CARNIVÀLE LUNE BLEUE eschews modern thrills by embracing the low-tech mystique of Depression-era travelling shows

THIS WEEK

MACLEAN'S

VOLUME 122 NUMBER 31, AUGUST 17, 2009 • SINCE 1905

AUG. 17-24, 2009

COVER: MATTEO BAZZI/CORBIS; INSET: EZRA SHAW/GETTY; THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPH BY BLAIR GABLE

WHEN THE CARNIVÀLE CAME TO TOWN

For five weeks, the citizens of Ottawa are invited to step out of time BY JORDAN TIMM

stage

In the evening, after Ottawa's office buildings have closed and its bureaucrats have been dispatched back to their homes, the carnival opens. Strings of bare white bulbs spark to light and a Ferris wheel, built in 1917 by the Eli Bridge Company of Jacksonville, Ill., begins to spin. The wooden horses of a 1938 carousel start circling, rising and falling. Delta blues music drifts from pole-mounted speakers. Along the midway, men and women in braces and neckerchiefs and poor-boy caps pull back the flaps of their musty canvas tents and set out games of skill and chance.

At five o'clock on the nose, a bearded carnie barker in a suit and straw boater walks down to the carnival gates, where a small cluster of people has already gathered. He takes down the rope that bars their entry to the grounds and sweeps them inside with a wave of his cane. They gawk and take pictures as they wander from the rides to the games to the reptile show or the fortune teller's caravan or wait for the next performance by the freak show or the acrobats under the big top.

Wayne Van De Graaff sits in a chair in the doorway of the carnival's management trailer, looking out over the Carnivàle Lune Bleue site at Hog's Back Park in Ottawa's south end. "There's an intoxication of sights and sounds and smells," says the Lune Bleue founder and executive producer. "The normal societal barriers are suspended for a while, and you're able to see things that are both beautiful and very dark." Tall and lean, Van De Graaff wears a denim shirt tucked into clean blue jeans. Every gray hair is neatly in place. Surrounded by sword swallowers and strongmen and roustabouts in Depression-era costume, he's the odd one out. A year and a half ago, he was a career accountant, specializing in human resources and expatriate taxes. Now he's the boss of a living, breathing, vintage carnival, and he's hung his shingle in the nation's capital, inviting its citizens to take off their wristwatches and step out of time.

Carnivàle Lune Bleue opened at the end of July for its second season, a five-week run in the city of Ottawa after last year's stand on the old fairgrounds at the edge of the village of Kars, half an hour outside the city limits. Six nights a week, the carnival draws 600 to 700 people—and sometimes upwards of 1,000 for this careful recreation of a 1930s-style dust-bowl entertainment. Alongside the authentic rides—acquired by Van De Graaff and carefully brought up to contemporary safety code—the carnival features nightly performances by Cirque Maroc, a troupe of Cirque du Soleil and Ringling Brothers-trained acrobats and clowns, and by the Carnival Diablo freak show, a successful independent touring company that includes fire eaters, glass walkers, an electric chair and a guillotine. The site also offers a fancy dining cookhouse, with a menu inspired by such Depression-era staples as succotash and chicken fricassee.

As a child Van De Graaff was lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the real thing just before it disappeared completely. Born in 1958 in Salt Lake City, the child of an oil lobbyist and a schoolteacher, he spent summers helping out on his grandparents' sheep ranch. In the Utah countryside, his grandparents would take him to the circus when it blew through town, and in the 1960s, a couple of the old sideshow-style carnivals were still on the road, mostly in the western states. "They had the tents arranged in such a way that you went inside and you felt like you were in a completely different place," he says. "We wouldn't stay more than a couple of hours, but it was just such an overwhelming experience. I've always remembered that."

College degrees in business and accounting led to an M.B.A. at the University of Southern California and a job in Los Angeles

CARNIVÀLE Lune Bleue in Ottawa (opposite); the Mighty Leviticus (above)

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BLAIR GABLE

with PricewaterhouseCoopers. He moved into management, through offices in Chicago and New York, before being recruited by PepsiCo to handle international stock options for expatriate employees. He met a Canadian woman studying in the U.S. to be an orthodontist and they married. Eventually, they bought a farmstead outside Ottawa and moved north, where Van De Graaff launched a boutique accounting practice. He was respectable, happy, and fulfilled in his career. But over the years, the impression made by those early carnival encounters remained. When he would come across modest bits of carnival paraphernalia—antique juggling pins, old midway prizes, out-of-print books on the subject—he would pick them up for his collection.

