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Design & Production Review  
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## Recent Programs: Backstage with Cirque Du Soleil's Kooza

By M.C. Friedrich

On Saturday, July 12<sup>th</sup>, thirty-five people, 27 members and 8 guests, from all four states of the USITT-Midwest Section trekked to Chicago to take full advantage of the wonderful opportunity to tour the backstage then enjoy a performance of Cirque du Soleil's travelling big-top show, *Kooza*. Steven Jacobs arranged the tour with the host, Michael Wilder, *Kooza's* Technical Operations Director. The 2½-hour tour was conducted by Mr. Wilder; David Millman, Head of Lighting; George Mercier, Head of Carpentry; and Remi Lemieux, Assistant Head of Rigging.

The tour began in the parking lot of the United Center behind the massive system of blue-and-yellow striped tents and semi trailers. *Kooza* comes completely self-contained including a trailer of 4 huge electrical generators and a sea of cleverly specialized road cases for quick set-up and strike. From the moment the trucks roll into a city and the crew begins to set up the 4 impressive masts that support the big-top and the complex rigging, it is just one week to the first performance.

Just inside the back of the tent was the artists' practice/warm-up area containing a trampoline, a 2-foot high tightrope wire, comparatively small trapeze rig, assorted other props, and a lounge area complete with a big-screen monitor. Next to this is the dressing room/make-up area: each artist has an individual road case that opens up into a personalized mirrored vanity. A physiotherapist retreat is nearby. Across the practice area from the dressing rooms is wardrobe, equipped with all the necessary tools of the trade, including a cobbler's workstation, as well as spare costumes and replacement pieces.

A tunnel/hallway, lined with additional props ready for the show, leads to the big-top and the more immediate backstage area, behind swaths of green-printed poly-silk drapery. Michael Wilder says they work to use as much inherently fire-retardant fabric as possible to minimize the need for environmentally questionable chemicals. This space looks as familiar as any backstage area with all the various platforms and scenic elements stacked and stored in preparation for shifting during the performance. Backstage extends circularly

## Upcoming 2008-2009 Programming

By Kathleen Donnelly

The programming committee of the section is planning an exciting year of programs that will take us to each state in the region. Our first program takes place in Madison, Wisconsin on Saturday, September 27th at the Overture Center for the Arts in the morning and a visit to ETC in the afternoon.



Photo: Zane Williams

Interior: Overture Hall, Madison, WI

The Capitol Theatre on State Street in Madison was built in 1928 as an opulent movie theatre back in the silent film age. The Capitol Theatre was part of an extensive renovation of the 200 block of State Street and became the main venue in a complex that included the smaller Isthmus Playhouse and a Crossroads lobby connecting the performing arts venue with the Madison Art Gallery. In 1998, a local businessman,



## Backstage with Cirque Du Soleil's Kooza

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under the seating units where more equipment, conveniently nestled in customized road boxes, is stashed.

In the house, the tour included a close-up look at the complex masts with rigging, cabling, props, and followspot crows-nests. There are hanging truss front-of-house lighting positions and speakers between the masts. High center of the big-top is a sizeable, what they call, a cupola with shaped truss on a winch system, housing much more lighting, speakers, trapeze rigs, and other cirque paraphernalia. As



The "big top" tent that houses *Kooza*

one expects, there is a front-of-house sound position and a control booth but also a winch system control area for the complex uses of high-wire and trapeze acts.

The tour then circled around to the scene shop where various prop, electrical, and sound equipment repairs can take place. They tour with a spare of every critical (show-stopper) piece of equipment and the shop is equipped to repair most anything else. The tour walked past the office trailers and the kitchen trailers that provide three meals a day for all crew and performers. Most of the participants had tickets for the matinee performance so there was time to walk from the United Center for a lunch of cheeseburgers at the Billy Goat Inn, made famous in a Saturday Night Live sketch from the 70's.

