



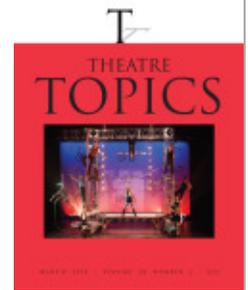
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## 2017 ATHE Conference Plenary: A Spectacular Balancing Act

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Chris Lashua, Louis Patrick Leroux, Chase Waites

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# 2017 ATHE Conference Plenary: A Spectacular Balancing Act

*Jane Childs, CarlosAlexis Cruz, Roy Gomez Cruz, Xandra Ibarra,  
Kareem Khubchandani, Chris Lashua, Louis Patrick Leroux,  
and Chase Waites*

*In keeping with its theme of “Spectacle: Balancing Education, Theory, and Praxis,” the 2017 ATHE conference featured a plenary titled “A Spectacular Balancing Act.” The plenary featured circus dramaturg Louis Patrick Leroux; Cirque Mechanics cofounder and artistic director Chris Lashua; performance artist Xandra Ibarra (aka “La Chica Boom”); and director of the Stagecraft Institute of Las Vegas, Jane Childs. Moderators included assistant professor of physical theatre CarlosAlexis Cruz; doctoral candidate in performance studies Roy Gomez Cruz; assistant professor Kareem Khubchandani; and chairman of the drama department and live entertainment technology at Lone Star College–Montgomery Chase Waites. Following initial statements (and in the case of La Chica Boom, a performance), the plenary moved to break-out sessions facilitated by the moderators. Below are reflections and summations of the event.*

## **CarlosAlexis Cruz**

When the thought came up about discussing the overall theme of our conference, “the art of the spectacle,” as it relates to the circus arts and particularly its contemporary iteration and the influence Cirque du Soleil has had for such performance in our country, the name of Louis Patrick Leroux immediately came to mind. Dr. Leroux is a playwright, director, and professor at Concordia University; he is also the founding director of the Montreal Working Group on Circus Research. While solidifying his role as a contemporary circus dramaturg for companies and institutions such as les 7 doigts de la main and Montreal’s École nationale de cirque, Leroux, through his media commentary, ended right at the center of the pending, then confirmed, Cirque du Soleil transition of ownership—a spectacle of uncertainty perhaps within itself, a redefining moment for the most spectacular company in the world. His knowledge of circus, from the practical perspective and its current evolution, as well as his awareness of the power of this growing art-form as a business model and as an ambassador of culture, are key to his understanding of how the circus arts in this nouveau/post-nouveau era has changed the way that we see the performing arts today. Leroux provided the attendees of our breakout session with a glimpse into his unique take on experiential approaches to circus research through research-creation practices at the National Circus School, where he is a researcher and teacher, as well as with the creative lab he runs at Concordia.

We began our session with the following question: “Please discuss spectacle and its influence on historical and traditional circus performance, and the role of spectacle on the expansion of circus-related performance into modern mainstream theatre.”

## Louis Patrick Leroux

This will require an oblique answer. *Spectacle* and *circus*. Where better to explore these two concepts than in Las Vegas, although there is no traditional circus here save for some acts at the eponymous hotel? What we see here is commercialized “new circus”—“contemporary circus” drawing on theatre and dance codes, working on an operatic scale, and offering spectacular narration and high artistic aspirations meant to appeal to the masses. *Cirque* is the term most people use in the United States to define this outgrowth of circus. To my ear, *cirque* is merely “circus” in French, no matter what the influence of *Cirque du Soleil* on its form might be. And actual French circus, of course, in its current and radically artistic form, crafted by more than 300 noncommercial companies in France, and a growing number in Québec, is far removed from the glitz and excess of the entertainment on offer in Vegas. Is this circus insular or niche and appealing to middling Western affluence? For the most part, perhaps, but not exclusively; certainly not the forms that tour successfully, broadening audiences’ conception of both circus and spectacle.