Then, one evening three years ago, as Van De Graaff sat on the sofa beside his wife and watched a DVD of the television series *Carnivàle*—a dark, Depression-era drama about a travelling carnival with a foot in the world of the supernatural—something came to life inside his head.

He began working long hours in his office, secretly compiling a plan. "My wife was complaining that I wasn't spending a whole lot of time with the family. She said, 'I don't know what's up, but something's going on you're not telling me about.' I remember being very nervous, coming to her one night and saying, 'Jessica, I need you to sit down. I've finally figured out what I want to do for the rest of my life.'" Van De Graaff handed her the plan for Carnivàle Lune Bleue, a book loaded with photographs and details. "I talked her through it, and I don't know just when her jaw fell open, but it did at some point."

Van De Graaff reached out to members of the circus and carnival communities, including National Circus School founder Jan-Rok Achard, Jim Conklin, the scion of the Conklin carnival family, and Johnny Meah, a sideshow performer and carnival banner-painter who served as historical consultant to *Carnivàle*.

"Wayne was not the first person who suggested that the set of *Carnivàle* might make an interesting event or theme park," says Meah, "but he seemed to be the most grounded in his concept. It came through quite early in our first conversation that he was a practical person. The dichotomy is, he's a practical guy but he's also a dreamer. And implementing one's dream sometimes can be pretty scary. Wayne is not an extremely wealthy man, and he didn't really have a lot of funding or backing."

A business plan followed, and Van De Graaff became convinced he could make a go of things, though as Meah says, "At that time, Wayne was particularly clueless as to the nuts and bolts aspects of the business, and what he wanted to do as opposed to the realities of what he could do." Nonetheless, he and his consultants began sourcing vintage tents and rides, finding caterers and scouting potential sites.

When Carnivàle Lune Bleue opened late last summer outside Ottawa, the local papers raved. People came, and came back, and came back again, some dressed in period costume, or like characters from the TV series. But then fall came and the whole thing packed up and vanished.

"There's something romantically mysterious about the carnival," says Scott McClelland, a veteran performer who owns the Carnival Diablo freak show and appears nightly at Lune Bleue as freak show master of ceremonies Nikolai Diablo. "Normally they sweep into town at night, set up overnight, and suddenly this beautiful little city is there in the morning, and just as quickly they leave. But they leave behind the magic of what takes place at a carnival, this nostalgic feeling from a gathering place that was here only for our amusement."

Two weeks ago Carnivàle Lune Bleue reappeared, inside the city limits at a site that Van De Graaff hopes will be more accessible for a walk-up crowd. He's talking to potential partners in Montreal and Hamilton about taking his show on the road next year, making it a real, travelling carnival. It's become a full-time job, requiring the mothballing of his accounting practice. And while he concedes it may never be as lucrative or as stable as his old career, he's happy. "I just want people to come and shut out the outside world, and enjoy the present," he says. "Just to become intoxicated with what's going on—I mean, they don't need alcohol to do that. And if someone from age five up to an octogenarian can lose themselves in the evening, and have an indelible memory of that evening for the rest of their lives, that's a success for me." M

'THEY SWEEP INTO TOWN AT NIGHT AND JUST AS QUICKLY LEAVE'

CARNIVÀLE CAST (above); performer Daniele Bechard (below)

ON THE WEB: For more photos from Carnivàle Lune Bleue go to **macleans.ca/lunebleue**

PERFORMANCE OF THE WEEK... KATIE HOLMES

Katie Holmes has come a long way since playing doe-eyed innocent Joey Potter on teen series *Dawson's Creek*. In a tribute to Judy Garland on the 100th episode of *So You Think You Can Dance*, Holmes amazed the audience with a smooth and sexy performance of Garland's hit *Get Happy*. Surrounded by muscular male dancers, Holmes was dressed in little more than a hat and a black satin tuxedo jacket.

JOHN MAJOR; PHOTOGRAPH BY BLAIR GABLE