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## On New/Contemporary Circus

—Based on the Cirque Éloize's Performances

### Prologue

*Circus*. What is the first image came up in your mind? When I was much smaller than now, a circus was like this: A big-top, lots of animals - elephants, lions, horses, monkeys and so forth, acrobats, jugglers, clowns and for some reason, balloons. I loved the tension when I was watching seemed to be dangerous tricks, and also, applause and whistle following each shows. I loved their old-fashioned music. I loved the very end of the circus, since glittering paper pieces and balloons were fell down from the centre of the big-top like a snow falling from the sky. That was all I have been known as circus show, until I encountered a performance by Cirque Éloize, called “Nebbia”.

### Introduction

Like many other matters do, circus also had changed. The first new/contemporary circus performance I saw was “Nebbia” performed by Cirque Éloize. After that I watched few more performances with DVDs or went to the place where the performances were held. From certain period, circus, in my opinion, had *shifted*. I, obviously, cannot take every circus shows into consideration, therefore I would like to focus on the three performances of Cirque Éloize; two pieces from their “Sky Trilogy”, “Nomade” and “Nebbia”, and as a typical example of cross-over, “Cirque Orchestra.”

Abstractly, recent circus groups seems to having their own distinctive colours. Consequently, the following notions would be valid for Cirque Éloize, but may not apply to every New/Contemporary circus groups. To examine what consists New/Contemporary circus and what is its own feature, I shall compare their performances to traditional circus. Those traditional circus are mainly depend on my old scrabbles and two books: “꼭마단 사람들 (Cirkusfolk),” a 6 years of photo-documentary book of Korean Traditional circus group and “La Merveilleuse Histoire du Cirque(The Marvellous History of Circus)” by Henry Thétard, though I did not directly quote from those books. I would like to begin with the superficial changes of circus then move onto the inner changes, then finally to a features within the performance of Cirque Éloize.

## **Circumstantial Changes**

### **- Place of the performance**

Lets start with the most obvious and visible matter. When we wanted to see a circus show, we used to visit Big-tops sat in large squeres. Now, if we want to see circus show of Cirque Éloize, we have to visit large auditorium or stage. This spatial change, both for performer and spectator, differentiated the structure of circus performance. When we are sit in the Big-top, spectators were able to see performance around the stage from every quarter, and even, could see someone sat opposite to one. However, this was changed into theatre stage-like space, where spectators only allowed to see performance from one side. It was sort of limitation to spectators, but on the other hand, I suppose that this allowed circus performers to do much experiments within their performances.

Concerning with the limitation, spectators who sit back row or even balcony seats apparently lacks opportunity to communicate with performers. Communication should not have to be verbal; it could be simply making eye contacts. Though Cirque Éloize tries a lot to communicate with spectators, they cannot actually reach out to those who sit backwards. In the Cirque Éloize's performance, especially in "Nebbia", they try to draw out responses from spectators. Of course, they ask everyone in the hall to clap together or scream out together, but the verbal communication is strictly limited to a couple of front lows. One may argue that if it was huge Big-top, it would be the same anyway, but I object since if it was Big-top, they could get response at least from all quarters. Also for the performers, they might be restricted by the stage and had to choreograph differently which might lead them to utilise less space compared to the traditional circus.

Like a light and a shadow, there seems to be positive aspect of this one-sided stage. Cirque Éloize tries to adopt background image to their performance. This is both valid to "Nomade" and "Nebbia". This also related to the later part of the paper, therefore I shall roughly comment on this. In "Nomade" they set a large and long white drape at the back of their stage. Then with their lights and projector, they change the colour of stage, black, red or blue, etc., and even shows us a image of full moon. In the similar vein, in "Nebbia," Cirque Éloize set big projector screen at the back of the stage, and when they change the act or scene, they simply changes the projecting image to change the atmosphere of each scenes. Those kind of atmosphere creations or background settings apparently would not be able to introduce if they were performing in Big-top, where they can hardly define 'back' of their stage.

### **- Audience**

There might be not much difference of audience between traditional circus and new/contemporary

circus. Though what seems to be different is that there were more families or children in the traditional circus show, there are relatively many adults in new/contemporary circus performances. I cannot be sure, but one explanation of this change could be explained by the advertisement/promotion of the circus show. For instance, traditional circus advertisement were mainly aimed children with dream-like themes, whereas new/contemporary circus targeting adults with somewhat more nostalgia-evoking copy-writing<sup>1</sup>. This might be also explained by theme/structural change within new/traditional circus scene.

