

REVIEW: TIMBER!

(PANAMANIA/CIRQUE ALFONSE/THÉÂTRE FRANÇAIS)

JULY 25, 2015 MIKE ANDERSON

Cirque Alfonse brings circus artistry with a razor edge to Toronto's Fleck Dance Studio

At opening night of [Timber!](#), playing as part of this year's [PANAMANIA](#) festivities, the theatre was swarming with excited francophone children and frazzled francophone parents, equally keyed up for 90 minutes in the dark with [Cirque Alfonse](#). This lumberjack-inspired cirque thrilled and terrified in equal measure — the poor kid behind me was beside himself more than once: "[S'il manque le cible, il cassera son tete!](#)" — and blew the top off the Fleck Dance Theatre.

As musicians Josianne Laporte, David Boulanger and André Gagné play 90 straight minutes of material inspired by traditional Quebec folk music, the acrobats and actors run the full gamut: aerialism, acrobatics, teeterboard, the works, always with a twist — for instance, at the most heart-stopping moment of the show, when several performers jump through a tiny hoop created by looping a [two-man crosscut saw](#), teeth exposed.

Naturally, there's axe-throwing, trunk-sawing, a lumber-camp breakfast and shenanigans at the outhouse. And that's what struck me most about [Timber!](#): it almost serves as a reminder that we don't need Cirque du Soleil's cutesy costumes and high-concept storylines ("Okay, so what if the acrobats are literally butterflies, but also time-travelers who represent man's hubris and frailty, except dressed as Buddhist nuns?") in order to showcase some whizz-bang cirque tricks.

One wrinkle: the concessions they make to the [h'anglo](#) Toronto audience seemed to me a mistake. The show works perfectly well in French, and the company doesn't seem totally comfortable with plugging in a new language. You don't need to understand this show to understand it, and anyone who would let a lack of understanding of French wreck their enjoyment is missing out on a lot more than a little late-show storytelling.

But linguistic clunks aside, this show is as solid as the acrobats who perform it: do you think we can persuade the [Théâtre français](#) to find room in a future season for [Cirque Alfonse's Barbu](#)? If it's half as interesting — viscerally thrilling, off-the-wall creative, stomp-your-feet musical — as [Timber!](#), I'm more than ready to turn over my credit card right now.

Production photography by [Guillaume Morin](#).