

THEATER

The man on the flying trapeze

Gay performer the highlight of Cirque du Soleil's *Alegría*

BY FLOYD SKLAVER

The circus is in town! And with it, the totally hot gay gymnast

Gaston Elie, who opens the show high above the big top on the synchronized trapeze.

Gracefully moving in perfect tandem with his female partner, the 29-year-old Argentinean is the high point of Cirque du Soleil's latest offering in Portland, *Alegría*, which runs through Oct. 26 at the Grand Chapiteau on Southwest Moody Avenue.

For anyone who hasn't seen a Cirque extravaganza, it's an amazing blend of circus acts, music and spectacle. While nominally each show has a basic storyline and theme (*alegría* is Spanish for elation and joy), according to artistic director Pierre Parisien (who is also gay), it is "not important." Instead, just let the splendor of the production and the artistry of the performers wash over you. Sit back and gaze in wonder at the strength, elegance and agility of these magnificent performers.

Especially Gaston Elie.

A sixth generation of a circus family, Elie has been performing since he was 8 years old. His father, who owns a traveling circus in Buenos Aires, is a trapeze artist, his mother a tightrope walker and his sister a contortionist.

When Elie was growing up, his father used to let him perform a very simple trapeze routine during the matinee shows ("because my number wasn't good enough to perform at night"). Living out of three suitcases, he has been on the road his entire life and traveling with Cirque du Soleil since 1999. "It is my passion," he says.

For the past year, Elie has been joined by his equally yummy boyfriend, Keith Stiles, a former competitive bodybuilder.

The couple met two years ago when *Alegría* was performing in Denver. Elie was riding the Cirque float in the Gay Pride parade, and Stiles, a licensed massage therapist, was on another float in front of him. After a series of mix-ups worthy of a romantic comedy, they hooked up and tried to sustain a long-distance relationship for six months. When *Alegría* was looking for a masseur to join the company, Stiles gave up his business in Denver and ran away with the circus.

Cirque du Soleil is "very open about homosexuality," says Elie. "A lot of

gay people work for the company, and it's not a problem." In fact, Stiles receives all the benefits that any other spouse receives. "When my boyfriend is inside the circus, we kiss and hug each other," Elie says. "We hold hands. Everybody knows he's my boyfriend, and I'm gay."

Artistic director Parisien says that when *Alegría* was in Vancouver, British Columbia, recently, one of its gay publicists was having dinner at an outdoor cafe when he recognized the first gay couple to legally marry

in Canada. He introduced himself and offered them tickets as a wedding gift.

While there are only two other openly gay performers besides Elie in the 56-member cast of *Alegría*, many of the crew and behind-the-scenes people are queer.

Elie says he looks forward to "the chance to have more of a normal life" and possibly settling in Las Vegas with Stiles. "I want to have a dog," he smiles.

Cirque runs three shows in Vegas: the long-running *Mystère*; *O*, which takes place in and above a 1.5 million-gallon pool; and the recently opened "erotic" show, *Zumanity*. But Elie is still nervous about the future. "I'm a little afraid because I like to travel," he explains. "I've never been more than a year in one place my whole life. I spent a year in Mississippi with the circus, but after that I was ready to get back on the road."



Gaston Elie's jaw-dropping synchronized act with his trapeze partner is the pinnacle of *Alegría*

For now he's living his dream. "One of my goals in my life was to be in Cirque du Soleil," he says. "It changed the concept of the circus completely. It's more than a circus because it gives you a chance to express more of yourself. To be in the show you have to be a dancer, an actor. You play with your emotions, you play with your feelings."

Parisien concurs but adds that the performers are not the only ones whose imaginations are captured by Cirque du Soleil. "We're helping people to have dreams," he says. "I believe our world could be a better world, and what I do—it's my tiny, tiny collaboration toward that better world." ■

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL performs *Alegría* through Oct. 26 under the Grand Chapiteau on Southwest Moody Avenue south of the Marquam Bridge. Tickets are \$31.50-\$65 from 800-678-5440 or www.cirquedusoleil.com.

FLOYD SKLAVER is a Portland free-lance writer who just may now run away and join the circus.

HIV unfriendly?

Discrimination suit filed against Cirque du Soleil

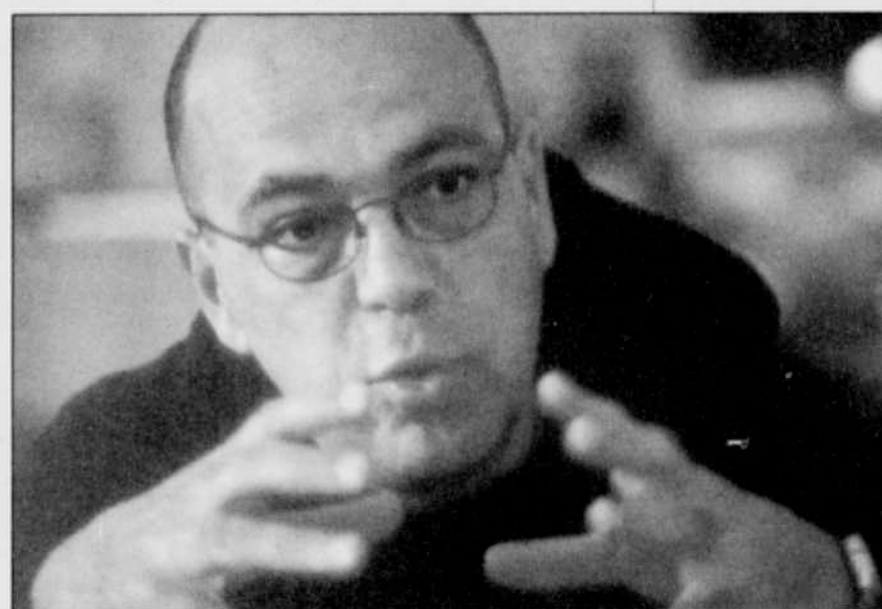
In July, Lambda Legal filed a federal discrimination complaint against Cirque du Soleil when a performer claimed he was fired from the *Mystère* show in Las Vegas because he is HIV-positive.

Matthew Cusick, who has been living with HIV for 10 years and whose viral load is undetectable, was hired to perform as a catcher on the Russian high bar and as a gymnast on the Chinese poles. He claims that after four months of training with the show (and extensive medical exams with Cirque du Soleil's physicians) he was let go before his first performance because he has HIV.

Although dangerous acts, neither would have put him at risk of exchanging body fluids with another performer. Yet, in a letter to Lambda Legal, Cirque's attorneys said the company was acting as a "socially responsible employer" and had an obligation to avoid "known safety hazards."

Federal and state laws prohibit discrimination against people with disabilities if they pose no real risk to themselves or to others and if the illness doesn't interfere with their ability to do the job. Cirque du Soleil officials didn't respond to *Just Out's* requests for comment.

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Artistic director Pierre Parisien says not to worry too much about the storyline and just concentrate on the pomp and circumstance

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