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DEMOCRATIC VISTAS PROFILES

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AT THE LIMITS OF LAS VEGAS

by Chris Jones

NUMBER
03

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by Chris Jones

IN ITS EXTRAORDINARILY RAPID

metamorphosis from primitive frontier gambling town to sophisticated, global capital of playful sin, the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, has come to prize two qualities above all else.

One is *exclusivity*. The other is *reinvention*.

Franco Dragone, the Belgian conceptual theater artist at the center of most of the recent revolutionary developments in Las Vegas art, commerce, and entertainment, embodies these requirements of Vegas success and has ridden them to a position of extraordinary

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artistic influence on the creative soul of the city. He has done so in a remarkably wealthy city that is rapidly shedding its longstanding *outré* reputation and becoming one of the world's most artistically important places.

And thus Dragone's reinvention of Vegas culture—and it is nothing less than that—is the story of one of the most remarkable individual contributions to urban culture in modern American history.

To a large extent, Dragone has operated outside of conventional artistic boundaries and institutions. His Vegas canvas has been the populist, time-honored tradition of the Las Vegas spectacle—a for-profit arena traditionally ignored by scholars and major critics—rather than more rarified nonprofit artistic fields like opera, ballet, or legitimate theater.

Much of Dragone's most influential work—such shows as *Mystere* or *O*—has been produced under the global brand of the Montreal-based Cirque du Soleil, rather than his own name. As a result, many members of Dragone's Vegas audiences arrive at and leave the theater oblivious to the name of the show's principal creator. And given the international composition of Las Vegas audiences, Dragone has typically employed a minimum amount of the English language.

frankly emotional demeanor. He eschews overt promotionalism, preferring to let his shows speak for themselves. He dresses down, talks softly, and otherwise suggests something far removed from the sassy, flashy archetype of Vegas culture.

Talk to him, and you get the impression that he has never much liked Vegas or what it stands for.

"When I first came to Las Vegas, I was shocked," he says. "In fact, I cried."

DRAGONE'S REINVENTION OF VEGAS CULTURE—AND IT IS NOTHING LESS THAN THAT—IS THE STORY OF ONE OF THE MOST REMARKABLE INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO URBAN CULTURE IN MODERN AMERICAN HISTORY.

Dragone has not reinvented Las Vegas alone. Others like Giles St. Croix, the creative founder of the Cirque du Soleil, Steve Wynn, Vegas's leading hotel entrepreneur, and Robert Le Page, one of Cirque's newest creative partners, also have wielded a great deal of influence. Still, Dragone (who has worked for several producing partners at different points in his Vegas career) is the creative link between all these people and institutions.

Outside of the Vegas boundaries, Dragone's work and ideas have influenced live entertainment, restaurant design, and the presentation of spectacle at such events as the Super Bowl and the Olympics. In other words, not only has Dragone transformed Vegas, but he has been a catalyst for transformations well beyond the Nevadan desert.

Some now argue that Las Vegas has eclipsed Broadway as the premiere global showcase of live entertainment. Certainly, there are numbers to back up such a point of view. Las Vegas shows cost far more (as much as \$165 million, as compared with Broadway's \$10 to 15 million), last longer, draw bigger audiences, and rake in more profit than their New York counterparts. In no small part, Dragone has been responsible for this seismic shift in the American cultural landscape. And the extent of his influence has yet to be fully appreciated.

But there's a note of irony here. Dragone has soft features, quizzical eyes, a rumpled appearance, and a

In other words, Dragone saw Vegas, the global capital of the shallow, as the diametrical opposite of his personal aesthetic. After all, the work of which Dragone is most proud, it seems, are the shows for children (*Eldorado*, for example) that he has produced in both Canada and Belgium "with seven actors, a slide projector and a CD player."

To Dragone, this disconnect seemed especially egregious in the contemporary context of the European artistic community's widespread disagreement with the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq.

"I am a little bit ashamed," Dragone says, "to be sitting here in Las Vegas when other artists are out protesting the war."