Is this a circus of the immediate? A circus for the Facebook generation? Acrobatic theatre? As we saw, various terms have been used to distinguish one form from another—the living from the fossilized—yet the iconic images remain. The extravagant spectacle of yesteryear: the nostalgic pining for the cheerful taming of animals and unleashing of our passions before their subjugated might; the awe-inspiring or eroticized freak shows of the “other”; the diverting of our attention toward a divertissement of escape—none of this truly exists as it once did. While the world has moved onto renewed forms of circus, the United States cannot seem to shake this image or that jingle, Ta-da-da-da-da, that bloody earworm of ta-da-da-da-da, a chromatic entrance of the gladiators, ta-da-da-da-da.

When I think of circus now, in my mind’s eye I see humanity in embodied performativity; I see achievement through training, technique, and artistry; I see human bodies in motion, emotion stemming from those bodies taking on our own projections, and the body emerging as both vehicle and site for expression; I see technique and prowess. In French we use the term *une prouesse*. In English the term tends to be *a trick*, yet since there is so little trickery involved I will always shy away from the t-word for fear of confusing achievement with deceit.

I see risk-taking in this kind of circus as a form of ceremonial undertaking, an Artaudian act of cruelty onto oneself as the spectators’ own bloated, disengaged bodies register the disparity between what they could be and what they merely are. And then the clowns come in to remind us of that very fact. Silly clowns, necessary clowns, edgy—doing “edgework,” taking risks alongside the acrobats and other artists. I also see characters—fleshy bodies and individual performers. All three coexisting within one; all three defining the stage presence before us.

What do these bodies say and mean? Certainly, more than “we are spectacular,” given that in today’s society everything has become spectacle, from politics downward. The bodies, projected into space and upon which we can project ourselves, are almost sacrificial: if only we could, if only we dared, if only we remembered how to transcend our sedentary, quotidian lives. Do they suffer so that we do not have to? Is writing this sacrilegious? I see performance: peak sports performance and its concern with training and precise reproducibility, but also artistic performance with its acute awareness of representation and adaptability.

There are losses. We can miss the intimacy of the old circus, its tent life, its smells and familiarity. Animals, no matter what our stand, reminded us of our distinction as humans and how relatable animals can be. Animals that so few of us actually see and engage with anymore in our urban lives, fetishizing them, making totems out of our idea of what they should be to us. Families, circus tribes, and families in the audience attending as with a liminal ritual of stepping out of one’s life and reconnecting with centuries-old entertainment. Different bodies, bodies of exception, and the gazes they elicited and the trouble they caused as measures of “normalcy.”

But let us forget for a moment the nostalgic circus as we move toward the present circus of excellence and exceptional human feats, the circus that shows us how we could strive to become rather than to illustrate how we have come to dominate. What can we dominate, truly, other than our instincts, other than our fears? Forget the elephants and the sequins—although we never can; forget the critique of this extended society of spectacle—although it is what we are trained to do and love; the terms have nevertheless changed.

Circus terms help me come to terms with a circus that is heading in a new direction. Let us consider the terms of engagement: audacity, embodied performativity, technique, prowess, risk-taking, projection, and sublimation. This is the circus I am talking about: *cirque*-style, if you must; in any case, let's call it contemporary circus, current circus, acrobatic theatre, theatre-circus, risky play—all ludic exploits.

### **Roy Gomez Cruz**

In our breakout session we had a unique opportunity to peek into Chris Lashua's creative world in which mechanical devices get connected with acrobatic moves to tell inspiring stories. Like many people in contemporary circus, Lashua does not come from a theatre background. After a successful career as a circus performer, he cofounded Cirque Mechanics in 2004, partnering with Aloysia Gavre. Since then he has embarked on the artistic journey of fusing together the athleticism that characterizes circus acrobatics with mechanical innovation onstage, seeking to expand the limits of storytelling. By sharing some challenges and lessons learned in this journey, Chris also offered a rich vision of the aesthetic potential of contemporary circus. For him, circus can be a powerfully immersive experience; its circular shape and use of the aerial space, combined with nonverbal forms of artistic expression, have encouraged circus artists to transform the stage into an exceptional universe. Surrounded by a world of wonders, spectators have an opportunity to feel right in the center of the action. Working with Cirque Mechanics' creative team, Chris has discovered ways of expanding and adapting this circus DNA into the theatre proscenium with the use of machines. But rather than hiding the ropes, chains, and tackles used to support these machines, Cirque Mechanics integrates them as a central part in both the creation and performance of its shows. In doing so, the stories told by Cirque Mechanics emerge organically upon imagining original and daring platforms to play with and bringing them to reality.