The show was fabulously entertaining and, perhaps, made a little richer for the backstage tour information. After the performance, Michael Wilder again met with the participants to answer additional questions which invariable began with "How did you do....." He was also encouraging and generous in offering advice to the students on the tour about getting started in the business, what the work is like, and encouraged them to search Cirque's website for further information. As one student was overheard saying at the end of the day, "Today was amazingly, overwhelmingly awesome!" Merci, Kooza! ☺

## Launching the Midwest Section Part 3: The Programming,

by Richard Arnold

One of the interesting aspects in the early years of the Midwest Section was the number of programs and sessions it provided throughout the year. The section boldly announced its plan to provide monthly meetings from September to June (excluding January). Nine programs were held in its 2<sup>nd</sup> full year, ten in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year and eleven in both the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> years of the section. The purpose was to offer a wide variety of programs in the technical fields of theatre. It was acknowledged that by scheduling many programs, members active in theatre production would have a greater chance of attending and participating in some programs of the section. It was also a stated goal to increase

membership and to make USITT "better known as a meaningful organization for all theatre fields, educational and commercial through the states of Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana" (2<sup>nd</sup> year Annual Report).

As a result of the monthly program format, the goals of increasing membership were overwhelmingly met. The 32 members of the first year increased to 92 members in the second year and then swelled to 172 members in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year where it stabilized in succeeding years. Further, attendance at the programs was surprisingly high. During the second year average attendance at the nine programs was 61 people, ranging from attendance of 32 for *The Choreographer* and



### Launching the Midwest Section, Part 3: The Programing, Continued from page 2

Left to Right: Bernie Works, Al Koga, & Dick Arnold

the *Technician* session to 120 people at the *Scene Painting Demonstration* by Bob Moody.

Programs were intended “for people who are active in theatre or theatre related endeavors.” Therefore, early brochures stressed that programs were not

### Attendees at Midwest programs were drawn from as far away as New York in the east and Nevada in the west.

meant to cover basic knowledge and known methodologies of production. They would focus on *advanced* technology, skills and concepts and the *newest* ideas, materials and approaches.

So, to what can we attribute the popularity of attendance at these monthly programs? USITT was still a new organization and one of the first to deal exclusively with theatre design and technology. With the exception of the Institute’s headquarters 1000 miles away in NYC and the only other regional section 2000 miles away in Southern California, the Midwest Section was located within reach of many central states. Attendees at Midwest programs were drawn from as far away as New York in the east and Nevada in the west. One could suggest that the programs filled a need at a time when there were fewer advanced level courses in design and technical theatre offered in colleges and universities. In fact, many programs and tours exceeded what some schools could provide or afford. In addition, the 1960’s and 70’s was a period of expansion in regional and local theatre companies and facility construction and a growth in technical advancement in theatre production. In any case, there seemed to be a hunger for theatre design and technical information.

In the early years, most meetings were scheduled in the Chicago area. In the second year, a tour of the Krannert Center in Urbana was the only venue outside Chicago. In the third year, two programs left Chicago: a tour of Milwaukee theatres and a joint session at the convention of the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association held in Springfield. In the fourth year all programs were conducted in the greater Chicago area. ☺



### Listing of programs in the first years of the Midwest Section

The 2<sup>nd</sup> year (1969-1970):

- Sept 12 Scenic Build-ups and Texturing
- Oct 3 Stage Make-up and Wigs
- Oct 25 Tour of the Krannert Center (Urbana)
- Dec 13 Tour of the Civic Opera House
- Feb 6 Scene Painting Demonstration
- Mar 6 The Choreographer and The Technician
- Apr 11 Stage Properties and Special Effects  
(with the Central States Speech Association)
- May 1 Lighting Projection Techniques
- June 5 Recent Technical Developments

The 3<sup>rd</sup> year (1970-1971):

