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The score: Composer makes Circus Smirkus sing

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Tristan Moore composes music for the 2010 Circus Smirkus tour in his studio at the circus' home base in Greensboro earlier this summer.

Job Wallace-Brodeur/Times Argus

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When Circus Smirkus called Tristan Moore about becoming a composer and keyboardist for a youth circus, but didn't identify themselves, they had to be surprised by his response.

"This wouldn't happen to be Circus Smirkus, would it?" he asked them.

After they replied in the affirmative, he continued, "I know who you are. You guys are fantastic. I would love this opportunity."

Moore had already seen Vermont's traveling youth circus in 2000 in Stowe while passing through.

"I immediately thought this was a place I would enjoy working with, but I didn't pursue it at the time," he said. "They contacted me and said here's this opportunity to compose and travel as a keyboardist with a youth circus."

Moore, now in his third year with the troupe, can be seen at the keyboard performing his own music when Circus Smirkus winds up the tour of its 2010 show "Wilderness Wonders: Outdoor Adventures under the Big Top." Remaining are four performances at Montpelier High School Aug. 11 and 12 and three at The Circus Barn in Greensboro on Aug. 14 and 15.

Moore's music is far more than mere mood-setting. Finely crafted, utilizing styles from the latest pop hits to jazz and classical, his Circus Smirkus scores not only set the tone for each year's circus, they create the flexible backdrop for the various feats of daring.

Moore's creative process begins months before the first rehearsal. First, the Circus Smirkus creative team – Artistic Director Troy Wunderle and Creative Director Jesse Dryden – decide on a theme for the year's show, as well as ideas for the various acts.

"They've talked about what kind of show this is going to be aesthetically," Moore said. "There's a lot of guesswork involved, because we don't know exactly which acts are going to make it through the final cut at that stage. But they have a good idea of what skills they are working with so we make some stabs at it."

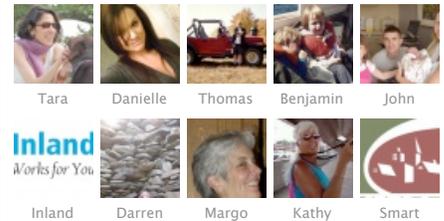
Circus Smirkus

Circus Smirkus presents "Wilderness Wonders: Outdoor Adventures under the Bigtop":
Aug. 11-12: Montpelier – \$20, \$15 for children, Montpelier High School, 5 High School Drive, 2 and 7 p.m. each day.
Aug. 14-15: Greensboro – \$18, \$15 for children, The Circus Barn, 1 Circus Road, 7 p.m. Saturday; 1 and 6 p.m. Sunday.
For tickets or information, call 1-877-764-7587, or go online to www.circussmirkus.org.

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Most of that work takes place over the phone, between the directors in Vermont and Moore at his home in Salt Lake City, where he is resident composer at the University of Utah Children's Dance Theatre.

"This year, because the theme was so expansive, Jesse gave me the idea that this was going to be a larger-than-life feel, a little bit operatic at times, always with an undercurrent that the folks here of the Appalachians have," Moore said.

For the next couple months, Moore generated compositions which he shared with them over the Internet. Those compositions began to take real form when the circus started physically coming together at The Circus Barn in Greensboro, and the acts began training.

"They got videos, and that's where the personalities of the individuals, the troupers, who are going to perform, come into play," Moore said. "That's a big factor for me, to look at what story is being told, and what kind of energy they bring into the ring."

That involved tweaking the pieces he has already written as well as generating new music.

"Those last three weeks at the barn are an intense blur of deadlines – just to get something on the road," Moore said, "with the knowledge that later down the road, we'll be able to tweak it and fine tune things so that it becomes a more aesthetically polished show."

Much of the music, played live by Moore on keyboard and Ryan Gray on drums and percussion, is improvised to a certain extent.

"Occasionally I'll write stuff out to remind myself where I am," Moore said. "A lot of it is programmed into computers."

It's never quite the same composition from show to show.

"The tricks obviously take variable lengths of time from show to show," Moore said. "If the jugglers drop something, or if somebody takes longer to get from point A to point B, we need to build in some flexibility. So the compositions are essentially chopped up into sections which we can extend."

There is a lot of musical diversity within the Circus Smirkus scores.

"It's gone through a renaissance – it no longer has to be just marches, it can be anything," Moore said. "You can use ideas from film scoring and insert those, which I did; you can take it from musical theater; you can take it from classical music.

"We've got a little Aaron Copland in here," he said.

In fact, growing up in Salt Lake City, Moore's initial training was in classical piano, beginning at an early age. At Amherst College, he earned a degree in music, theater and dance, going on to study composition in Paris at the Schola Cantorum.

Moore's discovery of circus music came with a performance by Montreal's Cirque du Soleil in New York City in 1998.

"I was just blown away," he said. "What I saw going on there was a really personal connection between the performers and the music – and I thought that was something I would like to participate in in some way.

"I didn't think of it as a realistic career goal at that point – I just found it amazing."

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