

EXTRAVAGANZA



MAGICAL DESIGN AT BELIEVE

For the first time ever, Cirque du Soleil builds a show around a star personality, with extraordinary—and controversial—results

By John Huntington

Circuses are exciting because people take risks in front of our very eyes. During the development of *CRISS ANGEL Believe*, Cirque du Soleil observers watched the members of the show's creative team walk a tightrope, as they worked to balance two significant influences. On the one hand, there was Cirque's legacy, tradition, and process, rooted in circus and street performance; on the other was the illusionist Criss Angel, and all that comes with his larger-than-life persona: celebrity, devoted fans, and magical effects shrouded in secrecy. Cirque, Angel, and the Luxor (the production's home base) all took a big risk with this production, and suffered a media-hyped opening delay and savage reviews. But the show's scenic, lighting, video, and sound designs work together seamlessly to create and support some of the most beautifully presented illusions I've ever seen—and I've seen a lot. Everyone involved should, rightfully, be proud of their work.

The dream

The show is the culmination of a lifelong dream for Criss Angel. John Farrell, the show's director of illusions, says he first met Angel 15 years ago. Farrell had recently graduated from NYU, where he trained as a set designer. "I was working on the Broadway production of *Grease* with Rosie O'Donnell, and Herb Lager, the owner of Variety Scenic, called, and said that a kid he knew, who did magic, was looking for somebody to do some sketches."

The two of them met. "Criss

showed me drawings of ideas for a show with magic, music, and a band onstage," says Farrell. "I started doing sketches, so he could do presentations, and then I started designing props for him. Criss didn't believe in traditional methods—boxes, girls in sequin leotards, things like that. It was a lot more modern, more exciting, with a bigger use of multimedia. That attracted me right away."

Eventually, says Farrell, "Criss' mom refinanced her house, and he put together this little show" at the WWF Theatre (now the Hard Rock Café), in Times Square. However, just before the load-in, the events of 9/11 occurred. "There were shows closing left and right, and everybody was shutting down," says Farrell. "But, by that point, Criss was already committed. We were only expecting to run maybe three months, but the show ran over 600 performances." It led to TV specials, which led to the *Mindfreak* series on the cable network A&E. "It's funny," says Farrell; "people only know about Criss from TV, and, as we were doing [*Believe*], everybody said, 'How hard is it to make the transition from television to the stage?' The reality is, we started with live theatre, and, for us, the hard part was figuring out how to go to television."

One night, around the time that *Mindfreak* began shooting in Vegas, Jeanette Farmer, the veteran Cirque production electrician, was sitting at a hotel bar; she had endured a bad day on a show, and didn't really want to talk to anyone. But a guy, who noticed her Cirque du Soleil jacket, started telling her about a show he wanted to

do. Farmer was unimpressed, until he dropped the name of a friend, who, he said, was going to help him with his project: the lighting designer (and magic aficionado) Jules Fisher. It was Angel, who would play a role in making Farmer's own dream—of designing a Cirque show—come true.

"I felt like Cinderella, and the shoe fit," says Farmer. "I hadn't done my own theatrical lighting design since the late '80s, and I just wanted to be a part of [Angel's show], because Jules and Peggy [Eisenhauer] were lighting it. Jules called me—I still have the message on my phone machine—and I was going to be his assistant. Eventually, the schedules changed, and it became apparent that he might not be available to do it. Then Cirque called and said, 'Well, what's the deal; can you handle this or not?' I said, 'Yeah, I can handle it.'" She adds, laughing, "On the inside, I was saying, 'Oh God, we'll see!' So, after many years of helping other people do it, I finally got my own show. But, as I jokingly like to say, nobody had been practicing longer than me." The beautiful results prove that Farmer was more than up to the task.

The show

Believe, named after the code word Harry Houdini gave his wife so they could communicate beyond the grave (she never heard back), was envisioned as a different kind of magic entertainment. From the beginning, however, Angel's knack for generating press led to incredible expectations, making the show a target for the celebrity gossip machine. "Our goal



Criss Angel in flight: The star played a key creative role in the development of the show.

was to be more artistic about it," says Farrell. "That certainly wasn't the easy way! But I think it was more rewarding." When *Believe* hits its stride, the illusions blend seamlessly with the story, an approach that has been criticized, he notes: "I've heard many comments like, 'Wow, there's no magic in that show.' In fact, there are more than 30 effects. In some ways, there is more magic than in some other guy's performance, where he spends 15 or 20 minutes talking between each effect."