- Sept 11 Scene Design: Unconventional Approaches
- Oct 9 Theatre Safety
- Nov 6-7 The High School Theatre Facility  
The Arts of Costuming (a joint session with  
the Illinois Speech and Theatre Association)
- Nov 13-14 Tour of Milwaukee Theatres
- Dec 6 Stage Make-up Workshop
- Feb 6 Multi-Media Mix
- Mar 13 Costume Style Show
- Apr 5 Theatre Management
- May 7 Modern Television Production
- June 4 The Industrial Show

The 4<sup>th</sup> year (1971-1972):

- Sept 10 Sound Effects and Sound Systems
- Oct 8 Theatre Safety
- Oct 24 Theatre Preview Performance
- Nov 5 Training the Performing Arts Technician
- Dec 4 Tour of McCormick Place
- Feb 4 Business and the Arts: A Collaboration
- Mar 3 Application of Lighting Control Systems
- Apr 7 Arena Stage Design Concepts
- May 6 Costume Style Show
- May 22-23 Annual IES-TTFL Symposium
- June 2 New Materials



## Upcoming 2008-2009 Programming

Continued from page 1

W. Jerome Frautschi made an initial gift of \$50 million to develop a cultural arts district in downtown Madison. Now complete, the facility contains the fabulous Overture Hall, the Playhouse, 3 black box spaces, The Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, The Wisconsin Academy's James Watrous Gallery and 3 community galleries along with the Capitol Theatre. More information about the facility can be found at [www.overturecenter.com](http://www.overturecenter.com).

Our program that day will tour the facility and be followed by a program on the sound system and acoustical design of the theatre featuring Joseph Myers from Kirkegaard and Associates who was involved with the project, along with staff members of the Overture Center. Following this program, a short drive over to Middleton will bring us to the ETC headquarters.

ETC's 250,000-square-foot headquarters in Middleton, Wisconsin, completed in 2004, is the hub of the company's global operations and pays homage to the art of lighting and entertainment. Virtually a theater in its own right, ETC's 'Town Square' atrium stages a 1940's street, complete with a life-size recreation of the famous Nighthawks painting by Edward Hopper. Set-like façades such as a marquee theater and an Art Deco skyscraper hide real departments. Begun in November of 2007, the recently completed 80,000-square-foot addition is primarily production space. Not only is the addition to manufacturing impressive in size, it is earth-friendly. Beyond the 167 trees that were planted as landscaping, other green considerations were included in the expansion. With assistance from ETC staff, huge, in-house constructed light diffusers hang under each of eight sky lights. Not only does natural light carry farther with these metal structures-- reducing the need for electrical lighting-- but the calm, scenically-painted clouds on them provide a unique ETC signature to the new space.

The second programming event of the year will take place at Purdue University in Indiana on November 15<sup>th</sup>. Look for more specific information about schedule and details of events on the web page at the end of August. ☺



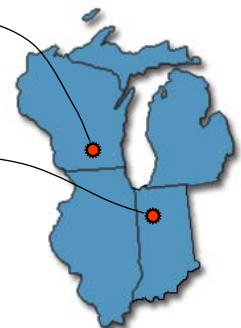
Exterior: Capitol Theater, Madison, WI, originally built in 1928.

### Mark your Calendars

#### Upcoming Events

Madison, Wisconsin  
Saturday  
September 27<sup>th</sup>

Purdue University  
West Lafayette, IN  
Saturday  
November 15<sup>th</sup>



**SUBMISSIONS** Design & Production Review is published by the Midwest Section of the United States Institute for Theatre Technology. The region includes Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, and Indiana. Submissions are continually sought and accepted. Submissions to DPR may be made by any member of the Section and may cover any topic: critiques, commentaries, educational approaches, new materials or processes, new products, book reviews, theatre history, facilities, section news and events, etc. We will work with you to realize your ideas. Please send inquiries and submissions to Paul Brunner, editor DPR, [pbrunner@indiana.edu](mailto:pbrunner@indiana.edu).

