

Cirque ignites 'Spark'

Self-help author finds something new under the sun

By Craig Wilson
USA TODAY

NEW YORK — Lyn Heward is watching jugglers run through a routine they'll perform that evening at the New York premiere of Cirque du Soleil's newest show, *Corteo*.

The rehearsal is virtually flawless. The young Russians' maneuvers are so impressive they even wow Heward, who has seen every Cirque act dozens of times.

"Well, that was something, wasn't it?" she asks.

As a longtime executive with Cirque du Soleil, Heward has witnessed such creative energy firsthand hundreds of times, but she's still intrigued that a company, any company, is able to keep "the spark," as she calls it, alive. So much so she came up with an idea for a book about just that.

The Spark: Igniting the Creative Fire That Lives Within Us All (Currency, \$19.95) is a semi-fictional account of a burned-out executive who stumbles onto a rehearsal of a Cirque du Soleil performance in Las Vegas, follows the famed troupe back to its Montreal headquarters and turns his life around by embracing the company's mantras: take chances, get out of your comfort zone, trust others, work for a common

goal, and when all else fails, muster up some courage.

"It's about going beyond the job, stimulating people, letting them try new things," Heward says. "And letting them fail in the process."

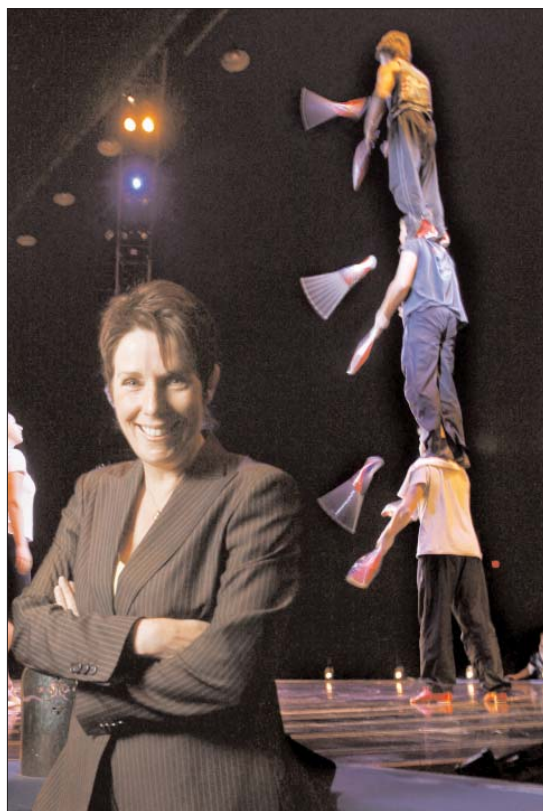
Some in the publishing world think Heward's tiny volume (135 pages) could break out as the newest self-help book, along the lines of *What Should I Do with My Life?* or the international best seller *Who Moved My Cheese?*

"But this book is not about moving cheese," says Heward, 52. "It's about moving people. ... Cheese is not my problem."

Publishers Weekly calls the book "captivating" and says it "offers important lessons that can be applied to many aspects of modern life."

Sara Nelson, *Publishers'* editor in chief, sees *The Spark* following in the tradition of Twyla Tharp's best seller *The Creative Habit*.

"It's the marriage of two genres," Nelson says. "It's celebrity entertainment and how-to journalism. ... And with a name like Cirque du Soleil, you



Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY

Top of her game: Cirque du Soleil executive producer Lyn Heward takes readers of her new book, *The Spark*, on a journey inside the world, ideas and attitudes of the show.

have a lot more people paying attention."

Books like this "all have one underlying message, and that's how to improve your life," says Michael Palgon, the deputy publisher at Doubleday who worked with Spencer Johnson on *The*

Present, his follow-up self-help book to *Who Moved My Cheese?*

"A lot of these books work through word-of-mouth," he says, adding that corporations always are looking for a quick read to motivate their employees. "The best have a good message that works both at work and in your life at home."

But even Heward concedes that bringing creative energy to the workplace is easier said than done: A survey conducted by Harris Interactive last year shows that 55% of all Americans are unhappy with their jobs, only 20% feel passionate about their work, and a mere 15% feel energized by what they do.

Heward worries that people don't recognize themselves as being creative anymore. "And you can never develop it if you don't practice it. It's in there, but you have to work on it."

She knows this all too well. Heward, a former dancer and gymnast, was president and COO of Cirque's creative content division when she realized she needed to get out of her second-floor office.

"You can get lost even at Cirque," she says. "You can feel your passion wane. I needed to reflect on what made me passionate to come to Cirque du Soleil in the first place. ... I needed to go hands-on, go back to the sensorial stuff."

Today, Heward acts as an executive producer for a variety of projects of her choice, including *The Spark*.

