

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.