### **Changes within Circus Performances**

#### **- Narration**

As we can apparently perceive from the title of Cirque Éloize's performance, there are certain story line or narration they would like to deliver us via their performance. This, even, not a one volume of story; It's *Sky Trilogy*. Though I have not had chance to see their second part of Trilogy, "The Rain", I was able to see the first and last chapter of it, "Nomade" and "Nebbia." If we adopt notions from literature, "Nomade" can be read as first person narrative story and "Nebbia" as mainly first person narrative, with constantly shifting perspective between Gonzalo and Stephane, though Gonzalo is the main character of the story. Also throughout the *Sky Trilogy*, it is noticeable that the structure of performances are much resembles to the structure of novel. When we open the cover of book, we generally meet a sentence like *To....* This kind of devoting, if one can name it, transformed into those performances. We can find this at the beginning of the performance, or rather *prologue*; "Nomade" is devoted to a girl named Sofia; "Nebbia" is devoted to a friend named Stephane. I cannot be so sure, but deduced from the soundtrack of "The Rain," it seems to be devoted to a girls father, or the narrator's father. These narration with certain perspective is hard to be found in traditional circus, which mainly focused on exhibiting their skills in certain order.

The themes of both circus show are clearly expressed: *Nomade* is mainly about love, and *Nebbia* is about memory of Gonzalo, of his grandmother, of his old home town, of his lover, and of his friend Stephane.

#### **- Theatrical Elements**

It is convincible that new/contemporary circus had somewhat degree influenced by other form of arts, especially theatre. It is common that theatre usually has two or more act, unless it is one-act play. Sometimes, if the theatre is fairly long, they usually have around fifteen minute intermission,

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<sup>1</sup> They might promoted "Nebbia" differently country by country, but the copy was like this when they had performance in Korea: The magical performance of dream circus, *Nebbia*, will evoke your beautiful childhood memory and lead you back to your old memories. I suspect that children would have old memories or childhood memory.

after they played half of their whole play.

If one can say traditional circus is relatively long, though it usually lasted around one hour, one act play, new/contemporary circus, on the other hand, is fairly long several act play, sometimes with intermission. Before move on, I would like to let you know that what I meant my *act* is that a scene or scenes which has coherent theme. Lets look more closer to “Nomade” and “Nebbia.” It felt like act division in “Nomade” was somewhat vague to me, though I was able to see the shifting of scenes. In “Nebbia,” the distinction between acts became much more clear since they inserted narration or side-show in-between every acts. It is valid to both performances that they mark the beginning and end of each scene with their music.

#### - Costume

In traditional circus, generally every performers wore somewhat extraordinary clothes, such as glittering clothes, feather-like puffy and thin clothes, or round red nose of clown, if one can call that clothes. When it comes to Cirque Éloize’s performances, those glittering and unusual clothes gone away. They are mainly dressed in white clothes. In “Nomade,” the leading clowns have their red nose draw with cosmetics and wear suits, and depend on the scene, the performers clothes changes; if there is a performer playing bride roll, then she or he wears wedding dress, and so on. Interestingly, in “Nebbia,” performers rarely change their cloth, since the theme colour of “Nebbia” is white. They are trying to imply metaphorical meaning also with clothes and colours. Presumably, they mark their rolls with clothes, and clowns in “Nomade” are continuously shift their roll as clown and ordinary performer in the performance<sup>2</sup>.

#### - Music

Cirque Éloze play live music in performance same as in the traditional circus. They sing together, plays instruments and so on. However, there is one noticeable difference between traditional circus and their performance: The lyrics. This is much more distinctive in “Nomade,” and actually, understanding of lyrics helps spectators to enhance the understanding of performance. They carry stories with their lyrics, and in “Nebbia,” they tries to attain comical effect through the lyrics. However, the attempt to achieve comical effect in “Nebbia” hopelessly failed since ordinary Koreans were not able to understand neither Italian nor Spanish. Besides the lyrics, the music they play contributes a lot to creating certain atmosphere of the scene, with their melody.

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<sup>2</sup> To avoid misunderstanding, I would explain *roll shifting* here. The two clowns, especially the guy with long hair, are sort of organizer or leader of the performance as “Clown.” Throughout the performance, the guy with curly hair plays comical clown roll, whereas the guy with long hair ride mono-bicycle. When we observe the performances closely, we can find that all of the performers has their specialized discipline, i.e. Their own field of trick. They do not cross others field, rather stick to their own fields. The roll shifting occurs only within theatrical field. For instance, the girl who played bridal mate in one scene, plays mad girl in another scene, and so forth.

- *Technical aides - “Nomade” and “Nebbia”*

Thanks to the technical development, Cirque Éloize presents a lot of magical scenes to spectators. As I mentioned earlier, it relates back to the spatial change. Since they now have a *back side* of their performance, they were able to use it as a *mise-en-scène*. With the help of projector they easily change the colour or background of scenes. We can see from both play that the salient roll of developed technique: In “Nomade” at the last scene they actually pour down the water from above to show that it is raining. At the beginning of the last scene, it rains on the two performers then it gradually broad into whole stage. In the similar vein, in “Nebbia” they actually spread out fog through the hall and manage to fill the space with it. One scene of “Nebbia” also contains raining scene, but this time not of water but of thousands of corks, to show that it is heavy rain and make the sound of heavy rain<sup>3</sup>. Also in “Nebbia” they play the sound of sea at the beginning and narrating part, thanks to the audio device. Consequently one can say that the technical aides contributed new/contemporary circus to achieve much more abundant effect and allows them to introduce experiments to their performances.

