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Landscape of the Body

By John Guare

March 8 – April 6, 2008



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The Big Top

Gay gymnast runs away with the circus

“If you watch the show, you think, ‘Oh my God, you guys train a lot,’ but we don’t train a lot. Because your background is enough.”

For someone who performs death-defying feats up to 10 times a week with Cirque du Soleil, those words might sound cocky—or, at the very least, risky—but Michel Conceição knows what he’s talking about. Although the Brazilian gymnast is only 25, he brings 18 years of experience to the big top.

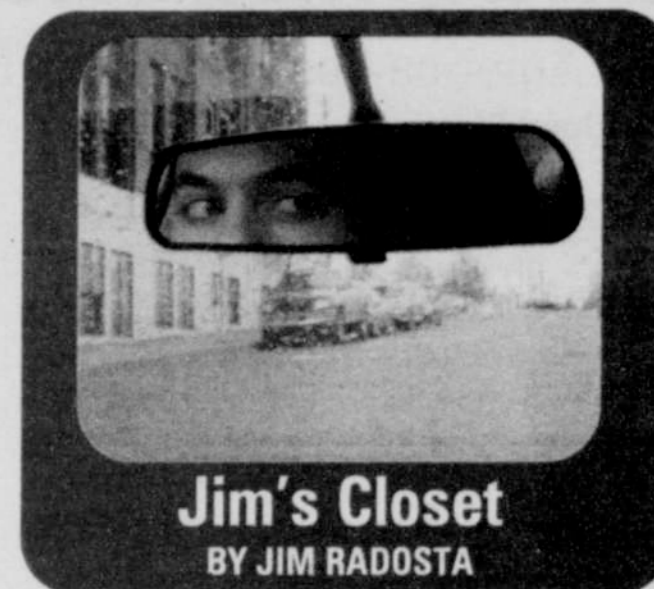
Conceição says he entered the world of gymnastics as a child “because I am flexible.” After winning several medals in competitions, the São Paulo native left his family at the age of 18 to train with the national team in the southern city of Porto Alegre.

Although Conceição never went to the Olympics, he did compete in the Pan-American Games before joining the Montreal-based Cirque du Soleil in March 2007. Portland is the third city in which he’s performed.

“I was supposed to go to *Salimbanco* [another touring production], but I hurt my knee in the Chinese poles,” Conceição says. “It broke in two parts. I stayed out for three months, then Cirque offered me another show and I came to *Corteo*.”

Corteo is described as the story of a clown who “pictures his own funeral taking place in a carnival atmosphere, watched over by quietly caring angels...to illustrate the portion of humanity that is within each of us.” In addition to daring trapeze artists, acrobats and jugglers, the show features several clowns resembling an “Ashes to Ashes”-era David Bowie, a 7-foot-6 giant and a pair of mesmerizing little people, perfectly proportioned, the human equivalent of a Bonsai tree.

Conceição practices with an international crew of gymnasts—including fellow Brazilian Paulo Pena Silva, whom he’s known for 10 years—for about two hours a day. He says his coaches impose no rules dictating how he can spend his free time, although he usually is too tired to stay



up late on any night except Sunday because he has the next day off.

“Cirque is relaxed. You should come and do your job. It doesn’t matter if you went out last night, but you can.”

The Cirque family is immense, with 61 performers and 150 crew members—including riggers, sound and light technicians, trainers, physical therapists, managers, musicians, cooks and English tutors—filling 63 trailers that move from city to city.

“Everybody talks to everybody, except for the Russian people,” Conceição says. “They keep separate. They don’t speak English, and they don’t want to learn.”

Even though he’s the only openly gay performer, Conceição says camaraderie is tight: “I was afraid, but now it’s nice. At the beginning sometimes I feel they don’t talk to me, but you can explain for everybody, ‘I’m gay, but I don’t want to take you!’”

Conceição says his sexuality isn’t an issue at home; in fact, São Paulo is renowned for throwing the world’s biggest Gay Pride celebration. Last year’s attendance was estimated at upward of 3 million.

When asked to describe the atmosphere, Conceição says: “It’s a lot, a lot, a lot of people at the parties all night. But I’ve never been here for Pride, so I don’t know” how U.S. Pride festivals compare.

Conceição’s family of five is quietly queer-friendly: “My mom and my dad don’t talk about this, but they know. When I was in Brazil for New Year’s Eve, I went to parties and came back at 10 o’clock in the morning—it’s, ‘How was the party?’ ‘Good.’ Then change the conversation. They’re never asking about if I have a boyfriend.”

So, does Conceição have a boyfriend? Considering he’s constantly on the road, he laments, “It’s impossible!”

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL presents *Corteo* through April 6 under the blue and yellow Grand Chapiteau on Southwest Moody Avenue south of the Marquam Bridge. Tickets are \$35-\$85 from 800-678-5440.

Arts and Culture Editor JIM RADOSTA needs your feedback. E-mail him at jim@justout.com.



Michel Conceição (inset) is among the dozen gymnasts who whip themselves around these bars during “Tournik,” the finale of *Corteo*.