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circus

Cabinet level position

We chat with Nathan Dennis,
one of the out artists with
Cirque du Soleil's newest show,
'Kurios — Cabinet of Curiosities'



It's a cliché that at some point, all young boys dream of running away to join the circus. A circus. Any circus. You'd think it hasn't actually happened since the Great Depression. But for Nathan Dennis, not only is it literally true, it is exactly the future he imagined.

"I saw a Cirque du Soleil show when I was about 13," recalls the native of Brisbane in Queensland, Australia. The show was one of Cirque's earliest touring productions: *Saltimbanco*. "I said to my mother that I would really like to do that. My mom thought I was a little crazy but I wanted run away with the circus."

But what exactly was the "that" they were doing, and how does a tween prepare for a career in the circus? Dennis was pretty savvy about it.

"I made the link between what I saw [under the big top], and gymnastics," he says. "When I was younger, I was always hand-standing and was a little bit acrobatic." But he immediately began taking formal gymnastics classes, perfecting his tumblers and jumps and stretches — all with one goal: To join Cirque du Soleil.

"My main background was trampoline, so [I felt comfortable applying that to] all the acts in Cirque that involve an aerial element. That's how I made the link. If I had

good aerial awareness, I could do a double somersault from a swing or a trapeze."

Ummm... Aerial awareness? Explain for us couch potatoes, please. Dennis laughs.

"It's pretty much just have a good ability to know where you are when in the air," he explains. "[To execute] which trick you are doing, you need to be a little fearless, as well. It all comes naturally to me."

After years of practice, once he finished high school, he auditioned.

And he was hired.

For *Saltimbanco* — the very show that triggered his fascination in the first place.

Talk about lightning in a bottle.

That was, remarkably, about a decade ago. In the intervening time, Dennis has moved into one of Cirque's newest productions: *Kurios* — *Cabinet of Curiosities*, which is now in its more than month-long run under the distinctive colorful tent at Lone Star Park in Grand Prairie. And while Dennis has been with the show for nearly three years, the run-up to it has been a lengthy and daunting undertaking.

Ever wonder how the creative folks at Cirque du Soleil put together a new show from soup to nuts? Dennis has lived it.

Cirque management had begun to hear feedback that, after 30 years of performances, their shows were becoming a little predictable. To address that, the director and writer of the show, Michel Laprise, declared a mandate: Get rid of what they were doing out of habit versus what they did out of necessity (safety, for instance). The result is *Kurios*.

One thing that sets apart the act Dennis is a part of, called AcroNet, is that just a few years ago, much of what you see would not have been possible. Advances in technology made the trampoline rigging a reality. What arrives on stage looks like a music box, and out of it, the characters come to life (Dennis is one of six performers in the act). They then dazzle us with a human-powered display of physicality.

"When we practiced in our high school gym it was never on this scale," Dennis says, still slightly amazed at what they are able to do. "I was definitely excited when they said we have this new project. I didn't envision the net whatsoever."

All of that required not just tons of training, but the ability to design a unique and entertaining act.

Dennis was plucked from *Saltimbanco*

to join five other artists — none of whom he knew personally, only by reputation on their work in other Cirque productions — to develop the act together.

First, they had to learn how to use the net itself, and to develop their leg strength and control the net with their feet. Then they needed to turn those skills into something.

"For the first two months, we paired with a choreographer and acrobatics coach, and they put together a rough draft of the act. Then we presented it to the artistic director. We'd go back and forth until he liked what he saw. The full creation period was nine months — a week before we premiered, we were still changing things. And we're still developing stuff now," he says. "I still don't know how [we] pulled it off."

AcroNet has proven popular with audiences of all ages — the costumes (a distinctive aspect of all Cirque shows) conjure up fishes either in a net or buoyantly swimming through the "water," behaving with goofy abandon. All of which seems very "Cirque du Soleil" to Dennis.

"I just think that there's an attention to detail and it's the small details that make the shows stand out," says. There's even

KURIOS
Lone Star Park,
1000 Lone Star Parkway, Grand Prairie
CirqueDuSoleil.com/kurios.org.

