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Entertainment Review

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

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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.