INTERVIEW SERIES: THE FACES OF THE ECQ

Interview with Geneviève Kérouac

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Françoise Boudreault - To celebrate its 30th anniversary, the Quebec Circus School is conducting interviews with circus artists who have shaped the history of the School or who have attended it. Educators, artists, administrators, students, and program leaders share their experiences, their appreciation, their contributions, or their journeys at the École de cirque de Québec. This interview with Geneviève Kérouac offers the perspective of an artist who experienced the School in its early days and who still teaches there today.

Originally from Sherbrooke, Geneviève Kérouac moved to Quebec City in the late 1990s to earn a bachelor's degree in physical education. Trained in artistic gymnastics, she was first hired as a coach at the Quebec City Circus School, where she continued her acrobatic training until 2000. She joined Cirque Éos for its show Chapiteau, where she performed on the aerial diamond and the straps—the latter discipline being rarely practiced by women at the time. Geneviève then honed her skills in clowning with Francine Côté, René Bazinet, Soizick Hébert, and Michel Dallaire. Since 2003, she has been a professional swing dancer, an acrobatic dance form in which she became world champion in 2005 and 2007. She teaches Lindy Hop, Charleston, blues, and Balboa in Quebec, Europe, Australia, and the Americas. In 2008, she co-founded the Québec City-based theater company À Tempo, which produces multidisciplinary shows and where she serves as co-artistic director and performer. With this company, she created La Grande Étude, L'Oubliette, and, as director, Concerto de bruits qui courent and Swing Station, among others. It is worth noting that Camping, created by À Tempo and directed by Geneviève in 2019, has been performed 450 times in Germany, not counting the performances in Quebec. She directed Action!, an acrobatic-clownish play presented at Le Diamant in Quebec City in December 2024. At the time of the interview, performances of Combats were wrapping up at the Musée de la civilisation in Quebec City, a commission tied to the exhibition "Lutte. Le Québec dans l'Arène."

Geneviève is currently an artistic advisor, director, and choreographer for numerous circus, music, and theater productions. She also serves as an artistic advisor and head of clowning training at the École de cirque de Québec.

What is your earliest memory of the circus?

Geneviève Kérouac - I discovered the circus when I was very young; I must have been four or five years old, maybe six. In its very earliest days, Cirque du Soleil had set up its tiny big top at the Carrefour de L'Estrie in Sherbrooke, and you could see the lines of the parking lot when you looked down. The show was simply called Cirque du Soleil;

there was no title. It was my first time seeing the circus, and I was completely fascinated. That must be where all my love for the circus comes from.

FB - At that time, you were already doing gymnastics, and it wasn't until later that you moved to Quebec City. What was your first experience with the Circus School?

GK - I left Sherbrooke to come study in Quebec City. I was looking for work, and since I had taught artistic gymnastics, I thought I'd coach at gym clubs in Quebec City, but they didn't need coaches at the time. I guess it wasn't a time of labor shortage! At the gym clubs, they told me that the new circus school was looking for acrobatics coaches. It was 1997, and the Circus School was in the gym at the Centre Louis-Joliette. I walked in and recognized the gym equipment, but I also discovered strange apparatus suspended from the ceiling: aerial hoops, diamond rings, cubes, straps, silks... Wow! I loved it so much, I was so intrigued, that in addition to working for the School, which hired me, I enrolled there to start learning circus arts. I was also working on my bachelor's degree at Laval University; three things at once!

FB - Back then, what was the curriculum like for students at the Circus School?

GK - It wasn't structured like it is today; we hadn't yet reached the DEC level, which is relatively recent. It was acrobatic training. We performed acts with the coaches. Dominic Laçasse was the head coach, and he had designed programs for each apparatus, with a progression for learning the movements. Without an outside eye or artistic advisor, we'd choose a song and create our own routine using the movements we came up with. We were very independent, but at the same time, everyone helped each other out a lot—like a big family.

FB - People were versatile. You did aerial acrobatics: aerial trapeze, suspension straps...

GK - At the circus, I did a lot of aerial work. At first, since I came from gymnastics, I did acrobatics and trampoline. One day, I got a little lost in the air and really broke my nose. After that, I was less tempted by acrobatics. I continued with aerials, developing acts. Back then, we entered the job market fairly quickly; almost everyone at the School worked for Cirque Éos. That company helped advance the professionalization of acrobats in Quebec City.

