Precise clumsiness in a seriously silly solo show by Montreal’s “master of tumbles”

HANOVER, NH— Wielding a bottle of wine, a collection of objects straight out of a flea market and a peerless set of circus skills, Montreal clown-acrobat Patrick Léonard keeps the audience on the edge of its seats, poised between laughter and gasps, with his celebrated solo show, Patinoire. The show comes to the Hopkins Center for the Arts on Wednesday and Thursday, May 1 and 2, in Spaulding Auditorium.

Léonard is a founding member of the Montreal circus collective Les Sept Doigts de la Main (Seven Fingers), one of the leading companies in a city known as “the big top of the world” (Washington Post). This show—Les Sept Doigts’s first solo show—draws on the same unaffected theatricality that have made the group an international hit, including providing choreography for the recent Broadway revival of Pippin, directed by Diane Paulus.

Founded in 2002, Les Sept Doigts is a collective of creators who set out to redefine contemporary circus from its essence and explore the endless possibilities offered by the blending of artistic disciplines. Each of their creations is thus a new epic, a subtle mix of acrobatics and theatricality. In its 17 years, the collective has created shows as diverse as their creative minds: solo shows, Broadway musicals, prestigious international collaborations, special events, Olympic ceremonies, television performances, immersive experiences, and more.

Coming to Les Septs Doigts after three years of training at the National Circus School of Montreal and several years as a clown and juggler in European companies (including Switzerland’s famed Circus Knie), Léonard performs in and directs many Les Sept Doigts shows, sometimes alongside his two daughters. In 2015, he co-directed the acrobatic performances of Moby Dick, directed by Dominic Champagne, at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in Montreal.

“Patinoire” translates as “ice rink,” perhaps referring metaphorically to the show’s precarious feats of daring. Playing a shy, eager-to-please audiophile trying to operate bulky outdated hi-fi equipment, he juggles, balances and tumbles with a precise “clumsiness,” while the audience wonders: Will the next moment bring satisfaction or disaster? Created in 2010, the show has toured Quebec and Europe, including a hit 2014 run at France’s high-stakes Avignon Festival. Le Journal Du Dimanche (France) called Leonard “a worthy descendant of silent cinema, à la Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin.”
Affectionately known in circus circles as “le maître des chutes” or “master of tumbles,” Léonard told writer Anne-marie Desbiens that falling artfully was bred into him. “I grew up with six older siblings, so let’s just say I’ve been pushed around a lot as a kid. Tumbling is a game for me! Later on, gravity intrigued me. We see falls everywhere in the circus universe: bodies falling, objects falling, there are endless possibilities. It’s also an experiment the artist shares with the audience: everybody has taken a fall in their lives. I love to play with the tension before the tumble, falling at just the right time or when the audience least expects it.”

As for his precise clumsiness, that art of the near miss, he said, “My greatest inspiration is me! My own clumsiness in life, the carelessness, the blunders of those who, like me, want to push faster than time. I drew from what I observed around me on a daily basis, in just about everyone’s slip-ups. Buster Keaton is also an artist I’ve always admired.”

MORE ABOUT...

Patrick Léonard was a four-time Canadian Champion in artistic roller skating with a chemistry degree when he decided to devote himself to circus. After three years of training at the National Circus School of Montreal, he was hired as a clown and diabolist at the Casino de Montréal and then by European companies and won the Nikouline Prize at the World Circus Festival of Tomorrow in Paris. Since 2014, he has traveled extensively to Nunavut, in Canada’s Far North, in collaboration with ArtCirq, following which he began the co-artistic direction of Unikkaaqtauqt, a multidisciplinary production produced by Artcirq, Les Sept Doigts and Taqqut Productions. The show will premiere in Montreal in 2019.

Circus in Montreal
Circus underwent a transformation the 1970s—away from stunts and animal acts and toward a subtler, more theatrical “new circus,” exemplified by companies like the Pickle Family Circus and the Montreal-based Cirque du Soleil. While old-style circuses continued to decline, with Ringling Brothers finally folding its tent in 2017 after 136 years, Cirque du Soleil has continued to grow, and other new circuses continue to emerge. In an interview with the Washington Post, Concordia University professor Patrick Leroux, who heads the Montreal Working Group for Circus Research, traced the city’s circus origins the 1976 Summer Olympics. “That’s when the national gymnastic team came to Montreal, creating an interesting mix of gymnasts and artists that hung out together.” In response to Quebec’s francophone movement, many corporations left the province for Toronto—but the artists remained. In the early 1980s, a group of Montrealers who had trained at the national circus school of Bulgaria envisioned a Euro-styled company in America. In 1984, with the help of a million-dollar grant from the province of Quebec, Cirque du Soleil, was founded. More investment in circus schools and performance spaces have help cement Montreal’s supremacy in new circus.

The Hopkins Center for the Arts
Founded in 1962, “the Hop” is a multi-disciplinary academic, visual and performing arts center dedicated to uncovering insights, igniting passions, and nurturing talents to help Dartmouth and the surrounding Upper Valley community engage imaginatively and contribute creatively to our world. Each year the Hop presents more than 300 live events and films by visiting artists as well as Dartmouth students and the Dartmouth community, and reaches more than 22,000 Upper Valley residents and students with outreach and arts education programs. After a celebratory 50th-anniversary season in 2012-13, the Hop enters its second half-century with renewed passion for mentoring young artists, supporting the development of new work, and providing a laboratory for participation and experimentation in the arts.

CALENDAR LISTING

Patinoire, a production of Les Septs Doigts de la Main
Quebec’s Les Sept Doigts de la Main (Seven Fingers) fascinates audiences across continents and languages with works that flit between circus and theater, comedy and poetry. In this solo performance, Seven Fingers co-founder Patrick Léonard tugs the heart strings while craftily deploying peerless circus skills. Playing a shy, eager-to-please audiophile trying to operate bulky outdated hi-fi equipment, he juggles, balances and tumbles with a precise “clumsiness” that keeps you on the edge of your seat. Will the next moment bring satisfaction or disaster?

Wednesday, May 1, 7 PM
Thursday, May 2, 7 pm
Spaulding Auditorum, Hopkins Center for the Arts, Hanover NH
$25/20
603.646.3991, hop.dartmouth.edu

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