Then how did Dragone and Las Vegas come to develop such an extraordinarily close relationship? To trace Dragone's influence on the town, one must first chart how Vegas and Dragone came to meet.

Fittingly enough, it has been a bizarre marriage of historical opposites.

In Las Vegas, gambling and live entertainment have grown up in tandem.

Las Vegas entertainment has its origins, of course, in the development (and constant redevelopment) of Las Vegas's famed "Strip"—a section of Las Vegas Boulevard that anchors the city's entertainment district. Its history is short and fast-moving.

In 1829, a young Spaniard named Rafael Rivera (an

apt name, as things turned out) rode into a valley in the desert and christened the area “Las Vegas,” or *the meadows*. But Las Vegas remained an insignificant backwater for the next hundred years.

Criminals came early to the city’s environs, but there were also early Mormon settlers (thirty Mormons established the Las Vegas Mission in 1855, only to see it close a decade or so later). But still, by 1900, there were only about one hundred people living in Las Vegas, getting their water from natural wells below the desert surface. The railroad arrived in 1905 and brought growth. In 1921, the population of Las Vegas was only three thousand people.

The 1920s were the liveliest decade in Vegas history. The town made some money from Prohibition and began to establish the permissive reputation that ultimately would prove to be so immensely lucrative. Competing cities followed suit—in 1927, the faster moving city of Reno changed its laws to allow for quickie divorces, with the hope of filling its hotel rooms. But even as late as 1930, the population of Nevada was less than a hundred thousand and Las Vegas was only its fourth largest city.

In 1931, gambling in the state of Nevada was legalized (or more accurately, *relegalized*). To call that legislative act significant would hardly scratch the surface of its ultimate influence. But in the early 1930s, Las Vegas casinos were seedy outfits almost entirely controlled by men from the world of organized crime. Organized crime would continue to exert massive influence over Las Vegas culture until impersonal but legal corporations (mainly from the hospitality industry) finally took over the city in the 1980s.

Most historians credit the invention of the word “Strip” to Guy McAfee, a wartime businessman who named the street outside his Pair-O-Dice Club after the similarly named section of Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, hoping to import some perceived sophistication. Hotels like the Last Frontier and the El Rancho were among the early buildings to call the Strip home.

But in terms of entertainment, the most important early act was mobster Meyer Lansky’s decision to send the colorful Bugsy Siegel to Las Vegas during World War II with plans to develop the Flamingo Hotel, replete with floorshows. The overt aim of the

Flamingo, which opened at Christmas 1946, was to find a way for organized crime to exploit American postwar wealth. Siegel set out to create a hotel with more of the ambiance of Beverly Hills than the desert. In making the hotel a sort of fantasy destination, he gave Vegas its first pseudotheatrical theme.

Despite a rough start (and brushes with conflict), Siegel’s hotel thrived. And the luxury Las Vegas resort was born. As a result, other casinos followed with live entertainment of their own—the Desert Inn, the Thunderbird, the Tropicana. By the mid 1950s, Vegas was becoming known as the home of glamorous cabarets and theatrical extravaganzas.

In its early days, these were mere sideshows to the real business of the town—cold, hard gambling. The content of the typical show was little more than a parade of naked bodies and feathers, albeit presented at considerable expense.

But in 1952, the Sahara Hotel “themed” itself in the style of North Africa (loosely speaking) and things changed. That same year, the Sands Hotel was built, replete with the Copa Girls, a group of entertainers it marketed as being unusually high class. By the time the Dunes got into the act in the middle of the decade, Vegas was well on its way to embracing an embryonic version of the themed environments that would become so influential in its growth over the following fifty years.

In the late 1950s, the Stardust and Tropicana hotels popularized the practice of importing Parisian entertainments lock, stock, and barrel. The Tropicana, for

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example, snagged the Follies Bergere (advertised as “direct” from the French capital), while the Stardust brought the Lido de Paris, a topless entertainment. Las Vegas had achieved vacation destination status, attracting more than eight million people per year.