"This was a little different for Cirque du Soleil," Jonathan Deans, the sound designer, who also did *Mystère*, *O*, *La Nouba*, *ZUMANITY*, *KÀ*, *LOVE*, *Saltimbanco*, *Corteo*, and *KOOZA* for Cirque. "Unlike *Love* or *KÀ*, where we're tapping into people's imagination and letting them dream—either sonically or visually—in *Believe*, Criss Angel is the focus."

"One of the primary design goals was to give a whole new visual feel to a magic show," says Farmer. "A huge part of that is our director [Serge Denoncourt], and his idea of not

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wanting to see a Vegas-style magic show, with a guy in front of gold lamé curtains. We wanted to have a visual impact—as Cirque usually does—that takes you to other worlds." Much of that otherworldly impact was created with projections. "We had the idea of bringing some elegance to the world of Criss," explains Francis Laporte, the image and projection designer. "He's playing a character on a journey, and we tried to make it mysterious, but we didn't want him to be someone else other than he is."

Design for two worlds

When you enter the *Believe* theatre, you see an ornate, intricate gold proscenium, dominated by a large (and tricked-out) clock, and adorned

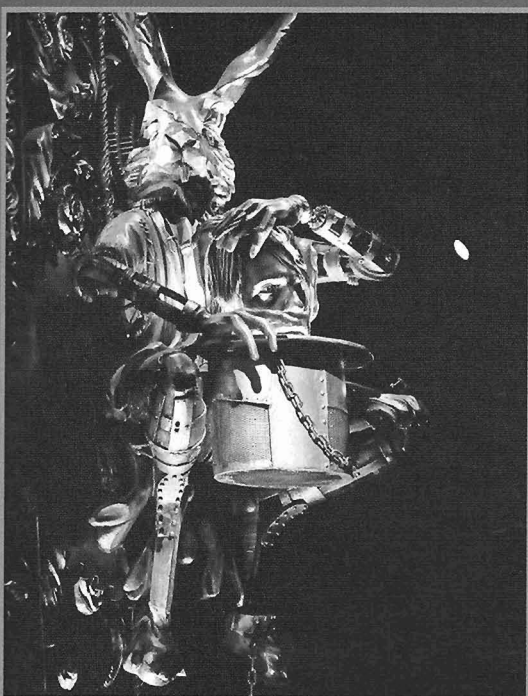
with the figures of bunnies. Inside the gold frame is a red curtain, and placed throughout the audience is a large number of lanterns. The curtain rises, and a straightforward, *Mindfreak* kind of magic show begins. Then, during an illusion with a Tesla coil, Angel's character is knocked unconscious; the audience enters a fantastic world inside his mind, full of evil bunnies, clowns, and assorted situations that require him to perform magic while pursuing an angelic woman.

These two worlds—the opening segment and the fantasy that follows—required different approaches; Farmer's lighting style changes dramatically for each. This approach required "one style of rig piled on top of another on top of another," explains

the designer. "There's a pretty straightforward theatrical rig, a dance plot—which is unusual for Vegas shows—and then a rock-'n'-roll rig. In all, it's almost 1,500 units, a pretty big show."

The sound also takes a two-worlds approach, says Deans. "In the beginning section, based on his TV show, we keep everything as a left/right, rock-'n'-roll system. There isn't anything going into the surround, overheads, rears, any of that." In the fantasy sequence, he says, "everything opens up into the surround system; it stays there, even at the end, even through the bows, because, by that time, we've created an environment."

The video design begins with straightforward playback, then becomes a major component of the fantasy. "It is not like *Love*, which was a very '60s design," says Laporte. "This one has some Gothic, some 19th-century Victorian touches. I'm never realistic; I don't think that it's the way to take people somewhere. When you see a poppy field in *Believe*, it's an Alice-in-Wonderland poppy field, not a realistic one."



The creation process

"From day one," explains Ray Winkler, the set designer, "Cirque gets all the heads of the creative departments together to brainstorm the show. This started something like two-and-a-half years ago. It's been a long process. They indulge very early on in a broad range of ideas that get bounced around."

"Cirque starts out with a very basic storyline," says Farmer, "and everybody is expected to contribute to the whole show. Not just how you're going to light your show, or what the costumes are going to do; you actually get involved with helping to develop—with the director at the lead—the characters of the show. It's just thrilling and, for a little while, it's like a bunch of kids playing make-believe: What about if he did this? What if he flew?"

