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Tabarnak: blasphemy or a stroke of genius?

7 July 2017 by [Jean-Mathias Sargologos](#)

Presented as part of the [Montréal Complètement Cirque](#) Festival, the new Cirque Alfonse piece is entitled [Tabarnak](#). Even before the show begins, the title sets the tone.

And once you realize that the action takes place in a church with a stained-glass window commanding the stage and see performers dressed as priests, the die is cast!

Right from the beginning of the performance however, the spectator is invited to reflect and to ponder the following question: When putting together a circus show in 2017, why draw inspiration from Catholicism?

At a time when the zeitgeist bristles with an anticlericalism incarnated by rootless, disillusioned mankind, the choice made by Cirque Alfonse might come as a surprise, yet therein lies its stroke of genius.

Given that many circus presentations excel in terms of impressive feats of acrobatics, pushing the limits in order to constantly amaze the audience, those shows are too often an end in itself, with form trumping content and with little regard for meaning. The work is rooted in nothing, is steeped in nihilism.

That is the postmodern paradigm as it applies to artistic creation, an approach that cares little for the past or for a connecting historical through line.

Grand Narrative

The art historian Denys Riout notes that "(...) Post-modernity is a vague notion, but many commentators seem to agree that post-modernity deems itself the death of the grand

narrative".

By presenting this show in a Roman Catholic setting, Cirque Alfonse is reconnecting with the imperative of anchoring artistic creation in a grand narrative, in this case Catholicism. It thus offers a framework that gives meaning to the acrobatics and the different sketches performed by these artists.

A human pyramid is then not merely the placement of one person atop another as high as possible, but is a representation of the pointed arches of churches and cathedrals (architectural specialists will also note how the acrobats use the same keystone procedure to hold their human pyramid in place).

Another number is not just a feat of acrobatics consisting of launching someone into the air between a woman's legs, but is also a reflection on birth and baptism. The religious décor thus adds meaning to the performance.

Some will wonder what place faith occupies in the minds of the Cirque Alfonse founders. None at all, according to one of the co-founders, Antoine Carabinier. Their connection to Catholicism is above all cultural; it is a link to roots and to heritage, aspects often given short shrift in Quebec.

The idea is to get the audience to think about how they view the history of Quebec – of which the Catholic Church is an integral part.

Cirque Alfonse reminds us of what Quebec has lost. The objective of *Tabarnak* is to get spectators to think about the history of Quebec, one where the Church played a leading role. Whereas Quebec now is an archetype of a postmodern society that has lost its bearings, the choice made by Cirque Alfonse is a bold one and worthy of mention.

But did they accomplish their goal?

The answer is yes. Thanks to the humorous tone, the spectator is captivated and Cirque Alfonse gets its message across. Tableaux are interspersed with the prayers of our childhood and serve as interludes (*Our Father* is recited in several languages including Arabic, a reminder that Christ's message is omnipresent), and the words at times are toyed with ("... Et kyrie...il a crié!").

But is it blasphemous? Most likely yes.

Certain songs also play with Christian symbolism such as the blood of Christ ("A toast to good wine, Sip the fruit of the vine, And the world glitters and shines"). In short, Cirque Alfonse is having fun and the audience is too. But is it blasphemy? Yes, it probably is. That question was in fact a source of concern for the creators of the piece.

But one is tempted to forgive them, given their good intentions.

Rejecting Roots

Nevertheless, *Tabarnak* also reflects the ambivalent relationship that Quebecers have with their history and with their Catholic heritage. The violent rejection of Catholicism in Quebec also entailed a massive rejection of a civilizational and cultural heritage such that Quebec is now a secular society, but in many ways is also nihilistic.

Nonetheless, the persistence of the swear word "tabarnak" in everyday language and in initiatives like this one from Cirque Alfonse demonstrate the difficulty of breaking free of the past, of one's roots, and the need to revisit them. The question then becomes whether the Cirque's attempted reconnection with Quebec's cultural and Catholic heritage can dispense with a spiritual or religious connection.

Be that as it may, while *Tabarnak* is both the name of this show and a word that has slipped into common speech like a resurgence of a Catholic past, it is also a joyous outburst heard at the end of the performance by spectators absolutely charmed by the piece!

The logo for LA PRESSE, featuring the words "LA" and "PRESSE" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters stacked vertically on a solid red square background.

MONTRÉAL COMPLÈTEMENT CIRQUE
DARN GOOD!

Tabarnak

Cirque Alphonse show directed by Alain Francoeur
Until July 11 at TOHU
4 stars

JEAN SIAG, LA PRESSE

Cirque Alfonse opened the *Complètement cirque* festivities in fine style Thursday evening with its High Mass, brazenly christened *Tabarnak*.

This is the first new work from the troupe from Lanaudière since its electro-trad cabaret *Barbu*, presented in 2014, and the carnival artists from St. Alphonse de Rodriguez were somewhat anxious, as apparent when watching them knitting wool onstage just before the show began. A sign of the cross for good luck was thus just the ticket.

Judging by the audience response at the end of the piece, it seems that their prayers were answered.

Old rawhide snowshoes, cross-country skis, hockey sticks, a bean bag toss, old trophies, an organ and benches serving as church pews, all of it surmounted by a big stained-glass window hanging high above the stage – the props bear witness to an era both blessed and rebuked, a time when religion was omnipresent.

The word "tabarnak" can of course be spoken in a moment of anger, but also in a moment of pure bliss, grinning from ear to ear. It is that latter perspective that Alfonse's provocative title conveys as it employs Church imagery – in respectful fashion – to explore our rapport with the sacred in the past and our relation to the sacred today.