By now, Vegas entertainment included virtually every star in the firmament—from Elvis Presley to Ella

Fitzgerald to Peggy Lee. High-end acts like Noel Coward routinely commanded upwards of \$400,000 per week and opera stars frequently got bookings at the top hotels. Most famously, The Rat Pack of Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr., and Joey Bishop turned the Sands Hotel into its personal playground, dispensing a sophisticated blend of comedy and music, while evoking the lifestyle of smart, rich, amoral, and uber-relaxed men at play.

But there were, in essence, still only two types of shows. Big-name singers—or comedians, or raconteurs, or combinations thereof—would perform in showrooms. These concerts did not look much different

built the Mirage in 1989. In its moment, that hotel was marketed and perceived as the *sina qua non* of Vegas luxury—the Mirage was the first new Vegas resort in sixteen years, had three thousand guestrooms, and cost in excess of \$610 million—an extraordinary sum in its day. That amount did not stay a record for long. Wynn followed the Mirage with Treasure Island in 1993 and the Bellagio, built in 1998 for the astonishing sum of \$2 billion.

In this cultivation of the luxury hotel, Wynn began a game of raising the bar with every new project. Suddenly, entertainment was not just about distracting gamblers. It emerged as a major branding opportunity

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from a touring show in any other American city. They certainly were no more extensive—and the stars (such as Elvis, in later years) were often past their prime. And then there were megawatt spectacles—burlesque-type scenic extravaganzas that recalled Busby Berkeley movies or classic European shows from the early twentieth century.

The stars, of course, changed with the years. But the Las Vegas production shows changed barely at all. Many, such as the Follies Bergere at the Tropicana, ran virtually unchanged for decades. Also unchanging was the relative marginalization of the desert entertainment culture from the larger world of theater. The hotel and casino shows were ignored by the theater establishment. Legitimate actors tended not to work in Vegas, and Broadway producers did not typically get involved in the town.

Two major arrivals were to change all that—the magician team of Siegfried and Roy and later, the small Canadian circus-style operation called the Cirque du Soleil.

In the early 1990s, Las Vegas underwent a luxury building boom, thanks mainly to Steve Wynn, a local entrepreneur with a shrewd instinct for real estate. After cutting his teeth on the Golden Nugget and a variety of other land and property holdings, Wynn

somewhat akin to Old World competitions between different noble families to hire the most illustrious artists.

“Las Vegas...is exactly like the Italian Renaissance,” observes Robert Le Page. “You have a bunch of filthy rich people all wanting to impress each other with whom they are working with. And they are all printing money in their basements out here.”

In 1989, Wynn made the decision to bring the magicians Siegfried and Roy into a Mirage show of uncommon sophistication. It was the work of producer Kenneth Feld, best known for running the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. And more significantly, it was the work of legitimate theatrical director and designers, such as John Napier, who were imported from London.

As it happened, Siegfried and Roy’s arrival coincided with the renaissance of musical theater in London and the growth of the so-called megamusical, such as *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Miserables*. It was a perfect storm for Vegas entertainment. At the end of the 1980s, the city was attracting twenty-five million visitors per year.

When he opened Treasure Island four years after the Mirage, Wynn decided that the only way to top Siegfried and Roy was to import the Cirque du Soleil, which had been making a splash touring its own big tent across North America.

When the Cirque arrived in Vegas—a town whose culture it would completely dominate within a single decade—it brought along Franco Dragone.

Dragone transformed the town.

Dragone had an unusual pedigree for the high priest of Las Vegas entertainment.

For starters, he was a creature of mainland Europe and an artist firmly indebted to what one might call a European performance aesthetic—light years removed from Dean Martin or even the British creative team behind the Siegfried and Roy show. Dragone’s influences were not Hollywood or West End, but the continental avant garde.