With the basic story and structure of the show set, "We did a fair amount of workshoping," adds Farmer. "It's awesome, because you're renting an unbelievable amount of gear, and you set it up in bits and pieces in warehouses around Vegas. You try things, sorting out details ahead of time. We went to *KÅ* and *Zumanity* and used their rigs; we

were able to test a bunch of things in advance. You have to understand what the cumulative effect is, and how to make everything look right."

"The workshops were a benefit for all of us," says Winkler, "because the scenery is only ever as good as the lighting, and the lighting is only ever as good as the scenery, and scenery and lighting both have to serve the illusions. In the workshops, we had a full rig of lighting and video gear, and different fabrics and backdrops, and we could test all of them against the illusions. We walked away with a lot of notes, and, even after three or four workshops and research-and-development sessions, a lot was still dependent the theatre's environment. There was an extensive period of work in the Luxor theatre, because the illusions had to be absolutely watertight."

In addition to physically workshoping elements of the show, Winkler created computer animations of many of the scene transitions. "They happen in front of the audience," explains the designer, "and there's nothing more boring than sitting through a long, tedious scene change." The animations, however, did not include the illusions themselves. "There was no point," he says, since, "at the end of the day, you can fudge them in the



Left: The bunny motif extends to the theatre's proscenium. Right: Laporte notes that the design is filled with Gothic touches.

animation. The real challenge was to deliver an illusion show in a 1,600-seat auditorium where everybody has a different point of view; you had to be sure that you could pull off the illusion for every seat in the house. John and I, with the experience in our respective fields, complimented one another in figuring out how to best deliver the illusions.”

“We knew how we wanted the illusions to work, and what it would take to get them to them to work,” says Farrell. “But we didn’t know would make them not work. That was a big learning process. None of these illusions existed before, so we’re still learning how to make something that will be consistent, because we’re talking about 4,000 performances.”

“We had a lot to learn,” says LaPorte, who doesn’t have a background in magic. “It’s a challenge putting a 60’ screen behind something, when you don’t want the people to see it. I know that an image can eat anything onstage in one second. You are not in a rock show, and you don’t want anyone looking at an image when the focus is on Criss and his environment.”

Deans, who also designed sound for another legendary magic show in the 1980s, explains how even the sound designer can participate in an illusion: “I learned from Siegfried and Roy to respect the power of the magicians and the visual connection they must have with the audience in order to make their illusions work. You have to look at an illusion without distraction, to understand it. I had discussions early on about not using in-ears or other devices on Criss—because that might make someone say, ‘Anyone could do that, because he’s wearing an in-ear.’ Most of the miking involves a hand-held, or a unit on somebody else, or even on the set. My goal was to envelop the audience with sound while not distracting from what they’re seeing, because the attention has to stay with Criss Angel, the magician.”

Lighting, of course, is a key part of the success of any illusion. “It’s always a challenge lighting magic, and still trying to be artistic,” says Farrell, “because it’s about lighting what you want to see, and not lighting what you don’t want to see. Sometimes there’s a very thin line between the two, or an overlap; sometimes, unfortunately, Jeanette would have to sacrifice a little bit of art for technical reasons.” Farmer also worked on Siegfried and

The renovation presented many challenges for the Cirque team. “There were changes in the International Building Code in 2006, as well as Clark County addendums that were implemented since we built *LOVE* in 2005-2006,” explains James “JT” Tomlinson, a veteran of Cirque’s *KÀ* and now senior project manager of Cirque’s resident shows division. In January, 2008, at a key point in the *Believe* renovation and production

