

A fine, fine balancing act

Circus creativity and medicine

Story by Sarah de Leeuw

Legs swung up. Over. Stretching, bending. Behind the head. A torso curving so gracefully it's almost more than human.

The contortion, highlighted with deep red backlighting, is made all the more surreal by the strange clown figure (a nurse? a resident?) resting, prone, behind the arching "circused" body—a circused body adorned, it should be added, with a golden cupcake-like wig and, yes, oversized frilly knickers.

What a show! Happiness somehow pours off the stage!



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No wonder the circus-infused performance received 2 standing ovations at the 2014 Family Medicine Forum from almost 3000 family physicians who were being asked to reflect on the lofty question of whether or not art can save the world.

For the record, the answer is a firm yes. Both from family physician and Laval University's Research Chair in Emergency Medicine Dr Richard Fleet and from Julie Théberge, coordinator with the Cirque du Soleil's Cirque du Monde (Social Circus)¹: yes, yes art can save the world and yes, yes art and creativity have a role to play in saving medicine and doctors. Maybe only in small steps, but any long journey has to begin somewhere.

"For me," reflects Dr Fleet, "it is a question of survival. I have to communicate with people who think outside the box, who make me happy. Just to see how they think, it's amazing. Sure, I work all day with super smart people, but we work in very structured and perhaps too conservative environments. Working with the creative people of the circus, it's like dealing with different brains. The process is so different. The creative possibilities seem endless. We need that. We need that in medicine. In research."

An avowed "creative" herself, with old vinyl Bruce Springsteen albums on her coffee table and musical instruments from a circus life scattered around her living room, Julie agrees: "I'm a multiplicity. A graduate degree in visual arts, a singer in a band, a mother, and an advocate. And my life project? Empowerment. If the world is going to heal, we have to work with forces. The forces of people, what they *can* do, not what they can't. We can use their marginality as a force for good."

Unto themselves, and certainly when together, Julie and Richard embody the creative forces they're passionate about. "At first I started being just interested in *how* creativity works," said Fleet. "In the brain, in society, in research. But I found I could connect with people through creativity and that people could have fun."



PHOTO LEFT: Performance at the Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians 2016 conference with (back row, left to right) Alexandre Seim, Laura Benestan, Lysiane Morissette, Méganne Fleet, Richard Fleet, Jonathan Ducharme, Sarah Bilodeau-Fressange, Pierre Lavolette, Maxime Plamondon-Boulianne, Nicholas Dupont, (front row, left to right) Ève Pouliot-Mathieu, Claudia Laurin, Julie Théberge, and Maude Amyot.

PHOTOS RIGHT: (Top) Dr Richard Fleet and Julie Théberge watching rehearsal with Sarah Bilodeau-Fressange on the silk trapeze. (Bottom, left to right) Frederic Bruneau and Jean-Francois Racine with Dr Fleet getting ready for the show; Maude Amyot putting on her clown face for the show.

COVER STORY

“When you get into medicine,” observes Fleet, “you have a whole bunch of pretty extraordinary people, high-performing people, who have invested their whole lives in getting into medicine. Then, lots of time is spent memorizing colossal amounts of information with little time left for unstructured creative thinking. It’s almost like it kills that part of you. For sure, you have the capacity to make a huge difference in people’s lives. But somewhere along the line you realize, in comparison to your peers, you are pretty average in terms of your perceived capacity to create and how much you innovate. Life gets busy. Then, it’s like a punch. Am I really living at my full potential? Where is that space to express myself and have fun? That’s where creativity comes in.”

Fun, then, is not just creative frivolity.

For Julie, who works with displaced and marginalized youth aged 16 to 25 in Quebec city, Que, fun can be a source of strength. So for her too it’s a question of survival, a question at the heart of social injustices and disparities between people, which Richard agrees, in clinical practice, teaching, and research, are at the core of what doctors are again starting to focus on.