This acrobatic piece opens with music by the fabulous electro-trad trio led by David Simard, and the music contributes enormously to the success of this very festive *Tabarnak*.

It was a pleasure also to see the co-founder of the troupe Julie Carabinier Lépine – absent from the group's recent shows – for she has a magnetic presence and sings... divinely.

The acrobatic content is likewise compelling for these experienced circus artists (some of whom are close to forty, rare birds indeed!). The two new stars in the Alfonse group, Nikolas Pulka and Jean-Philippe Cuerrier, bring a youthful dash to the mix, fitting smoothly

into the core nucleus of Antoine Carabinier-Lépine, Geneviève Morin, Julie Carabinier-Lépine and Jonathan Casaubon.

BRILLIANT ACROBATICS

While some numbers veer toward facile folklore – a roller skate line dance, a group jig danced while sitting down – or are sometimes overlong (human pyramids and towers), some of the acrobatic segments are highly original and downright brilliant.

For example, one aerialist act involves a rope and a pulley where two artists (in underpants!) pull on the rope, each projecting the other into the air in turn like ringing a church bell. A magnificent tableau – theatrical, acrobatic and reflecting the theme of the show – that culminates in a straps number, the acrobat twisting and turning in the air.

Another beautiful moment involves the manipulation of incense burners, with at least three performers spinning them in the air by their chains. Once again, a theatrical and acrobatic sketch that hits home.

The members of the troupe give it their all in each segment, without putting on airs and with humour tinged with some self-mockery and lots and lots of heart and humanity.

Cirque Alfonse adopts a fearless approach that includes acrobatics on the Russian bar (not sure the whip was really necessary, though) and on the swing – again, as with most numbers, all members of the troupe jump into the fray to lend a hand even if their performances on these devices are more basic.

A moment of grace towards the end of *Tabarnak* occurs when three artists dressed in woollen bell-shaped tunics (which they were knitting when the show began) start spinning in place, giving the spectator the impression of three church bells. That almost mystical segment evokes whirling dervishes; it is simple but magical.

Cirque Alfonse earned acclaim for its previous shows *Timber* and *Barbu, cabaret, électro-trad*, and electrifies once again with this demanding and highly original *Tabarnak*, which will no doubt charm our neighbours to the south as well as audiences overseas.

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Entertainment Review

Tabarnak: Neo-trad Mass for a rough and ready Circus

7 July 2017 | [Isabelle Paré](#) | [Cirque](#)

Photo: Pedro Ruiz, Le Devoir Archives

Named after Quebec's go-to swear word, *Tabarnak* is a show that drifts between confessions and meditations, but always with a touch of self-mockery.

Far from the lumberjack's cabin that was the setting for *Timber*, the Cirque Alfonse troupe invites the audience to receive communion at the altar of Quebec's Roman Catholic religious heritage in *Tabarnak*, a more introspective work than its predecessors, but one that in no way repudiates the festive spirit that is in the very DNA of this neo-traditional circus.

Ten years after its inception, this family troupe from St. Alphonse de Rodriguez once again greedily draws on Quebec traditional culture, revisiting with humour and irony the religious icons and archetypes that riddle our collective imagination.



Named after Quebec's go-to swear word, *Tabarnak* is a show that drifts between confessions and meditations, but always with a touch of self-mockery, as the taste for mischievous antics is alive and well in this rough and ready circus. On a raised stage furnished with some benches as pews and topped by a stained-glass window and arches that evoke an altar or a confessional, an electro-trad band sets the tone throughout this High Mass replete with the sounds of rigadoons, spirited reels and the chants and songs of the liturgy.

The troupe makes multiple allusions to Quebec's two dominant religions, with prayers also for Holy Hockey and the saints of the Montreal Canadiens during ensemble roller skating numbers, jigs and square dances. As with *Timber*, the troupe makes impressive use of call and response songs and rhythmic foot tapping, delightfully enfolded in rock and folk.

The first part of the show contains a number of aerial tableaux inspired by the back-and-forth motion of the rope pulled by a church bell-ringer, and also by the symbolic flight of an artist with more than a passing resemblance to Christ on the cross. The Carabinier-Lépine family is joined by two very skilled artists who perform outstanding hand to hand acrobatics, balancing acts and exploits on the Russian bar one after the other, always staying true to the theme.

This sacred vocabulary is also brilliantly employed in an ensemble piece where artists twirl the chains of covered incense burners, spinning them over their heads like jugglers' diabolos. The troupe pokes fun at sacred ritual, toying with holy water, rewriting the *Our Father* prayer and having a priest mount the pulpit to recite the horoscope.

This religious folk fable also takes a few delicious jabs at other religions, notably when the artists are draped in long woollen bell-like capes as twirling dervishes. Initially not very performative, by the end of the show *Tabarnak* exults in Chinese pole numbers, shoulder perch acrobatics and feats of skill with the Russian swing, as it becomes decidedly more acrobatic. It is in those carnival acts, straightforward and unpretentious, that the troupe excels.

After the more muscular and physical *Timber*, with its axes and logs flying helter-skelter, or *Barbu*, a wild and crazy cabaret chockfull of testosterone and self-derision, *Tabarnak* comes

across as a big family fête, debunking a few sacred myths along the way.

With less sweat and fewer strong emotions the troupe is getting older, yet despite everything manages to reinvent itself here in a show that is less explosive but more fully embodied, and presented with finesse and spirit.