- *Blending of Genres : Cross-over*

As I mentioned above, Cirque Éloize adopted visual art to their performances with projector. What I want to take into consideration in this section is “Cirque Orchestra<sup>4</sup>” which I mentioned at the introduction. As you might sense from the title, Cirque Orchestra, they blend circus with high classical music, and I though this could be typical example of blending genre and cross-over in the scene of circus. It was quite challenging for me to find articles on this performance and video clip of it; though I failed to find some articles, but luckily I managed to find some video clips. Based on the video clips, my reflection is following: First of all, it was quite astonishing idea to collaborating circus with classical music, since in my mind, circus is sort of popular culture and classical music is of high class culture. In the performance, the performers wore white clothes with absolutely no decorations, not even unique make-ups. After I watch a couple of different fragment from the performance, I noticed that the circus performance was an interpretation of classical music, though it is not common form of interpretation. With their physical movements they were interpreting the classical music at the same time the music was played by orchestra, in physical form, and it was well choreographed with sufficient understanding of classical music. Therefore, I could say that

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, they successfully made sound of heavy rain with thousand of corks poured down from the high ceiling.

<sup>4</sup> The music they used in “Cirque Orchestra”; Adagio pur cordes, op.11 / Capriccio espagnol, op.34 / Danse arabe / Vocalise no.14, op.34 / Valse triste / Danse macabre, poème symphonique, op.40 / Pavane pour orchestre, op.50 / Danse persane / Mort d'Ase / Danse bacchanale

circus blended with other genres is a sort of tool of fresh interpretation of other art forms, deepening the understanding of other art forms in relation to their performance, though it is controversial.

*- Substitute animals with ordinary objects*

In traditional circus, appearance of animals were quite general, such as elephants horses, monkeys, birds, tigers or lions and so forth. However, in none of Cirque Éloize's performances is it impossible to find animals. In "Nebbia," in certain scene, they use fragments of white fabrics and hang them to invisibly fine strings and move fast back and forth to illustrate bird flying through trees. It would be rather correct to say that they structure performances not including animals. In other words, animals are excluded from the new/contemporary circus scene. When they need animals, they simply wear costumes or make-up to mark that they are animals.

**Distinctive Element in performance of Cirque Éloize**

*- Intervals and Revised Side-show*

As I mentioned before there are relatively long intervals when act changes in Cirque Éloize's performances, and they fill-up the intervals with show which to somewhat extend remind me of Side-show. If side-shows in traditional circus were consisted of freaks, those of Cirque Éloize's performances are consisted of freak characters, or freak or comical contents. In "Nomade" there is a female character who seems to be a sort of freak, for instance screaming out repetitiously; In other intervals the two clowns revise the former scene, a female performer contorts her body, into comical scene. Intervals in "Nebbia" is rather brutal or violent compared to those of "Nomade." Those side-shows actually do not exhibits any physically imperfect bodies, or freaks. Those are substituted by a body or bodies disguising to be physically imperfect or playing freaks. I shall name this *revised* side-shows.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the whole paper I tried to sketch out some segments of new/contemporary circus based on the Cirque Éloize's performances. To sum up, the following can be considered as some elements of new/contemporary circus:

1. Using one-sided stage instead of Big-top.
2. Targeting not only children but also, and mainly adults spectators.
3. Having certain and relatively clear theme and narration within performance.
4. Adopting theatrical elements, such as Act-division or intermission.
5. Using costumes as a roll-marker or carry meaning to somewhat extend.
6. Music with lyrics - regardless of the language - as a tool of carry narration and of creating certain atmosphere.
7. Adopting technique to enhance the density of the performance.
8. Blending with other genres.

9. Absence of Animals.

Although those eight elements might not be applied to all new/contemporary circus since the reflection is based on one Circus group, I guess that those are drawing lines between traditional circus and new/contemporary circus.

### References

Cirque Éloize Official Homepage. <http://www.cirque-eloize.com/>

Oh, J.-R. (2004). *꼭마단 사람들 (Cirkusfolk)*. Seoul: Homi.

Thétard, H. (1978). *La Merveilleuse Histoire du Cirque*. Paris: Julliard.

### List of Cirque Éloize's Performances

- Nomade – La nuit, le ciel est plus grand
- Jamie Adkins' Typo
- Cirque Orchestra
- Excentricus
- Cirque Éloize
- Rain – Comme une pluie dans tes yeux (On Tour)
- Nebbia (On Tour)