GK - The director of the Circus School was Michel Rousseau, founder of Cirque Éos, so it was kind of a natural fit. He started a company, and eventually, Éos's rehearsal space was the Circus School: the entire process of creating the show took place there. When I arrived at the School, Imaginaire, Éos's first production, had already taken place, with those who had been there a year, a year and a half earlier. I joined the second one, called Chapiteau, with my entire cohort from the Circus School.

FB - In the meantime, the school had moved from the Louis-Joliette Centre to ExpoCité.

GK – Ah! ExpoCité, where they really did have animal shows! In that huge arena, there was never any ice—instead, there were parades featuring cattle, horses, and all sorts of

animals during the agricultural fair. Our practice rink would fill up with hay on the floor and animal feed during the summer. They'd clear the hay away afterward, but on all the arena beams and under the seats—everywhere—there was still a ton of dust and everything that had blown into the air. It smelled like manure, like a farm. Anyone who used to come to train at the youth pavilion back in the day would talk about the smell: it was intense when we came back in September. And it was hard to heat; it was pretty cold in the winter. Fortunately, it was very high up, with plenty of places to hang things and tons of space for everyone to practice their discipline at the same time. It was great, a good place, but echoey and without any enclosed rooms. Classes in clowning, acting, or dance were held in open areas, and everyone could hear the music or the voices. But there weren't that many of us working at the same time—maybe a dozen a year.

FB - Then the school moved out of the ExpoCité pavilion and set up shop at Saint-Esprit Church.

GK - Yes! Hurray! Wonderful! That's a whole different story. They managed the church's acoustics, so the sound was much nicer than in the pavilion. It smelled nice. They renovated, transformed, and desacralized the church. Plus, there are closed-off rooms downstairs: the dance room and the game room, equipped with mirrors and other tools to help students progress. I wasn't a student anymore around 2002 when I arrived at the church; I was already a coach.

FB – With the move to a new location, have you seen an increase in the number of students attending the school for recreational or professional purposes? There has been an increase.

GK – Yes. There were also more people from out of town. At first, almost all the students came from Quebec City: former gymnasts from the ExpoCité days and the early days of Éos, friends who had competed in gymnastics together before. All of a sudden, American jugglers showed up, people from out of town, and the cohorts were larger in the professional training program. Before the DEC program started at the Circus School, there were few students in the professional training program—I'd say five or six per year. Very few entered the job market after their three years of school, but the recreational program was more advanced, with very high levels, and that formed the pool for the professional training program later on. All of that helped.

FB - Music, clowning, physical theater, and acrobatics. Théâtre À Tempo's first show was a huge success when it premiered at RIDEAU, a major event for performing arts presenters that takes place in Quebec City every year. La Grande Étude gave the company an unexpected boost.

GK – Yes, incredible. We created La Grande Étude as part of the 400th anniversary celebrations of the city of Quebec City. It was a clownish scientific study—not entirely serious— on human reactions to different sounds. Our two musicians, Sylvain Nault and

Renaud Paquette, played scientists analyzing the reactions of three clowns: Olivier Forest, Benoît Lemay, and myself, the company's co-founders. They gave us instructions: open drawer number one and see what's inside. We made little tunes and all sorts of silly things with whatever we found—recycled materials, no less. I don't think musical clowning had been performed very often in Quebec before. It was funny; people laughed a lot. The RIDEAU grant and the entire network of presenters discovered us; that's huge. After our run at RIDEAU, where we performed the full show, we toured for two years in theaters all over Quebec. That opportunity gave us a great boost for what came next, and thanks to that, we're still here creating shows for the Diamant and all sorts of other venues.

FB - At Théâtre à Tempo, why do you hire students from the School? What qualities do you look for in a performer?