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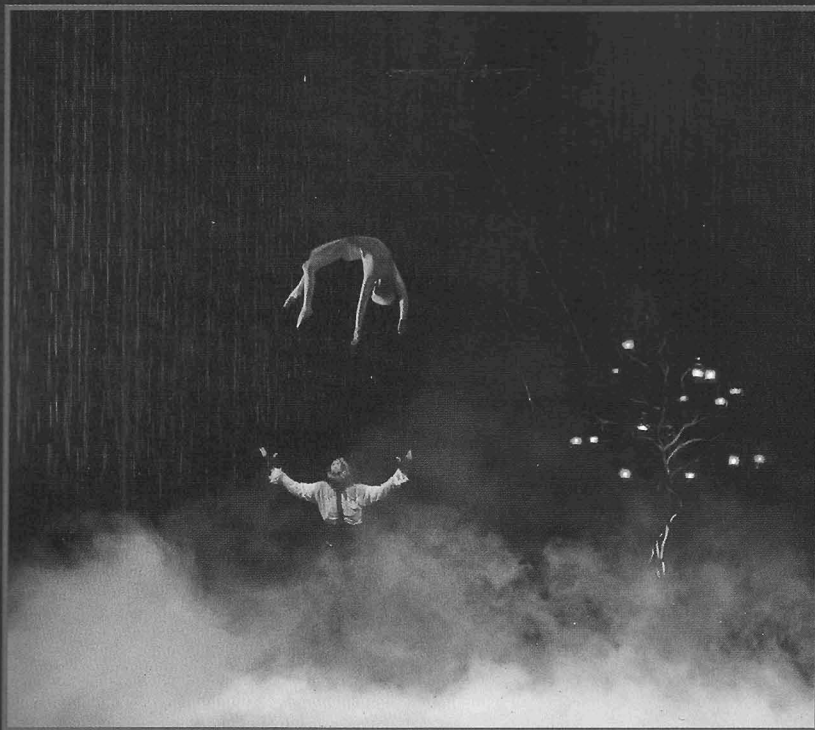
Roy, an experience that, she says, gave her “confidence to know how to deal with certain kinds of effects.” Beyond that, she adds, “I’m going to be awfully cagey about talking about the lighting and its impact, whether positive or negative, on the illusions. There’s a core of people who do magic, and they believe strongly in the brotherhood of silence. In my heart, I believe that the enjoyment in an illusion show comes from not worrying about how it’s done.”

Renovating the building

Even after years of planning, animations, workshops, and offsite rehearsals, the integration of illusions into the show could only take place in the theatre—which was undergoing a renovation. “It was designed for a variety-type show, where you have a Diana Ross-type person standing center downstage throughout,” says Winkler. “It wasn’t designed for illusions. Very early on, we did studies to show what needed to be changed, because there were some pretty bad sightlines. Cirque basically revamped it” to guarantee the patrons could see the illusions.

load-in process, welders accidentally caused a major fire on the exterior of the Monte Carlo Hotel, an event that was visible for miles up and down the Strip. This led to additional calls for oversight and stricter enforcement of regulations.

“The building department informed us one week before load-in that they would require permits on several large elements that we had scheduled for the first days and weeks,” says Tomlinson. “Some have typically been considered scenery in the past, and were not subject to such intense scrutiny. The permitting process required additional stamped engineering and documentation, plus revisions, re-submittals, and reviews, and, once we got approvals, we still had to modify several elements before we could load them into the theatre. Most notable was the requirement for the already steel-framed deck sections to be welded throughout, and secured to the building with seismic-rated anchors. There was a rather complicated discussion regarding what kind of wood we could use for the deck, and, in the end, we had to remove the theatre’s original live floor,



The design is shaped to keep the audience focused on Angel's illusions.

install a 3/16" steel layer below the planned two layers of plywood on the new deck, install sprinklers under the steel plate, and run all wiring under the deck in conduit or enclosed cable tray.

"In addition," he says, "because the gold proscenium frame, constructed by F&D [Scene Changes Ltd.], was placed out in the house and above the audience, it had to be engineered and permitted, and, because of its depth, it had to have sprinklers underneath it. All of this added weeks of paperwork, submittals, reviews, and so forth. One benefit was that several of us learned a lot about the permitting process, which will help us in the future." (Besides the frame F&D Scene Changes provided a blue patina wall. The show's automation system, winches, and flying rigs are by Stage Technologies. The show deck, and window wall piece are by PRG. The show's pyrotechnics, atmospherics, and rain are by AES Las Vegas.

These extra steps led to a major

reworking of the production schedule, and, ultimately, delays in the rehearsals and previews; this may be one of the few times in show business history when "technical difficulties" could be truthfully blamed for a postponement of preview performances. All of this, of course, had an impact on the core of the show. "The way that it affected us the most, is that a lot of the illusions aren't stand-alone," says Farrell. "They are not in self-contained boxes that can be performed anywhere—they rely on the infrastructure of the theatre. That was a big thing, and we found ourselves rehearsing the mundane over and over and over again, until we could get to the complex things in the theatre."

In comparison to massive spectacles like *KÅ* or *O, Believe* is a relatively straightforward show, at least regarding those parts that people are allowed to talk about. No tours are ever allowed backstage, and biometric lock systems have been installed to keep the curious out.