### **Chris Lashua**

The Cirque Mechanics approach to circus lies in the unique interaction between performers and originally designed machines. It is the innovative machines envisioned, designed, and built, together with the special connections made by the performers on them, that inspire a real-world time and place and slowly whisper stories rooted in circus lore, but imagined in a mechanical world.

My fascination with machines started with my years in BMX trick cycling, which led me to run away with Cirque du Soleil in 1992. Cirque du Soleil ignited my passion for performance and inspired my interest in modern circus and its many possibilities. I was a featured artist in its *Quidam*, where I created and performed the opening German wheel act. After three exciting years of performances on three continents, I began to consider and explore the next steps in my circus career, freelancing.

As a freelance performer one of my first challenges was to find a way to reduce the floor space required for my German wheel act, in order to perform on smaller stages and therefore increase the number of possible contracts. The answer to my space problem was my first machine design, the Trolley. I envisioned a geared and wheeled trolley that would allow my German wheel to turn

in place quickly, while traveling slowly across a small area. Encouraged by positive feedback from clients and the circus community, I added a winch, so that by simply engaging a lever, the rolling motion of my wheel on a set of rollers connected to a gear drive could serve to hoist an aerialist high above the stage. This aesthetic created by the interaction between machine and artist, which is at the heart of *Cirque Mechanics*, was born.

The Trolley became the centerpiece of our first show, a collaborative production with fellow performers and the Circus Center of San Francisco. We found a factory to be the perfect home for this initial machine, which led us to design others that would complement the industrial setting. Inspired by the murals of Diego Rivera and taking the lead from Chaplin's *Modern Times*, we set our show during the Great Depression. The whimsical narrative about a bird inspiring change was added, and *Birdhouse Factory* opened to rave reviews and enthusiastic audiences.

The process of problem-solving machine design became the cornerstone of *Cirque Mechanics*. We used this approach when designing rolling mini-trampolines and a pedal-powered crane in the 1860s mining town of our second production, *Boom Town*. We also used this method for the self-contained, pedal-driven mechanical stage, which eventually became the bike shop in our Jules Verne and H. G. Wells steampunk-inspired production, *Pedal Punk*. Stay tuned for *42ft: a Menagerie of Mechanical Marvels*, where a mechanical horse and rotating circus ring set the stage!

The uniqueness of our shows comes from combining innovative machines and dynamic performer interactions in a real-world, artful setting, all while telling a compelling story full of the wonders of the circus. The “spectacular” is in the awe, laughter, thrills, applause, excitement, fascination, and standing ovations that we inspire in our audiences.

## **Kareem Khubchandani**

At the plenary, Xandra Ibarra performed a “spictacle” as her alter-ego La Chica Boom. She stripped off her pants and T-shirt, put a harness around her hips through which she inserted a phallic bottle of hot sauce, and laid out a floral printed table cloth on the stage. Ibarra jerked her hot-sauce bottle over the table cloth, loudly moaning in orgasm. Her subsequent remarks tempered the irreverent pleasure of her spictacle. She explained the mental exhaustion of iteratively embodying racial tropes, even though she uses her performances to trouble them. In addition to psychic traumas are bodily tolls, such as tears in her breast tissue from iconic burlesque tassel twirls. Ibarra's oeuvre after La Chica Boom documents this fatigue, as well as the impossible though continuous labor of trying to retire the spectacularly racialized and gendered identity of La Chica Boom by running, cockroach-like ecdysis, photography, laughing, and ritual. Ibarra's move from performances of virtuosic spictacles to explicit stagings of exhaustion and survival lays bare the labor of effortlessness that make some spectacles so seductive. Her body of work also suggests that for some people, spectacle may be the only option through which to be legitimated as an artist. For those who do not enjoy the privilege of quotidian invisibility—whose bodies are read as feminine, female, queer, poor, gender nonconforming, disabled, or nonwhite—everyday life means being a spectacle. We endure the physical and psychic traumas that come with what José Esteban Muñoz calls “the burden of liveness,” the expectation that we will perform our bodily, cultural, and sexual difference for others' pleasure.

