

Life Lessons From the Circus: Roll With Changes

The French acrobatic troupe Compagnie Libertivore and its director see beauty in motion.

By BRIAN SEIBERT

The work of the French circus-dance troupe Compagnie Libertivore tends to keep turning. The stage set is usually round, as if to represent the planet on which we're all stuck, and the performers gravitate to circular motion. They whirl and tumble in wheeling patterns. They spin while suspended in the air. Most distinctively, beginnings and endings — of movements, of sections — roll together in a vision of continual metamorphosis, a vision that presents change as both natural and beautiful.

Such a vision was what the company's director and choreographer, Fanny Soriano, intended 10 years ago, when she first conceived of "Fractales," the work that Libertivore is bringing to Peak Performances at Montclair State University in New Jersey for the troupe's United States debut, Thursday through Sunday. She was finishing a solo, "Hêtre" ("Beech"), centered on a hanging beech-tree branch, and she was starting to make "Fractales," meant to show her children how change can be positive. But then her own body began to alter.

First her back and left shoulder froze up. "In circus, you're always working with pain, so it was normal to continue," Soriano, 43, said in a video call from her home in Aubagne, in the south of France. She couldn't hang from her left arm, so she did everything with her right one — until that became too painful. One knee stopped bending, then the other. "It got to the point where I couldn't do anything," she said.

For months, she tried physical therapy, but the pain kept spreading to new places on her body. It took a year and half to get a clear diagnosis: ankylosing spondylitis, an inflammatory arthritis affecting the spine and joints.

"I thought I was going to be able to get



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back to performing, but it never happened," she said. "I had to give up on my acrobatic career, the only thing I knew how to do, the only thing I wanted to do. I felt trapped in my own body."

Although she finished "Hêtre," she was never able to perform it. And as for "Fractales," the idea of positive change now seemed like a lie. She burned her notebook and abandoned the project.

What brought her back to it was a realization of what had attracted her to circus performances in the first place. As a shy 10-year-old who had trouble fitting in, she said, she became obsessed with circuses because circus camp was where she felt free: "There was no competition, and everyone had a place. In circus, everyone is attentive to each other because we put our lives in each other's hands."

At 15, she enrolled in the French national circus school, the Centre National des Arts du Cirque. But there, too, she didn't fit in.

"I was kind of the black sheep," she said. "I'm not an amazing acrobat. When they al-

Clockwise from top: Fanny Soriano, the director and choreographer of Compagnie Libertivore, near her home in France; Kamma Rosenbeck and Léo Manipoud, foreground, in the troupe's "Fractales"; and another scene from "Fractales" with Rosenbeck and Voleak Ung, above, and Nina Harper on the floor.

lowed me to improvise and invent alone with a partner, it was much easier because then I felt my soul could be involved. I love technique, but I need my soul to be involved."

While most teachers found fault with her, a guest teacher, Francis Viet, who was a member of Pina Bausch's company, Tanztheater Wuppertal, told her that the simple things she was doing were beautiful — that they were a kind of dance theater. "And that made a switch in how I saw myself and how my teachers saw me," Soriano said. She was the only person in her class to be awarded the highest honors. "It was such revenge," she said.

After graduation, she worked with many circus companies, big and small. In 2005, she founded Libertivore with her partner, Jules Beckman. "But it was too much for us to be a couple and have two small children and also work together," she said. So Beckman started his own troupe, Transminuko, and Soriano continued with Libertivore, concentrating on a poetic exploration of the



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natural world and a hypnotic, dancelike flow.

That was the path that led to the creation of "Hêtre" and her positive view of big changes, the path that her condition seemed to block. "I felt like someone cut my wings," she said.

The way forward was putting her life in the hands of other people, creating what she called the "minisociety" of the circus onstage. First, in 2015, she allowed someone else to perform "Hêtre": the aerialist Kamma Rosenbeck. "To replace me, I needed someone that I love," Soriano said.

Then Soriano began working on a duet with the French circus artist Vincent Briere and the Cambodian-born acrobat Voleak Ung. Briere is nearly twice as tall as Ung, and in "Phasmes" ("Stick Insects"), they roll amid dry leaves, insectlike, her body nested in his. She climbs him as one might climb a tree, and she even does a handstand atop one of his arms raised high. But he also climbs on her, and the focus is never on acrobatic feats for their own sake.

"They have personalities," Soriano said, "and I want to show people the beautiful things I see about them. I don't want them to disappear behind the choreography or technique. I want people to see them, to feel their souls."

This, she decided, was what was missing from her original conception of "Fractales." She said, "I had this idea of change, of being part of the landscape, but in a landscape there are usually other human beings."

So she revisited "Fractales" as an ensem-

ble piece, with Léo Manipoud and Nina Harper joining Rosenbeck, Briere and Ung, all artists whose "souls are involved." In a sense, the work is a continuation or combination of "Hêtre" and "Phasmes." As in "Hêtre," the performers hang in the air, but now from the roots of a tree suspended above the stage. As in "Phasmes," they climb one another and tumble together.

"Hêtre" and "Phasmes" work as a diptych, and Libertivore was scheduled to perform them that way at PS21 in Chatham, N.Y., on Tuesday and Wednesday. But because Ung contracted Covid-19, "Phasmes" will be replaced by another work, as yet unannounced. (Emily Zuckerman will replace Ung in "Fractales.")

"Nouveau cirque like this is where innovation is happening," said PS21's executive director, Elena Siyanko. "Fanny is among the most sophisticated in her blend of concept and choreography."

"Fractales" takes that blending further, introducing a darkness that feels hard-earned: Someone is buried, the tumbling becomes a tug of war, there's a strong suggestion of ecological catastrophe. But the overall impression is still of perpetual transformation, and of change as creative and beautiful.

For Soriano, discovering the beauty even in ugly or frightening things is an act of resistance, of hope against despair. "I know that it can be hard to see the beauty in something," she said. "I know because of what happened to me." For the same reason, she knows why it's necessary.

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