

SUNDAY NOW

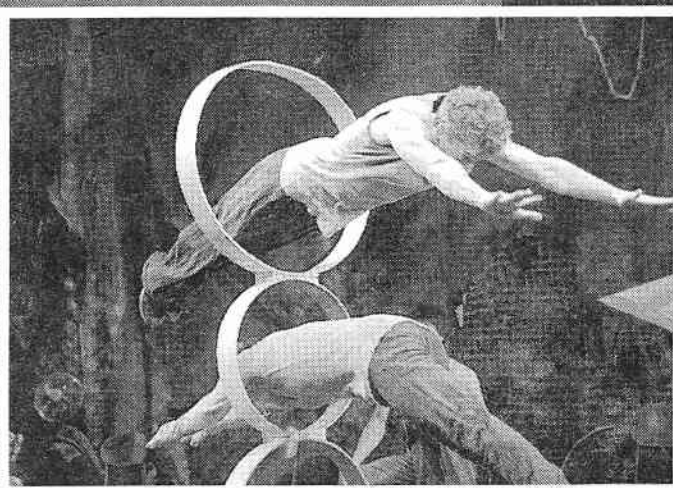
Running away with the circus

A young Montreal troupe leaps onto 42nd St.

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

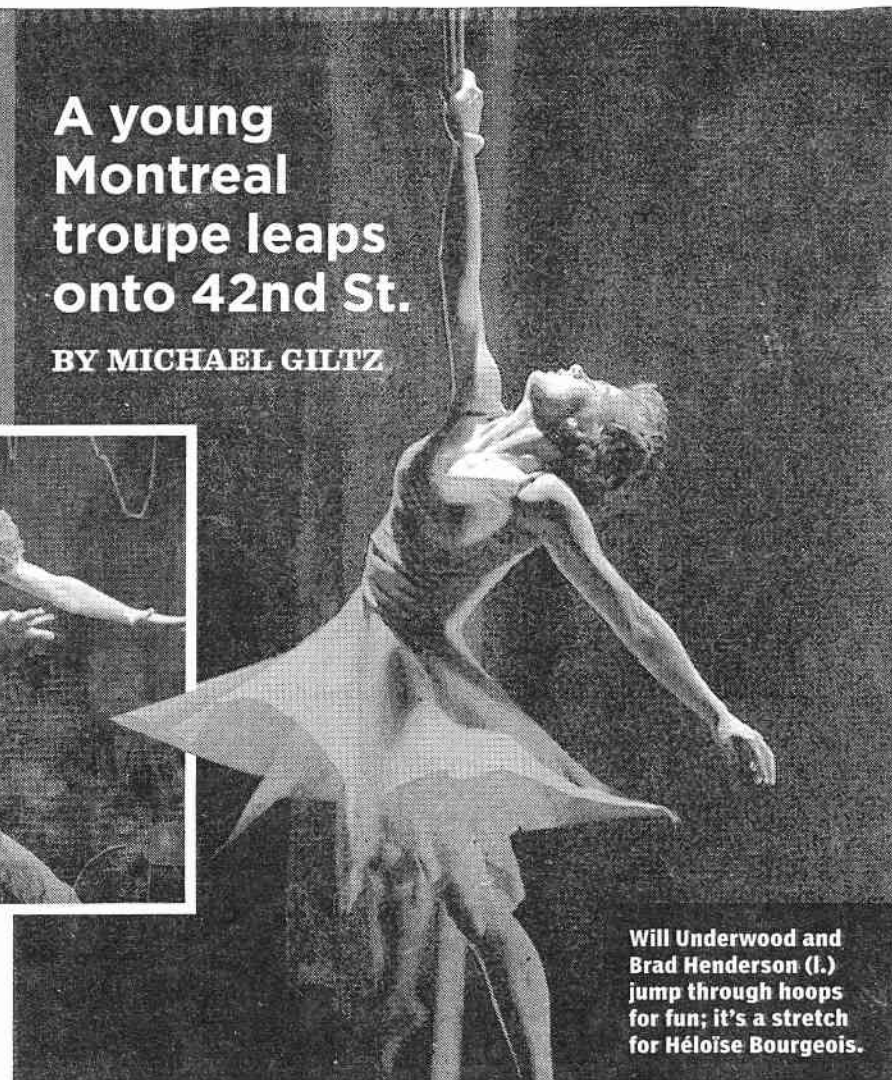
2/3/08
The five young circus performers starring in the inventive show "Traces" at the New Victory Theater (229 W. 42nd St.) this Friday through March 2 learned to hold a crowd's attention the hard way: by working as street performers in Europe so they could afford to eat and rent a hotel room.

