

BOLEADOROS

Many in the Cirque received formal dance training in their youth. Not Marie-Claude Lacroix, one of the two boleadoros dancers. We've just seen how Susan Daly stretched at the altar of the ballet bar. But Marie-Claude didn't even want to be a dancer. She didn't even want to be in show business. Her dream was to live an ordinary life, and she studied to become a psychologist. She was painfully shy. She didn't audition for plays in school. She didn't even audition for the Cirque. The Cirque came to her. She's had a serendipitous life. Perhaps that's why she's always smiling.

And she is always smiling. Backstage before going on, dining in the commissary tent after the show. Even while performing, if you can make out her features behind the ricocheting bolos, you can see she's enjoying herself. Still, the performing arts are filled with mercurial personalities who are pleasant as cherubim when everything's right with the world. How does she handle calamity?

The boleodoros is a vanishing dance and few in the audience are qualified to criticize her performance. It isn't like juggling, where dropping a ball constitutes a distinct failure. But there are perils in the dance even more potentially embarrassing and, though not as dangerous as the other acts, even harmful. The bolos are thin ropes three feet long with one inch Teflon balls on the ends, wound around the last three fingers. Sometimes the balls hit a metal strip in the round wooden platform and bounce erratically, striking the dancer in the leg or knee. Sometimes the ropes become entangled. Once, she recalls, she lost one of the bolos completely. It severed from the three-inch connector around her fingers and the rope and ball came to rest behind her. One of the Masques adroitly flung it back to her, but because of the severed connector it was three inches shorter than the right bolo. So she had to whip the left bolo faster to keep time. "I prefer to laugh," she says. "I am not a perfectionist. My whole world is not collapsing."

Still, that was years ago. Maybe time has ameliorated the trauma. But then she confesses to a more recent miscue. "Ten days ago the bolas got entangled! I was really surprised. It hadn't happened for such a long time! I think of it like a virus. You recover as quickly as possible."

She didn't storm off the stage in tears. She didn't sulk in the artistic tent. "I do four hundred shows a year. I do bolos because I love it. I am not a perfectionist," she repeats.

"If you are happy you lead by example," she says. "Where I'm from, near Quebec city, people are pretty happy. They laugh a lot."

One of the Russian performers had admitted to being disconcerted by Americans. Russians, like the French, only smile when they have a reason to smile, and she was suspicious of all these smiling Americans always wishing her a nice day. One may be forgiven for thinking the same of Marie-Claude. Her smile is so prominent a feature you wonder if it's just another mask, as artificial as the columns of masks hanging in the artistic tent. And when you discover that it isn't, that her contentment is as genuine as Susan's unpretentious earnestness, you wonder how she made it this far and marvel that her nature has remained uncorrupted.

Neither Susan nor she seem to possess any significant quantity of angst—that quality so crucial to the artistic temperament. At least Susan is quietly driven. But if it weren't for Marie-Claude's pale skin and French-Canadian features, you might be forgiven for thinking she had grown up in a Buddhist monastery. The fire is on the outside, on her costume. Inside she just glows.

Of course, even angels have inner demons, and Marie-Claude's demon was shyness. As a child she never dreamed about performing. She never imagined that she could walk on a stage. Even now she remains a very private person, avoiding groups. "In big groups there is so much politics," she complains.

If she had become a psychologist perhaps she could have specialized in helping people overcome their shyness. The moment of decision for her came in high school when she had to make a presentation. She was extremely nervous in the days leading up to the event. But she decided, finally, to attack her demon head on. She talked to her classmates and learned that they too were nervous. She tried exercises, such as holding a pen and letting it act as a magnet for her stress. She told herself not to try to please everyone. She didn't overcome her shyness in a week, but over years, step by step.

"I think you will be more happy with who you are if you challenge yourself," she believes. "Ask yourself, what you are hiding? Ask if there is anything in your life you would like to feel more comfortable with."

Still, it's one thing to make a speech in front of your classmates, quite another to dance before 2,500 people eight to ten times a week. Until she was sixteen her only exposure to rhythm was playing the clarinet in music class. Others come to the Cirque by a road. It may be a long road, stretching from the depths of Siberia. But Marie-Claude had no such route connecting past and future. Rather a chasm dividing them.

The bridge was an Argentinian who spoke neither French nor English. Marie-Claude's best friend had asked her to go to an arts festival. Marie-Claude said no. The friend insisted. Among the acts were two Argentinian guys doing boleadoras. Marie-Claude was bored. Her girlfriend led her backstage and introduced them. Marie-Claude didn't know a word of Spanish.

Nevertheless, one of the men managed to extend an invitation to her by phone through a friend who spoke English. He was living in Montreal, playing festivals and doing odd jobs. Marie-Claude was only sixteen, but she had a strong, independent character, and her parents couldn't prevent her from becoming involved with a foreigner in his mid-twenties. They would stay together for seven years, but not marry. He taught her the bolos.

The bolos were used by Indians in battle and later by gauchos to rope cattle. The dance originated in Argentina as an expression of machismo. Unlike other Latin dances, the bolos keep the dancers apart. Watching Marie-Claude and Adriana in *Saltimbanco*, they seem less partners than adversaries, challenging each other from their separate platforms like gunfighters shooting holes in quarters.

There weren't many good teachers of the boleadoras when Marie-Claude learned the dance, and fewer female performers. Spain had the flamenco, and tango dominated in Argentina. Adriana, a native of Argentina, left because of the dance's waning popularity. Many Argentine's thought it old-fashioned, a relic of their Indian rather than European heritage.

Cirque scouts went four or five times to Argentina, searching for experienced dancers. They came back disappointed. It was then they found Marie-Claude in their own backyard. She and her boyfriend had been performing together at festivals, and she had even appeared on television. She loved the dance but never contemplated it as a career. She was devoting most of her time to studying psychology at the University of Montreal. But she found academic life boring and too competitive. More emphasis was placed on test results than actual learning. And Marie-Claude had always valued the destination less than the journey.

When the Cirque called it was like a pair of wings falling from the sky.

The act had originated with others, of course, and the first part is performed in unison. But Marie-Claude's solo belongs to her. She could have copied her predecessor, or strung together a series of moves studied from other dancers. "But I wanted to create something that is me," she explains. Her performance is subtly affected by her energy, but with so many shows there's little room for variation. She never improvises. She only improvised the dance once, and that was not in *Saltimbanco*, but while visiting an Indian temple in Kuala Lumpur. A renowned guru had also come to visit, and Marie-Claude took this as a sign to perform. With the aid of a percussionist she improvised the boleadoras for the first time in her life.

Like Susan, Marie-Claude has been with *Saltimbanco* for four years. First in Australia, then, after a seven month break, in Japan, and now in Europe. But London will be her last city. She has plans for the future but, with Russian-like superstition, she won't say what they are. You have the feeling, however, that she will succeed in whatever she tries and that, like the Cheshire Cat, her smile will punctuate the fading dance.

You only regret the loss to the world of psychology. She has a lot to teach us all about not getting tangled up.