Picture by David Cannon

SPELLBOUND

Her jaw-dropping performances around the world – with the Cirque du Soleil, amongst others, and recently also at the closing ceremony of the Bangkok International Film Festival – leave audiences in total awe. Meet Erika Lemay, contortionist and extreme acrobat extraordinaire...

2magazine: Where is home?

Erika Lemay: I was born in Quebec, a beautiful green European-style city, and one of the oldest in North America. But since I got married last year I have been living in downtown Milan with my husband. Most of the time though I am traveling around the world to perform.

When did your contortion talents emerge?

At the age of four I started classical ballet and began doing artistic gymnastics when I was nine. At eleven I pleaded with my parents to enrol me at circus school, but this was no easy task as the concept was totally different then – the *Cirque du Soleil* was not as famous as it is now, and most people associated circus life with caravans, animals and tents!

Do you come from an entertainment background?

Not at all. My father worked in construction and my mother in insurance, although she is musically talented.

What performing discipline did you learn first?

When I started at circus school I was introduced to various disciplines ranging from hand-balancing to contortionism, trapeze and aerialist training. Initially teachers guided me towards being an aerialist.

Are there limitations to extreme gymnastics?

Willpower is everything. Hand-balancing is mostly performed by stronger, older men, and teachers thought my body type wasn't

Picture by Boaz Zippor

muscular enough. But it was my passion and I started practising alone every evening, adopting hand-balancing like a Zen discipline.

What is your training schedule like?
I train everyday for three to six hours. It's also important for me to drink a lot of water and I eat every three hours – no red meat, dairy, fried or processed food, salt or sugar. I mostly eat fish, nuts, fresh fruit and vegetables.

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"ONCE MY PARTNER DROPPED ME FROM THE AERIAL HOOP WHERE WE WERE HANGING, PARTLY BECAUSE MY COSTUME WAS MADE OF A DANGEROUSLY SLIPPERY FABRIC"

Can you recall your first major performance?

I was 12 years old and performed a duo with aerial hoops for the Quebec Day Festival. It was a 45-minute show and I was the youngest.

Has anything ever gone wrong during a performance?

Sure, I've had my share of accidents like every performer. Once my partner dropped me from the aerial hoop where we were hanging, partly because my costume was made of a dangerously slippery fabric. But when something like this happens, you have to just get up and continue.

Isn't it very dangerous?

There are many potential dangers, which is why I personally check my equipment ten times before every performance. I also check the stage for irregularities, nobody but me is allowed to touch any material, and talcum powder is forbidden.

How do you remain focused?

Before every performance I have a three-hour ritual that helps me concentrate on becoming another person when I step on stage. It's like I'm in my bubble and not really aware of what's going on around me – although I do acknowledge and appreciate applause.

What has been your biggest career highlight to date?

The *Festival du Cirque de Demain* in Paris, January 2007. This festival gathers 26 different acts from 15 countries, chosen out of more than 1,000. I was awarded during this competition, which is the most important worldwide in circus arts. I also received an amazing response from the audience, which meant even more to me.

What do you enjoy most about what you do?

It's hard to say, but I love the daily challenge and discipline. I also feel like I have to renew myself every day artistically to be on top of what I do.

Does it pay well?

Money is certainly not my primary focus, otherwise I would have gone into television or cinema which is much more lucrative. But I have a wonderful and interesting life, which takes me around the world to perform for the most famous personalities and exclusive events on earth.

Where does the inspiration for your choreography come from?

Most of my inspiration stems from visual arts. Silk represents femininity and purity, and I started this choreography when it was really rare. Jean-Marc Saumier has been a constant source of inspiration since I was a young girl, and more recently I was in China for three months which inspired my new hand-balancing creation which will premiere a year from now.

Do people treat you differently because of the incredible things you can do?

I certainly get a lot of interest from people, and although I enjoy it, I hope they see beyond the performer. I'm just a normal person who has trained her body and dedicated her life to her passion and work.

If you have a daughter one day, would you encourage her to follow in your footsteps?

I certainly would never push her to do anything she doesn't want to, and would want to open her horizons to science, literature and art to allow an informed choice later in life.

How have your special skills helped you in life?

I believe it certainly helps when you do what makes you happy.

Which performer has been a source of inspiration?

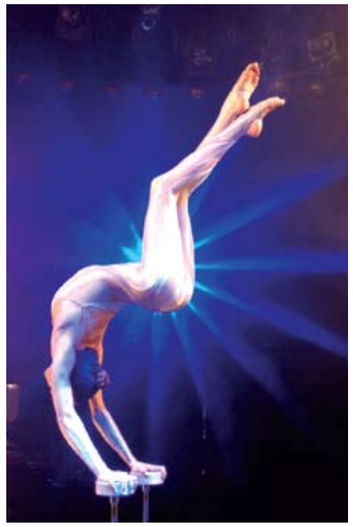
My idol is ballet dancer Sylvie Guillem who represents sheer perfection. She's rumored to

Picture by David Cannon

be very hot-tempered, but to be the best ballet dancer of all time you need a fighting spirit.

Do you have a major dream still to achieve?

I'd like to do a one-hour solo show to give me the opportunity to showcase all the different aspects of my art. I would also enjoy participating in a great advertising campaign.

What are your other interests?

I'm an avid reader and love discovering the cities I perform in. Bangkok is a chaotic city full of contradictions, with inner peace emanating from the people. I especially admire the strength of Thai women. Thai people have always been very respectful, welcoming and warm. They're a great audience and I look forward to coming here each time.