## **Xandra Ibarra**

During 2002–12, I performed under the moniker La Chica Boom and created a series of comedic sexual spectacles I called “spictacles.” I used burlesque and raunchy Mexican humor to explore hyperbolized modes of representation to perform an excess of Mexicanidad (spiciness) and make my gendered and racial “difference” more noticeable to the viewer. Rather than negating a

politics of respectability or rejecting the term *spic* for its racist overtones, I used spictacle performances to embody my own racial and sexual abjection and manipulated the politics of racialized sexuality to discover queer forms of pleasure.

After ten years of employing these hyper-representations of the racialized self-other, this artistic strategy became exhausting and fraught with issues and discontent. Some of my political readings were lost or ignored by predominantly white audiences. I felt that there was an uncritical consumption of these works, and that I had created an atmosphere for white audiences to sharpen their Mexiphobic gaze and to colonially gawk at me. To respond, I created a solo show titled *Fuck My Life (FML)*, in which I communicated the pleasures and perils of performing spictacles and resolved to abandon my hyper-racialized persona, La Chica Boom. The staged work takes place between the burlesque stage and bathroom that features my toilet altar to Lupe Velez, Hollywood's "Mexican Spitfire"—a 1930s burlesque and Hollywood Mexican actress who purportedly died with her head in the toilet. Velez and my story are presented side by side in order to foreshadow the destiny of my burlesque persona. I used ten years of burlesque audience commentary to develop racist sound montages and voiceovers that forced *FML* audiences to play the role of the interracial, incompatible, racist audience, my source of racial melancholia. These sound montages attempted to implicate the audience in my misrecognition and illuminate how my spictacles fail as the result of the audiences reading these subversive minstrel performances as reality or an invitation to express Mexiphobic glee. In the end I retired/flushed my burlesque persona into a toilet altar and transformed into a reviled creature, a cockroach.

*FML* endeavored to make explicit the failure of my interracial relationship with the audience. However, after an eight-day run of *FML* in San Francisco, I realized *FML* was fucked. The Mexiphobic gaze controlled the terms of legibility, even as I explicitly communicated the backstory, logic, and failure of my burlesque persona. I was misrecognized again. The show elicited the Mexiphobic glee/response that I was critiquing: audience members practiced their entry-level Spanish with me and made racist vocalizations at every show. I realized then that I was stuck with the limitations of white racist audiences, but that I was also fucked with the representational limitations of Latinidad—that is, I am predetermined, stuck with the signifiers of Latinidad. I remain a spic even without the hyper-racial costumes. *FML*, however, did allow me to abandon and put to death my hyper-racialized persona, but the possibilities of negativity stayed with me. Currently, my work traces this difficult mode of existence through a variety of media—namely, performance, photography, objects, and video. I work to capture the ways of being that comprise a fucked life: the material realities of living in degradation as a minoritarian subject without rushing to produce narratives of overcoming or celebrating negativity.

## Chase Waites

The Stagecraft Institute of Las Vegas (SILV) is a nontraditional teaching program in which the students are brought to train and experience various venues in Las Vegas. SILV partners with a multitude of leading industry partners for their training and class content, and with Cirque du Soleil and other Las Vegas production groups to let the students see the technology being applied in live performances. SILV operates as a nonprofit and offers unique circumstances in which the students obtain practical, hands-on training in an on-the-job fashion. The students are immersed in the training environment, which is how they learn, rather than through the traditional classroom model. During the plenary Jane Childs shared some of the history and philosophy behind SILV.