"I remember the first show we did in London," says Francisco Cruz, 24, who, with younger brother Raphael and three of their best friends, went on an unofficial "tour" of Europe during a summer break from clown school in Montreal to work the



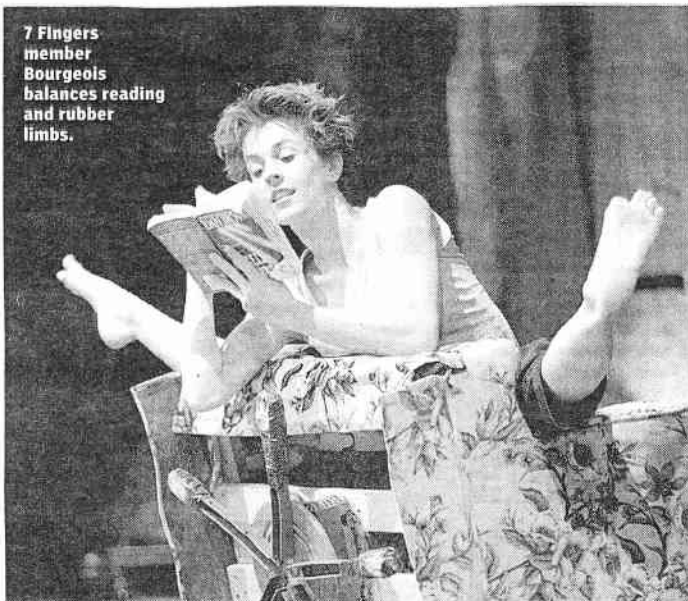
crowds for pocket change.

"We made this whole show, written all down on paper. But I don't think we picked the best spot. Our show was 25 minutes long and we made, I think, three pounds," Cruz laughs. "That's about \$6! It was ridiculous."



Will Underwood and Brad Henderson (l.) jump through hoops for fun; it's a stretch for H  lo  se Bourgeois.

7 Fingers member Bourgeois balances reading and rubber limbs.



But they'd been performing and rehearsing together for years. Francisco and Raphael grew up just outside San Francisco and met their friends Brad Henderson and William Underwood while studying circus moves, like Chinese hoop-diving, hand-to-hand (which involves gymnastics-like moves with a partner) and Chinese-pole maneuvers.

They all went to Montreal for circus college, and there met Héloïse Bourgeois. The five became inseparable, constantly working together on tricks and routines. So they knew how to adapt.

"For the rest of our time in London, instead of doing street shows, we'd actually work a street light," explains Cruz. "We'd find a busy intersection, and when there was a red light, we'd run out, do a trick then run to each car and try to get money. And they'd be throwing money at us! In an hour, we'd make about 80 pounds. In two hours, we'd make 200 pounds."

If it wasn't already clear, they were meant to work together. Luckily, as they neared graduation in 2001, a Montreal-based circus company called the 7 Fingers was looking to create a show. Veterans of the nouveau performance phenomenon Cirque du Soleil, the 7 Fingers had casually formed out of a desire to create their own show.

"We really wanted to create something we called 'circus with a human scale,'" says Shana Carroll, one of the artistic directors of the company and, along with Gypsy Snider, a director of "Traces." "We'd been doing these huge productions, and our instinct was to go intimate and demystify circus."

Their first production — "Lofts," in 2002 — was an immediate hit and is still performed all over the world. They wanted to build on that success without duplicating it, and here was a group of kids Carroll had known since most of them were little. (She and Snider urged them to further their learning in Montreal.)

"After their three years of circus school, we thought, hey, we should hire them!" says Carroll. "If anyone is going to do a show with them, it should be us."

The result is "Traces," a 90-minute burst of energy and creativity that incorporates everything from basketball and skateboarding and piano playing to classic stunts. It has played on four continents so far.

In classic 7 Fingers style, the five performers reveal details about themselves so the audience becomes invested in them as personalities and really cares about the dangerous, physically demanding work they do onstage. It's the same lesson they learned in London.

"It's not only about the trick," says Cruz of the show he has been working on and performing in for more than two years. "People need to see personality. They need to see we're having fun."

Sometimes, almost too much fun.

"They're young, and there are attention-span problems compared to other people we're used to working with," laughs Carroll, who hopes another 7 Fingers show — "La Vie," a dark cabaret act — can return to New York for an extended run after playing in the Spiegeltent at South Street Seaport last year.

"Putting skateboards and basketballs in the shows, sometimes we think it wasn't such a good idea because every time there's a five-second break, they're jumping around!" ♦

Brothers Francisco and Raphael Cruz hold each up during a performance.

