



## Roll up! New circus is coming to the Edinburgh Fringe



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With their beards and roller skates, Cirque Alfonse are the nuttiest of 12 circus troupes at Edinburgh. Scroll down for the rest of our picks of circus shows at the Fringe

If the members of the young French-Canadian company Cirque Alfonse have anything to say about it, Edinburgh in 2015 will go down in showbusiness as the year that circus got hairy. This family-run outfit is making its Fringe debut next week with the European premiere of a show called *Barbu* (“bearded” in French). Lasting about 70 minutes, and subtitled “Electro Trad Cabaret”, the production is a hirsute hoot that I caught a few weeks ago in Montreal. It’s also one of a series of shows at this year’s Fringe that come under the broad tent of “new circus”.

Originating in 18th-century England, circus was, until recently, about performing animals, red-nosed clowns and daring acrobats beneath the Big Top. Those shows aren’t quite gone but they are on the wane, replaced by the far wider theatrical brand of “new circus”. It can be daft, it can be sexy, it can be political — and it’s always contemporary.

But is it the sort of circus that audiences want to run away to join? Ed Bartlam and Charlie Wood, the joint directors of the sprawling Edinburgh venue known as Underbelly, are banking on the answer being a firm yes. “There’s a huge appetite for circus at the Festival,” Bartlam says, mentioning hits from past seasons including *Beyond*, a sensationally entertaining production by the Australian company Circa that he and Wood produced last August. “Other international festivals have been good at presenting circus,” he adds. “What’s been problematic in Edinburgh is that there hasn’t been a Fringe venue able to cope with the size, scale and technical complexities of the art form.

“We want to change that by creating one site for the largest and most technically ambitious programme of world-class circus – in all its variations and guises – that the Fringe has ever seen.”

His words carry the boastful ring of circus impresarios of the past – showmen such as PT Barnum, who branded the circus he formed in 1871 “the Greatest Show On Earth”. But Bartlam has certainly put his money where his mouth is. Circus Hub, Bartlam and Wood’s new venture, are hosting 12 productions at this year’s Fringe, performed in a pair of tents erected on The Meadows. The shows hail from Australia, Belgium, Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Palestine and the UK, and their tone and content veers from sensitively sober treatments of such issues as immigration and personal and/or political freedom to sizzingly sexy – or unabashedly silly – antics that come close to cabaret.

When I saw *Barbu* in Olympia, a big nightclub-like venue in Montreal, three musicians occupied a stage from which a tongue-like catwalk led to a round platform thrust out amid audience members seated at tables. The opening routine featured a trio of burly, bearded blokes on roller skates weaving swiftly among evenly placed silver cones. During subsequent acts a buxom young woman, sporting a frilly skirt and red knickers, clamped her mouth on a huge match that ignited as she was whipped round upside-down. A blond man hula-hooped in a corset. There were several hilarious cameos from a bald hyptonist who grew an extra head, and a good running gag involving the precarious balancing of golf clubs and, as a disco-tinged highlight, a big guy dressed as a mirror ball spinning inside a giant wheel.

Accompanied by film footage (close-ups of bees and flowers or, more surreally, men munching on their beards), and fuelled by a lively, raucous folk-rock score, *Barbu* is circus as a place to playfully test weird skills – spitting ping pong balls mouth to mouth, for instance, with somersaults. Wacky, risky, deceptively chaotic and liberating, it’s a show that brings a tongue-in-cheek, quasi-burlesque twist to tradition. More self-knowingly ridiculous than naughty, and all the more appealing for it, *Barbu* is also a welcome antidote to the still sometimes impressive but increasingly slick and soulless-seeming work of the mammoth entertainment franchise that is Cirque du Soleil.

Antoine Carabinier Lépine, one of the co-founders of Cirque Alfonse, is a tad sceptical about the “new circus” label: “It’s just everything together that we’re using, every source of art.” He refers to his company as “more of a splinter than a chip off the Cirque du Soleil block. They’ve helped us by paving the way and making it easier for circus to travel abroad.”

Born 34 years ago this month on a farm in Saint-Alphonse-Rodriguez, about 90 minutes north of Montreal, Carabinier Lépine found his calling 20 years ago after seeing a performance at Canada’s National Circus School. Post-training he worked his way through the big names of Quebec circus, appearing in special events for Soleil and being cast in shows by Cirque Éloize and Les 7 doigts de la main, aka 7 Fingers, before forming Alfonse with his dance-trained sister, Julie.

It was their second production, *Timber!*, that seized the imagination of the public and promoters. Originally aimed at Canadian audiences, this homage to the olden days of forestry was soon touring internationally. Featuring Antoine and Julie, Julie’s two-year-old son, Arthur, and the siblings’ sixtysomething father Alain, *Timber!* has been performed more than 300 times in 15 countries. At a

show in Dollywood. Dolly Parton, dressed as a lumberjack and toting a plastic pipe and an axe, sang with the company band.

Until a couple of months ago the family developed all their shows in Alain's barn in Saint-Alphonse-Rodriguez — until it a fire destroyed it. Julie and her and Antoine's mum deal with admin, and Alain — a wallpaper hanger who always hankered to be in the limelight — plans to keep performing for at least a year. Antoine's girlfriend Geneviève Morin handles performing (she's the match-lighter in red knickers in *Barbu*) and the company's PR.

Although inspired by early Montreal circus in the late 19th century, the wild party vibe of *Barbu* seems miles away from the warm, cosy feel of *Timber!* Carabinier Lépine calls the new show “a cross between an old-style fairground entertainment and a modern-day rave”. Apparently, even circus insiders, normally a show's hardest critics, enjoy it — partly because there is no pain involved. “They say they want to do it because it looks fun, like a vacation.” However, he cautions: “In circus it can be easy to charm an audience without taking any risks, so we are walking a fine line.”

Finding a title for *Barbu* was, he says, straightforward. “We all have beards, and it's what people call us anyway — like a name for a clan.” This may be a clue to what makes Cirque Alfonse tick. What its two shows share is a deep-seated sense of humour, plus the authenticity that stems from a family company. Its mission, Carabinier Lépine says, “is to keep our roots alive by staying true to what we believe in, and making work about where we're born. We don't go somewhere else completely. It's us onstage. We're not playing around with something we're not.” Or perhaps you could say that Cirque Alfonse is playing around with exactly what they are.

***Barbu* is at Underbelly's Circus Hub on The Meadows, Edinburgh (0844 5458252), to Aug 29**