GK - Unlike other companies in Quebec or Quebec City, when we hire an artist, it's not necessarily for their circus discipline; we then integrate them into the show's script. The most important thing is that the artist be very good at physical acting, or better yet, clowning, and that they be a musician—or at least know how to keep a consistent rhythm, to be on the beat. Even better if they can play an instrument or read music. That's more important than their acrobatic skill level in their circus discipline. We're obviously looking for a high level of skill, but physical performance is paramount, followed by music. At the Circus School, I watch the students go by, and there aren't hundreds who possess all these skills combined: I see one every three years. It takes time to build up a pool of artists who meet all the criteria and whom our company can select. I scout for talent. We've set ourselves a mission: I always let them do their first auditions elsewhere, so they can step outside the framework of what we've taught them, so they can experience things beyond what I or my colleagues have provided. Then, after they've spent a year or two, or three or fifteen, in other theaters, companies, or productions, we call them, hoping they'll say yes. And usually they say yes.

FB – You directed your first play at the school in 2010, for the end-of-year performance.

GK – *Passage Forain*. We didn't have much of a budget, so there were no sets or props. We used milk crates to make just about everything. Back then, before the DEC program started, there were five or six professional graduates. We showcased them, and all the other students at the school supported the scenes: group numbers, solos. Passage Forain told the story of nomads who arrived in a place, set down everything they carried on their backs, and settled in by building everything they needed.

FB – While you were at the School, did you participate in activities outside the country?

GK - I went to Paris with a group of students for the Festival Mondial du cirque de Demain. It was a special edition for Quebec artists in 2003, the year Daniel Cyr first presented his Cyr wheel. The world was discovering the Cyr wheel! I accompanied a group of students as a coach; it was a wonderful experience. We created a routine for a special performance at Cirque Phénix that was very impressive. I remember that the students were quite young. A wonderful activity and a beautiful memory.

1- **In the 1970s, the clown trio Chatouille, Chocolat, and Cézard blended comedy, music, and acrobatics in their shows. Sonia Côté, Rodrigue Tremblay, and Paul Vachon (replaced by Yves Caron) are considered pioneers of the Quebec circus. The duo Les Voilà—Soizick Hébert and Johnny Filion—had several musical-acrobatic clown acts in the 1980s.**

FB - A freedom you have to be willing to embrace. Along with technical skills comes the transmission of values. What values were passed on to you when you were a student at the École de cirque de Québec? What values do you pass on in your teaching, in addition to physical skills and technical expertise in acrobatics, clowning, or physical performance?

GK – Pushing yourself to the limit. You learn physically; you get better, stronger. But there's also an artistic coherence, making a connection with the artistic. As a student, I came from a gymnastics background, so the focus was more on competition. Arms held straight, feet pointed, and all that—very technical. In the circus, you suddenly have a certain freedom that you have to be willing to embrace. You have to step outside the boundaries you've always had, go elsewhere, create off the beaten path. Another thing I remember from the School: I can finally create what's in my head, work with anything. I have the freedom to do whatever I want without limits. I thought that was fantastic. That's what I try to convey to my students now. Do you have an idea? Share it, even if it's crazy—we'll see. In artistic advising, I guide students through the creation of their act, from first to third year. They enter the market with the act we've worked on together for three years. In the arts, you can create new things with each student—it's fantastic. The challenge is to help them shine, to find the way to make them as interesting as possible on stage, proud of themselves and feeling good. I work to guide the person—who often comes in more as a performer—to create, to present a full range of physical and artistic challenges with a high quality of interpretation.

FB - Acrobatics requires rigorous physical training and discipline. The parameters are different in the art of clowning. How does comedy work? Each discipline has its own specific vocabulary, but how does clowning work? Can you learn to be funny?

GK - Yes, it can be learned. If we compare it to an actor learning a role, the clown doesn't act; he plays himself, adding what's funny or a bit off-kilter about him—his natural clumsiness or the fact that he stands very straight or slightly hunched. We amplify what comes naturally, turning the volume up to 120. We "crank up" what's already there. We're not acting; we're working with the person, making them a bit

stronger, generally exaggerating, using different techniques like fixed points, stopping movement, looking at the audience...

FB - Comedy doesn't just fall from the sky; it's not always natural—it takes practice. What's unique about the art of clowning is that even if you have a coach, you need an audience to see if they'll laugh at what you've done.

GK – That's why clown classes at the School are always held in groups. Starting to learn the art of clowning without a group is too difficult. With just your teacher in front of you, it won't work. The clown must learn to listen to the laughter, to have a conversation, a constant dialogue with the audience. There is no fourth wall: the audience is there, and the clown wants to win their affection. A clown is like yourself at age six, trying to please your teacher, but afraid of the principal—the more authoritarian clown. You have to go back a bit to childhood and turn up the volume on all of that, amplify it.