"It's the most incredible company I've ever seen," says journalist John U. Bacon, who wrote the book with Heward's help, living and training with the troupe for six months, including

taking to the highflying trapeze.

"They've managed to meld collaboration and conflict together more successfully than anyone else. ... I've never seen any group manage creativity better. It's the opposite of Detroit," he says, referring to the auto industry. "They don't care where an idea comes from. The best just bubble to the top."

On the day of the *Corteo* premiere, Heward wanders the show site on Randall's Island, from backstage to the mess tent, chatting with everyone from founder and creative genius Guy Laliberte (he rarely gives interviews and did not for this story) to the hair and makeup people. There are 900 performers in 12 shows around the world, five in Las Vegas alone.

"You can see them thinking, and it has an impact on you," says Renee-Claude Menard, who works in Cirque's front office, of the artists. "All the employees here are in contact with the artists. Sometimes it's reassuring just to know they're eating the same salad you are."

Gale Hess, 51, a violinist, just joined the company this spring and is sitting in a chair backstage having her hair done for the New York premiere. The process takes close to two hours. Not only does she play the violin in the orchestra, but for certain acts, she also has to climb around the rigging above the stage and play. "It's still freaking me out a bit," she says, "but I'm sure I'll get used to it."



Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY

Flying high: Gymnast Mitch Head, practicing on the trampoline, says he brainstorms with fellow performers to find new ways of doing his act.

She says she felt the difference from other jobs "in the first five minutes of being here."

"Cirque is not theater. You have to flow more. Someone will come up with a creative idea, and you have to go with it."

Taras Shevchenko, 22, comes from a circus family in the Ukraine and has been with Cirque for three years as an acrobat. He says he keeps the creative spirit alive by "every now and then turning right instead of left."

"If you do the same movement every night perfectly, but with no soul, the audience can tell. So you play with the person in the audience. It keeps you alive."

Richard Dagenais is the artistic coordinator for Corteo. He, more than most, knows what Shevchenko is talking about: "My job is to keep it fresh."

Dagenais sent some of his people to flamenco workshops, for instance. "I wanted them to taste and feel what it's like. The creating has to come from them, but you have to nourish it. The more you do, the more sincere it is."

Mitch Head has been a gymnast with the company since 1997. In Corteo, he does a back bounce from a bed (a disguised trampoline) up onto the head-

board, where he lands with such ease you're almost tempted to try it at home.

"It's an evolution. We start out with something basic, we tweak and build it up," says the once-competitive trampolinist who sits up late at night with his Cirque buddies thinking of new ideas.

"With 500 shows a year, you can find little ways to do the same thing a little differently," Head says. "And what you'll see tonight will be totally different a year from now."

Heward says it usually takes 18 months to two years for a show to hit its creative stride. "It's rarely fine-tuned before a year."

The New York premiere of Corteo, for instance, is at least 50% different from what Heward saw a year ago when the show first hit the stage. Acts had been shortened, moved to different slots or dropped all together.

"It was very rough at the beginning, but that's OK," she says. "That's what this is all about: being able to change."

Keys to the circus

Some of the keys to Cirque du Soleil's success, according to executive producer Lyn Heward:

- ▶ Sharing of ideas: "We argue about anything — what costumes to use, what athlete to hire. Our first idea is almost never our last."
- ▶ Surrendering to your senses and living an experience: "The journey inward begins with technique ... but it can only progress if you allow yourself to move beyond the mechanics and into the moment."
- ▶ The nurturing environment: "The ideal office is a fantastical playground ... a place where an employee can see the world through the eyes of a child."
- ▶ Challenges becoming creative catalysts: "Constraints — budgets, deadlines and limited resources — can be a fantastic motivator. Without them, your mind is not focused."
- ▶ Keeping the job fresh: "Comes from the top. In all businesses, your people will rarely work harder than the boss."

Team spirit is crucial

What are some of the tricks of the trade when it comes to inspiring the Cirque du Soleil team performer?

- ▶ Before each show, the performers stand in a circle, chanting and clapping. They stand facing each other, singing to each other, throwing long sticks through the air to each other.
- ▶ "Breathe! Be there! See each other! Go for it!" yells Alison Crawford, the show's artistic director.
- ▶ Why all the eye contact? "People can tell if you're not there," she says.
- ▶ The company is big on rotation and recasting, bringing in fresh blood to liven up a show that has been on the road a while.
- ▶ And something as simple as a drum works wonders. "Drums are the heartbeat of the world," Cirque executive producer Lyn Heward says. "We use percussion as a way to awaken the senses of our artists who come in as athletes. So many are in the cult of their body, but they might not be the people who provoke and evoke. "They're stars in their own right, and they have to learn that the show is the star."