## Jane Childs

The Stagecraft Institute of Las Vegas was founded and carved into existence by Don and Jane Childs and a small group of friends to offer a better, more efficient way to train practitioners in all areas of live entertainment. SILV was in development for forty years, planned for three, and conducted its first class in December 2006.

SILV has become a one-of-a-kind, intensive-training program for joining “students” from around the world with our partnerships with industry friends who donate their expertise, their time, their gear, their spaces, and their shows as pieces of this training. These partnerships were all founded on a handshake of understanding: “We know what your time and your materials are worth so rather than insult you, we just won’t pay you anything.” Twelve years later, SILV still operates under that same handshake. SILV classes are held in “other people’s houses,” meaning in the shops and facilities of industry partners across Las Vegas and even a few in Southern California. SILV students have more contact hours in one week than in a traditional semester-long, three-credit class.

When asked where SILV found its business model, I laughed and said, “You know the poster of the cat hanging on by its claws? Well, that’s us, and it never gets any better.” The very existence of SILV is possible because it is trustworthy. SILV promises the students the best teachers, and they promise their friends and partners the best students. SILV steps back and just adds water.

As a business, when the decision was made to file to become a nonprofit 501(c), we did all our own paperwork. After all, by then we had five years of being a nonprofit not on purpose! And we had learned the key for survival of nonprofits, which is to remember that your for-profit friends are also made up of human beings. If your “why” is clear and you approach for-profits as friends, and you are clear on how what you are asking for help with will benefit them, they really cannot resist helping. At least that is how it works for SILV.

Our mission is based in the pattern of Don’s own mission: SILV strives to pay back those who shared with us by paying it forward. The practice of teaching students the technology and sharing the knowledge, a sense of accountability, and collaboration are at the foundation of SILV. To date, over 900 students have shared the SILV experience. Our goal for students is that five years after their training at SILV, when someone asks them “Where did you learn all that stuff?” and the student replies “Stagecraft Institute,” the other person will say “I should have known!” Don always said that the true value of SILV would be judged by what becomes of our students! It’s all about the experience.

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*Jane Childs* is the director of the Stagecraft Institute of Las Vegas (SILV) and working on a fifty-plus-year theatre journey that includes costuming, assisting her husband Don on his scenic and lighting designs and projects, simultaneous French translation for Ladislav Vychodil, and den mother to generations of theatre students. Her studies included Indiana University, La Sorbonne, and the University of Iowa. She shares Don’s passion for theatre and teaching and his demand on a daily basis for integrity from those you work with, whether they be students or fellow collaborators. Her devotion to continuing Don’s legacy at SILV builds on his two mantras: “Integrity is all we have: an artist without integrity had nothing,” coupled with “Here’s to tomorrow and all the good work yet to do.”

*CarlosAlexis Cruz* is the co-founder and artistic director of the Pelú Theatre project—a physical theatre company mainly interested in researching the convergence between contemporary circus arts and theatre as performance vocabulary, particularly in the exploration of themes related to the Latino immigrant experience in the United States. The company is currently invested in the Pícaro project, a physical theatre take on the journey of a Central American immigrant set to tour in the

summer of 2018. He was awarded the Princess Grace Foundation's 2017 Works-in-Progress Award for the development of *Pícaro*, with the support of the Baryshnikov Arts Center in New York City. He serves as the producing artistic director for the *Nouveau Sud* project: a social circus company invested in socially engaged work in service of the diverse population of Charlotte, North Carolina. He is an assistant professor of physical theatre at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

*Roy Gomez Cruz* is a doctoral candidate in performance studies at Northwestern University. His research examines the political economy of contemporary circus industries in North America under competing modes of transnationalism. Approaching performance ethnographically, his work illuminates how circus troupes perform across national borders by both resisting and reproducing tensions between the circus body imagined as a source of economic capital and circus performance as a vessel of creative agency. His research interests concern the critical study of circus, transnational social movements, cultural industries, creative economies, and urban spectacles, particularly through the lenses of performance, critical race, and queer theory.