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dude, and, grossly, people listen to dudes more. I think what happens is people walk away without realizing it, having this new frame of reference for who trans people are. We're not weirdos. We're not freaks. We're not all the stereotypes that people have put out there in the media in the past. And there's not a fucking foam core sign in their face. That has value too, absolutely. But it's a totally different way of accessing them. I'm not wagging my finger at them. I'm making them laugh.

You say that an audience is more apt to listen to a man rather than a woman. Is that based on any personal experience of your own? It's this weird shift for me to go from this butch dyke who was only visible because I looked like a man with huge tits. I mean, I was visible for that, but I wasn't sexually visible to people. I definitely wasn't anything near a sort of female standard that culturally we have, so I was largely invisible until they figured out that I was female. Then, I was just weird. Now, there's a shift in how people look at me and listen to me.

How does it make you feel to know that people sexualize you in a way they didn't before you transitioned? I'm gonna say something that will piss people off, but generally speaking, if people find true value in compliments about their appearance, then there's probably some void that needs to be filled that will never be filled with compliments. [Compliments] have never, ever done anything for me. After my chest surgery, I started taking hormones, and I started to love myself in a different way and people [were] seeing what I was feeling about myself. But comments on my appearance? Those are empty to me.

What kind of place did comedy have in your life as a kid? When you were a kid did you get together with siblings or cousins and put on shows for your family? My thing was, I would come out in the intermission and do a comedy set, and I wrote my own jokes and they were horrible. They made no sense whatsoever. I didn't understand joke structure — I was 6. But I used to watch *The Carol Burnett Show* and all the Dean Martin roasts. I used to watch Flip Wilson and Rich Little. Oh god, when I was a kid, we had Bill Cosby's album of storytelling, which I kind of cringe at now. But at the time, while he was, you know, drugging women, we had his vinyl on our record player, and I remember

listening to that. So, I was the comic relief in the theatrical shows we performed. I would always come out during the break while they were changing behind the curtain sheet on a clothesline, and they would be behind me, and I would be telling jokes to my aunts and uncles. That was my early sort of exposure. It's so weird that after being a kid it never even dawned on me — never registered — that I could ever be an artist like that and entertain people and have it be a career. I talk about this frequently, but it really was life changing: This guy was writing jokes for *The Daily Show* and he was looking for something creative to do locally. He started offering comedy-writing workshops at our local comedy club, and he sent me a postcard. I owned a web development company, and I'm like, "What the hell is this?" It's so weird because it was really kind of kitschy, with this cartoony black, old-timey microphone in the spotlight. I left it on my desk at my office for a couple of weeks, and I stared at it many times. I was like, "I'm interested, but I'm really scared." Finally, I picked up the phone at the end of the week before the class started the following Monday and said, "Hey, I saw your postcard," and he was like, "I got one spot left." I said, "I'll take it! I'll take it!" I did the workshop and fell in love, and that was 15 years ago this January.

At first I started by writing poop and fart jokes, and I'm like, "OK, that's not me," but I was too scared to tell the truth in the beginning of who I was. About two years into it, I wrote my material but didn't really understand who I was on stage until a couple of years later. It takes a while to figure out who you are.

How did getting to know and touring with Margaret Cho in 2006 help you find your voice? I consider Margaret one of those people who's an absolute truth-teller on stage. She's very raw and open about who she is, what she's done, what's she's seen, how she deals with things. Traveling with her absolutely cracked me open and helped me be more brave about exactly who I was. I remember saying to her that I was scared to tell LGBT audiences that I was trans, and she's like "Why? These are your people!" But I'm like, "I know, but they're the ones I want to love me the most." She's like, "We need representation from the trans community. We really need that. They need to hear your story." It really changed my perspective because I was like, "I can actually be of service here. I can tell my story."

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an LGBT moment in the show, inserted by Laprise (who, like Dennis, is openly gay) where he puts a rainbow in the show — a wink to the big queer following Cirque has always enjoyed.

Just before the Dallas production opened, Dennis and the rest of the cast were on a break, which allowed him to return to his family in Australia. Now that he's 30, he realizes that his dream job

comes at a cost.

"I was dating someone in Australia, but I do not [have a partner] now. It's hard to meet people and maintain a relationship — especially when you are leaving and going to a city far away, it's kind of draining to manage," he says.

Ah, life in a circus. It's not all clowns and rainbows.

— Arnold Wayne Jones

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