Lighting

"The night that folks from LDI came to the show, they were asking, 'Why did she use [ancient High End Systems] Cyberlights?'" says Farmer. "We were going into a room with a lot of legacy to it. It housed the original Luxor production show, and then there was Blue Man Group, and then *Hairspray*. Luxor had a lot of equipment that had been acquired along the way. That's something people find amazing about Vegas: Equipment sits in a room, and, because you're not throwing it on and off of a truck, it can be in amazingly good shape, even after a long time."

The total is a mix of legacy and modern gear. It includes 763 ETC Source Fours in various degree sizes, 96 Altman Shakespeare units, 55 PAR 16s, 72 PAR 20s, eight PAR 36s, 16 PAR 46s, 214 PAR 64s, 36 ACL units, four MR 16 "blindlers," two 8" Fresnels, 12 Altman Zip Strips, 15 Mole-Richardson Nooklites, 24 Hydrel 4425 Submersible PAR 64s, 12 Mole-Richardson 2,000W Super Softlites, four Mole-Richardson 4,000W Super Softlites, six Altman single-cell cyc lites, 10 James Thomas four-cell Softlites lights, 14 Encapsulite T12 fluorescent stick lights, four halogen "yard lights," two Wybron BP2 Beam Projectors, one Mole-Richardson 4,000W 24" HMI MoleBeam, three TMB Solaris Quasar strobes, 11 High End Dataflash AF1000s, six GAM Starstrobes, and 11 Wildfire WF-400 UV units, two Color Kinetics iW Blast 12 TRS units, and 160 Wybron scrollers. Followspots include three Robert Juliat D'Artagnan 933 SNX and two D'Artagnan 934 SNX units, two Juliat Victor, two Juliat Lucys, and two LDR Canto followspots.

Automated gear includes 25 Vari*Lite VL3500 Spots, 34 Martin Professional MAC 700s, 34 Mac 700 Wash units, four Martin Mania SCX600s, 28 High End Systems Cyberlights, and 18 High End Studio Color 575Ms. Control is provided by one MA Lighting grandMA full-size

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console, with one MA Light and three MA NSPs. DMX distribution is handled by ETC ETCNet2 wired and City Theatrical SHoW DMX wireless units. Dimming is by Leviton and Strand. The gear was supplied by PRG Las Vegas.

Farmer and her team also spent an enormous amount of time on the lanterns that are used throughout the show. "We have so many of them, we had to spreadsheet it," the designer says. "Some are completely remote wireless DMX, so they're cued in with the rest of the show. We worked with Woody Kirkman, at WT Lanterns in California; he specializes in lanterns and lantern history. I found a picture of an old kerosene-based police lantern which was used by Scotland Yard in the era of Jack the Ripper." One entire scene is lit by nothing but four HMI flashlights held by the actors. "We got them the lanterns early, so that they could start working with them," she says,

Farmer also says she is especially proud of a wall of light, consisting of more than 200 incandescent lamps, which forms a backdrop near the end of the show. "I'm all for being green," laughs Farmer, "but try doing that with a fluorescent light bulb! It was fun, but I drove the guys crazy, because I kept wanting to try different things. [The wall features] a variety of low-wattage light bulbs, and T10s and T8s. The T10 is the orchestra-style lamp right, the tubular lamp, which I wanted, because I wanted to see the long filament. And then we found a T8—it's super-long; you dim it way down and get that gorgeous, super-warm incandescent glow. Every lamp is on its own individual socket, and is tied into this mess of wiring on strips of unistrut." She adds, laughing, "They really enjoyed putting that together, because I had personally drawn in WYSIWYG how I wanted every light bulb to be. It took them a long time to figure out that, no, I really wanted it just like that."



The illusions and effects go far beyond those seen in a conventional magic show.

Video

The video system includes an upstage Stewart AeroView rear-projection screen, 60' wide by 30' high; located downstage is a Stewart Lumiflex 50/50 screen, 32' wide by 30' high, used for both front and rear projection. Images are delivered by 13 Green Hippo Hippotizers V3—six for the upstage screen, three for the downstage screen, one "gunny," or hand-held, unit mounted in a catwalk, and three spares. All 20 of the show's video projectors are Christie Roadster S+ 20K units.

