéno Plus. After over one year working on the problem, he eventually developed a special GFCI (ground-fault circuit interrupter) dimmer and "magic" cable that could handle the 400' runs from the dimmer room to the pool. Steve Terry of Production Arts/PRG was brought in during the dimmer testing process and eventually won the bid to install the lighting packages and supervise system integration.

The look of the light is the domain of Luc Lafortune, Cirque du Soleil's lighting designer and part of the creative team for *O*, which also includes costume designer Dominique Lemieux and sound designers Jonathan Deans and François Bergeron. Each was faced with the challenge of finding waterproof design solutions, but the result is a beautiful 90-minute celebration of the theatre and the human spirit.

Always looking for new challenges, Cirque du Soleil and Scéno Plus are ready to open their next collaboration, or third permanent theatre, this one at Disney World in Orlando. Next comes another theatre at the Beau Rivage in Biloxi, MS. Scéno Plus has also begun working on the renovation of the Battersea Power Station outside of London, England, where the entertainment venues include a possible theatre for Cirque du Soleil. One daring circus and one no-holds-barred architectural firm add up to one amazing collaboration of form and function. Just add water and mix.

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