FB - Traditional clowns often perform in pairs: the Auguste and the White Clown. How do you perceive the evolution of clowning, whether solo or in pairs, and the way we approach the clown, sometimes called the "linking character"? How do you view the evolution from more traditional clowns to what's being done today?

GK - Companies working in clowning choose a path. I'm thinking of my colleagues in Montreal, Les Foutoukours, who are acrobatic clowns. Jean-Félix was one of my students. They've stayed true to tradition with the red nose, similar to the Russian clown, whereas other companies like ours don't use that red nose. It depends on how each company approaches the clown. We're moving away from the idea of the clown as Ronald McDonald with dyed hair, big shoes, a big nose, and balloons. Those clowns exist, but there are many other kinds that we're trying to introduce so people can choose. Just as there are different kinds of dance, there are different kinds of clowns.

FB - Closer to being human.You've seen the school's teaching evolve and the number of students increase. What would you say is the difference between the school's early days and now?

GK - College training has made a huge difference. The program has much clearer goals, closer monitoring between coaches and their students, with specific feedback and evaluations. This feedback helps students achieve longer-term goals. Everything is much more structured and organized.

FB - What would be the effects on the art?

GK - The artistic level, as well as the acrobatic and technical levels, has increased because the path to getting there is more organized and better, in my opinion. Then, the student, the artist who graduates, isn't just an acrobat or an acrobatic athlete; they become a complete artist with training in dance, acting, and clowning. They acquire a cultural foundation. They also learn to integrate all of this, to blend

acrobatics and body movements—which are physically demanding—with the interpretation of what they want to express and share with the audience. It has evolved from a sport into an art form.

FB - In the work of students, schoolchildren, graduating students, and artists, have you noticed any themes that have changed or evolved over time?

GK - There are trends. But one thing is certain: at the School, when I was younger, we'd go out in very elaborate costumes, similar to those of Cirque du Soleil, made of Lycra or featuring very colorful designs, with incredible makeup and hairstyles. We tried to channel a bit of Cirque du Soleil in our look. Now it's not like that at all. Artists dress almost as they train: fairly simple, everyday outfits, little or no makeup, no more tight-fitting Lycra, at least not as often. In short, it's perhaps become more human since we've become less like "creatures," we're closer to being human. One year I had a student, Jacob Grégoire, a great wall-trampoline acrobat, who came up with an insect act. I was his artistic coach and I said it's perfect—you have to do an insect that sticks to the wall. He didn't go for the human look, and it was great. We've gone from very colorful, with makeup, and Lycra, to something much closer to reality—and perhaps more contemporary, too.

FB - What are the current issues and challenges in teaching and school life at the school?

GK - Keeping our students healthy. There are risks in the disciplines, and many students get injured, so we lose them—it's inevitable. Even if a student is injured, the task is to keep teaching them, helping them progress, and ensuring proper rehabilitation to retain as many students as possible and prepare them.

FB - Aspiring circus performers need to learn about safety and prevention.

GK – Exactly. With the team of physical therapists at the School, the program has been strengthening over the past few years; there have been significant changes, and things are improving. The students are well-supported, but physical health remains a major challenge. And health in general. It's not normal to balance on one hand for two minutes. After training, once they're in the workforce, that's just the beginning. Students need to know what to do the next time they get injured, when the entire team from the School is no longer with them. We don't just teach them acrobatics or technical movements; we teach them how to take care of their bodies, how to eat well, how to sleep well; this is important so that later on, their profession and career can continue for a long time. Otherwise, they can get injured quickly.

FB - There's also artistic support for the creative process.

GK – They need to understand that the creative process takes time. They have to test their work in front of an audience. They'll know what to do because they've gone through the stages of the creative process at the School. Another challenge involves

immigration policies. Currently, fewer people from abroad can come to study because they don't have visas. This is severely limiting the School's training programs; it's going to be a major challenge in the near future. Before, people came from the United States, Europe, everywhere, and suddenly, we have a smaller pool because many more people are unable to obtain a student visa. We've had better times when it comes to welcoming international students to the School.