“Art is a human function,” explains Julie. “People generate creativity. And when you bring marginalized youth together with medical professionals, 2 things happen. Both groups are respected for what they *can* do. What a doctor does, what a circus youth can do, both skill sets are seen as important—normal and special at the same time. Secondly, everyone might look a bit silly doing something artistic, something like acrobatics or juggling. But that’s the equalizing power of art. We are all ridiculous and valued together.”

“What is the creative process at its most distilled?” asks Richard. “It’s about touching people. Touching people is the key. Creativity.”


Together, by letting Cirque du Soleil’s Cirque du Monde touch medical education, practice, and research, Julie and Richard are juggling, balancing, and trapezing brand-new ways of thinking and being. Founded in 1995 by Cirque du Soleil, Cirque du Monde is an international program aiming to help youth in need by offering circus workshops and training: the work Richard and Julie do, together through Cirque du Monde, combines circus arts and social intervention—but not just for the youth involved.

“For medical students and professionals,” says Dr Fleet, “it’s about getting involved with new ideas. It’s mixing the medical people with youth from backgrounds they are not familiar with. It also helps you appreciate that happiness is the small things.”



On the other hand, for the youth, says Julie, “It’s kind of a clash between 2 values, 2 worlds. How do they meet? It’s getting youth out of their bubbles too, meeting doctors, medical students, people they just think of as ‘rich people’—letting the real world happen, but in a healthy, creative way.”

“And ultimately, when you see those kids in action, it’s so inspiring to us all. When I talk to medical students about this project, I tell them, ‘I want you to meet some people you might not otherwise see, really see,’” adds Richard.

Julie and Richard summarize their work together at almost the same time, in almost perfect sync with each other: “It’s about balancing expectations, and about bringing people happiness in life” they say, as if on a performance cue, their voices bending into each other like a dance on high wire. 

Dr Fleet is a family and emergency physician and clinical health psychologist, Assistant Professor in the Department of Family and Emergency Medicine at Laval University in Quebec city, Que, and Research Chair in Emergency Medicine at Laval University and Hôtel-Dieu de Lévis hospital. He is part of the circus performance research group at the National Circus School in Montreal, Que. **Mrs Théberge** is the coordinator and social worker at the Centre résidentiel et communautaire Jacques-Cartier for the social circus project, Cirque du Monde, in Quebec city, and is a visual artist and singer in the post-punk-electro grunge rock band Headache24. For more information on Cirque du Monde, visit www.cirquedusoleil.com/en/about/global-citizenship/social-circus/cirque-du-monde.aspx. To view the performance Richard and Julie organized at Family Medicine Forum 2014, visit <http://fmf.cfp.ca/2014/11/happy-best-cure/>.

Acknowledgment

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Reference

1. Fournier C, Drouin MA, Marcoux J, Garel P, Bochud E, Théberge J, et al. Cirque du Monde as a health intervention. Perceptions of medical students and social circus experts. *Can Fam Physician* 2014;60:e548-53 (Eng), e541-7 (Fr). Available from: www.cfp.ca/content/60/11/e548.full.pdf+html. Accessed 2016 Oct 20.

The Cover Project The Faces of Family Medicine project has evolved from individual faces of family medicine in Canada to portraits of physicians and communities across the country grappling with some of the inequities and challenges pervading society. It is our hope that over time this collection of covers and stories will help us to enhance our relationships with our patients in our own communities.

PHOTOGRAPHER Andrée Lanthier, Longueuil, Que



PHOTOS: (Top left) Jonathan Ducharme prepping for the show, and a moment from the show with (from left to right) Pierre Laviolette, Éric Leblanc, Méganne Fleet, Anne-Marie Dumontier, Maude Amyot, Annie Veillette, Laura Benestan, Sarah Bilodeau-Fressange, Jonathan Ducharme, Nathalie Morissette, and Ève Pouliot-Mathieu.