"I used the [Green Hippo] Hippotizer V3," system, says LaPorte, "because I've been working with them so much. We are able to control as many projectors as we want in one timeline. "This was a good project to work with 3-D [modeling], " he adds, "and I was very tough with the graphic artists, because I don't like the feeling of 3-D—it's cold. So I used a lot of

translucency, transparency, depth. I used smoke to do clouds; I used 7-10 layers. We used lots of software, including [Autodesk] Maya, but I'm more an [Adobe] After Effects guy, so, in the end it's where we compose all the elements together. Version 3 of the Hippo software has a timeline, which gave me the opportunity to make adjustments in real time. When you are in creation, you don't want to spend a lot of time rendering new things. It's very important for me to be working at the speed of the lighting designer and the director; I want to be in the same rhythm." The system was supplied by Solotech.

Sound

"My philosophy of live sound," explains Deans, "is to create something that you can't experience anywhere else. So even if there is some amazing multi-channel recording made of the show, and people can

play it in their cars or home, they cannot simulate what we've done in the theatre." To accomplish this, his system is based around Meyer Sound LCS Series Matrix3 units, controlled with a CueConsole system. He placed more than 100 Meyer loudspeakers throughout the venue to bring the band and recorded media to the audience. "The band is located at house left is behind the auditorium wall, and we have two rooms—an upper level where the drummer is, and a bigger room where we have the singer, guitarist, and the bass player, Jean François Houle, who is also our musical director. We have a monitor mix position. Any time you have a band that isn't onstage or in the pit, you really need a monitor mixer." The band also integrates tightly with pre-recorded music and sounds played back from Ableton Live.

Deans has long used unusual loudspeakers—on Siegfried and Roy he even had a moving speaker. On *Believe*, his most unusual choice was Meyer SB-2 parabolic wide-range Sound Beam loudspeakers, which shoot out a very narrow 20° beam of sound, mounted on the side walls of the house. "There are moments in the show that are unsettling, dark, and mysterious," he says. "I wanted to some things to feel a little closer to you than you might have thought. You're aware the speakers aren't 10' away from you, but the sound is a little more disturbing than that. The SB-2 surrounds throw middle to high frequencies into the middle of the room. I didn't want to do speakers in the seats [as he did on *KÅ* and *LOVE*]—it wasn't that kind of show, and I'm not looking for that distraction."

Non-musical sound effects come from a 16-track Meyer LCS Series Wild Tracks system, and, Deans says, "sometimes we are running SMPTE from Ableton Live on a track that triggers sound and projection, and sometimes the projection would send

us a go that we would trigger a sound effect in Wild Tracks."

The loudspeaker hang includes 25 Meyer Sound M1Ds, 12 Meyer CQ-2s, 22 M'elodies, six SB-2s, eight 700-HPs, 20 MICAs, eight UPM-1Ps, and three Meyer MTS 4A. Along with the console, there are T.C. Electronic M4000 and TC6000 effects units, and a dbx 120A subharmonic processor. Although Angel doesn't use in-ears, others do, and they are Sennheiser SK5212 transmitters and ew 300 receivers; there are also two Sennheiser SKM 5000U wireless handhelds. The monitor loudspeakers are Adam A7 self-powered boxes. The system was supplied by Solotech.

Proluxon Montreal.

The images team included projections project manager/content producer Melanie Viau, projection systems project manager Tom Juliano, lead projection technician/operator Selina Davenport; and projection technicians Andrew Atienza and Louis Esposito. Working with Deans were assistant sound designer Brian Hsieh and production sound engineer Robert Mele. Props and puppets were by Michael Curry.

Believe is undergoing Cirque's traditional "fixation" process. "The creators are gone for a period of time," explains Farrell, "and we are expected to come back and look at the show again, now



The show, with its surreal images, is a trip through Angel's unconscious mind.

Completing the illusion

Of course, many others were involved in the production as well. These include assistant set designer Tamlyn Wright, assistant lighting designer Brad Nelson and second assistant Josh Koffman, lighting console programmers Benny Kirkham and Demfis Fysscopolus, and assistant to the design team Elizabeth Maybourne. The project managers from PRG were Barbara Brennan, Jim Holladay, and Jennifer Christianson. Lighting infrastructure coordination for Cirque was by Ray Forton and Bob Levec. WYSIWYG file creation was by

that all of the artists have had time to run with an audience. That's what's great about Cirque—just because a show opens doesn't mean it's done. Shows like *Love* and *KÅ* have taken at least a year before they reached a point where everybody was like, "We don't need to tweak it anymore." Angel is likely to be a key part of this process as well. "Criss is an amazing person," says Farrell. "He's been very ambitious and driven since the first day I met him. I think that is a lot of his appeal to people, and I'm not talking about the fans—I'm talking about people who work with him." ☺