FB - Have there been any memorable events for you at the School? Things you've seen that moved or shocked you.

GK - I've seen some pretty bad accidents happen back in the Eos days, when we were at the Youth Pavilion. One of my colleagues, Mélanie, fell off her trapeze. A fastening issue, a carabiner that wasn't clipped properly—I don't remember exactly, but I do very clearly remember seeing her fall from her swinging trapeze, from a great height. She landed on all fours on the concrete and broke all four limbs. In moments like that, you tell yourself you really have to clip the carabiner properly. It makes you aware of the risks. It was the first time I felt like I'd been punched in the face. When I'm rigging, I remember that it's really important. Something similar happened with Alberto, one of my students, more recently. The show stopped right in the middle because he fell out of the harnesses. Fortunately, he came out of it okay.

FB - Connecting with joy. Do you have any significant memories from your training at the School?

GK – I started clowning at the Circus School during my training with Francine Côté, who taught workshops there. Francine was my clown mom, just as she was for many clowns in Quebec and probably around the world. I fell in love with the discipline because I had so much fun. I laughed so much in my classes! It's hard at first when you feel like crying because nobody is laughing; you go through a roller coaster of emotions, but it's incredibly rewarding. I discovered a passion during those workshops with Francine Côté—it was a pivotal moment. We'd shout "Yippee!" and jump before starting. It works! You have to connect with joy to be a clown. Francine taught me that very well, and I try to pass it on to the next generation in my teaching. There were also Lecoq exercises with Danielle Barbeau. Probably everyone who attended the École de cirque de Québec has done them. How to row, how to climb a wall, physical theater exercises, mime—all designed to help us interpret certain situations effectively. It teaches body awareness, how the body moves, and how to effectively convey to the audience what we want to express. With Danielle, we worked a lot with larval masks. White masks without much expression, with two tiny holes for the eyes, as if the face were just a big nose or a big mouth from below or an enormous forehead. It provides a baseline for moving while staying consistent with the state of the face, of your mask. In the early days, to promote the School, we took on an animation contract using Danielle's masks. But we couldn't see a thing, and it was quite an adventure to animate with such a tiny field of vision. I survived, but I was afraid of bumping into people and falling off the stage.

FB - Do you have any memories of the disciplines you practiced at the School?

GK - I did bolas, boleadoras—little balls on the end of a rope that you hit against the ground to create a rhythm with your movements. At the School, I discovered this wonderful juggling discipline, which I really enjoyed as a musician. Until the moment I got hit in the forehead by a ball. It's a dangerous discipline: the bolas can cause a lot of bruises. It's very intense, but when you manage to create a routine, it's also musical because of the percussion of the balls hitting the ground. After that, I never did it again in my career. Another fond memory.

FB - You're a multidisciplinary artist. What did you take away from the School that helps you in your profession? You were both a student and an instructor. Are there aspects of the education you received at the school that are particularly useful in your work?

GK - Yes, everything is intertwined, but creating acts was part of it from the very beginning. We were so independent that I developed my own way of creating acts, shows, and sequences of three or four acts. Without realizing it, I still use pretty much the same approach as a director or show designer as I did in my first acts at circus school. Back then, I established the way I still work today. There are no classes or schools to become a director, and everyone has their own way of creating a show. Later, that helped me pass it on to young artists. It's very personal.

FB - What are you working on right now?

GK - This week marks the final performances of *Combats*, presented in the lobby of the Museum of Civilization throughout spring break, through Sunday. Best of all, it's free. Two 30-minute shows a day featuring two former students of the school, Santiago and Augustin, and musician Sylvain Nault, who was in La grande étude. A commission by the museum in connection with their exhibition on wrestling.

FB - What do you wish for the School in the future?

GK - I'd like it to continue becoming a global benchmark, to attract students so that the mix of all cultures, of all the knowledge of those who come together in each cohort, creates something even bigger. The mix of all the students helps the cohort emerge stronger and greater. I'd like the School to keep growing to attract more and more people—and high-caliber ones— and for it to be recognized for listening to students, letting them be who they are, the artists they want to become, just as we do now, without forcing them into a mold. I think it's super important that this continues. In addition: The Diamant website features an interview with Geneviève Kérouac and Marco Estrada, who discuss their respective professions and the theatricality found in circus and wrestling.