*Xandra Ibarra* is an Oakland, California-based performance artist that often uses mediums like video and photography. She employs hyperbolized modes of racialization and sexualization to test the boundaries between her own body and coloniality, compulsory whiteness, and Mexicanidad. Throughout her multiple works she teeters between abjection and joy and problematizes the borders among proper and improper racial, gender, and queer subject. Her work has been exhibited at El Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (Bogotá), Broad Museum (Los Angeles), Popa Gallery (Buenos Aires), Joe's Pub (New York City), PPOW Gallery (New York City), and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (San Francisco), to name but a few. She has been awarded the Art Matters Fund, NALAC Fund for the Arts, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Away Award, ReGen Artist Fund, Theater Bay Area Grant, and the Franklin Furnace Performance and Variable Media Award. Her work has also been published in *Women and Performance Journal*, *GLQ*, *Art Practical*, *TDR*, *Art and Architecture in the Americas*, *Artforum*, and *Hyperallergic*, among others. She is currently a senior lecturer at the California College of the Arts, and teaches philosophy and art history classes in the critical studies program.

*Kareem Khubchandani* is the Mellon Bridge Assistant Professor in the Department of Drama and Dance and the Program in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Tufts University, teaching at the intersection of performance studies and queer studies. He is currently working on a book project titled *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife*, a performance ethnography of queer social spaces in Bangalore and Chicago. He has published in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *The Velvet Light Trap*, *Theater Topics*, *Theatre Journal*, *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies*, and *Queer Dance*.

*Chris Lashua* has spent his life on or around wheels. After nearly a decade of professional bicycle freestyle competitions and performance, he found himself at China's famed "Wu Ciao" festival in 1992, where he won a bronze medal and a place on Cirque du Soleil's Japan tour of *Fascination*. His obsession with wheels led him to perform inside one, a German wheel, as the opening act of Cirque du Soleil's *Quidam* in 1996. In 2004, after the success of his collaborative project with the Circus Center of San Francisco, *Birdhouse Factory*, he cofounded Cirque Mechanics in Las Vegas. Cirque Mechanics quickly established itself as a premiere American circus, with its unique approach to performance. The stories it presents are wrapped in circus acrobatics, mechanical wonders, and a bit of clowning around.

*Louis Patrick Leroux* is a professor at Concordia University and an associate researcher at the National Circus School of Montreal. A playwright, director, and scholar, he has moved from dramaturgy and

discourse analysis to a more interdisciplinary and field-expanding approach in studying contemporary circus. Founding director of the Montreal Working Group on Circus Research, he works alongside the contemporary circus milieu as a teacher, researcher, and collaborator. With Charles Batson, he coedited *Cirque Global: Québec's Expanding Circus Boundaries* (2016). In 2017 he was elected to the Royal Society of Canada's College of New Scholars, Artists and Scientists.

*Chase Waites* is chair of drama, dance, and live entertainment technology at Lone Star College–Montgomery, where he teaches acting, introduction to theatre, and theatre history. A Fort Worth native, he spent ten years in New Orleans serving as the artistic director of the theatre and fine arts department chair at Jesuit of New Orleans. Production credits in New Orleans include award-winning productions of *Tracers*, *The Boys Next Door*, *The Compleat Wrks of Wllm Shkspr (abridged)*, and regional premieres of *Dead Man Walking*, *The Who's Tommy*, *Footloose*, and *Copacabana*. He received his BA in theatre from Centenary College of Louisiana, and his MFA in directing from the University of New Orleans. He also serves as the KCACTF Region 6 vice chair, ATHE's member-at-large for outreach, is a member of the Texas Educational Theatre Association, and is treasurer on the board of directors for Crighton Theater in Conroe, Texas.