Born in 1952 in Cairano, Italy, Dragone moved at the age of 7 to the industrial city of La Louviere, Belgium (Belgium remains his permanent base, even today). In the mid 1970s, he studied acting at the Belgian Royal Conservatory. By decade’s end, though, Dragone was firmly entrenched in the progressive arts, studying both political science and the commedia dell’arte. In Dragone’s training, art and politics were linked inextricably.

In other words, he was an arts-political progressive in the mode of Dario Fo, the Italian socialist-theater practitioner famous for working in nontraditional theater spaces and attacking the bourgeoisie. Like Fo, Dragone in his early days often preferred to work with nonprofessional actors and most of his early work had an explicitly political bent.

In the early 1980s, Dragone worked in Canada, directing the graduation show at Canada’s Ecole Nationale de Cirque, or National Circus School. That brought him to the attention of the Cirque du Soleil, the Montreal-based circus troupe founded by Guy Laliberte, which was rapidly expanding its operations. By 1985, Dragone was one of the Cirque’s key creative players.

Between 1985 and 1998, Dragone directed almost all of the Cirque’s signature shows and, as the official history of the Cirque acknowledges, he had “a major hand in creating the amalgam of cultures and artistic disciplines that characterizes these productions.”

Audiences across the world got to know Dragone through such notable Cirque shows as *Nouvelle Experience* and *Saltimbanco* in the early 1990s. These two shows expanded the Cirque—which unlike the more familiar “circus” format has never used animals—

far beyond its core Canadian audience base and drove the Cirque into public consciousness through North America and Europe.

In essence, Dragone offered his Cirque employers a unique fusion of postmodern dance, music, performance, and circus art hooked around a provocative narrative or dreamscape.

Unlike other circus shows, Dragone’s Cirque productions had both featured acts—acrobats, trapeze artists and the like—and “house” performers. The house troupe—typically made up of younger performers with circus skills but not functioning as part of a specific act—was composed of peripheral, tightly themed characters whose inclusion in the proceedings had an enormous impact on the critical acclaim that always greeted the Cirque in those years. It was the house troupe that turned the Cirque into a moving piece of theater.

In other circuses, a ringmaster linked the acts together. The Cirque shows found unity through overarching narratives. Dragone’s international background, which had trained him to communicate meaning in ways that transcended language, gave him a heightened awareness of moving too drastically in the direction of cultural specificity, and a knack for making an audience feel that something important was taking place before their eyes. This less tangible dimension of the tent shows was Dragone’s main contribution.

Over the years, the “Dragone effect” has been defined by various critics in mystical terms—words like “heart,” “spirit,” “childlike,” and “wonderment” all have had ample workouts. Le Page, who has just begun to work in Las Vegas, said in an interview that Dragone had “invented the Cirque’s Las Vegas spectacle.”

“I am interested in people’s souls,” Dragone says. “I care more about their hearts than their money.”

But Dragone’s contribution can perhaps best be understood as the marriage of the formative tradition of the circus—historically a daring but rather cold form of entertainment—with a warmer, gentler, and more spiritual kind of performance.

The resulting form is Dragone’s invention—and it made the Cirque du Soleil literally millions of dollars in Vegas, which has become its primary field of creative operations. The Cirque’s typical audience—especially in Vegas—came to look very different from the family crowd found at, say, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. Thanks to Dragone, Cirque now drew urban

professionals looking for an experience that combined escapism and sophistication. One could take a date to a Dragone show, even if the family further down the row brought the kids.

In raw economic terms, this proved to be a winning combination.

Nouvelle Experience, perhaps Dragone's most revolutionary piece of work, debuted in 1990 as something of a meditation on the role of observer. The performers constantly observed each other in a metatheatrical kind of way and acted as if they knew they were in a show, willing constantly to test the boundaries between truth and artifice, spectacle and reality. As a result, the show appeared to be less of a traditional circus and more of a community of characters. And since the piece came so early in Cirque's period of expansion, its aesthetic attached itself to the very identity of the company.

Saltimbanco continued Dragone's obsession with the metadramatic, seducing the audience with performers on bungee cords and a house troupe known as "Baroques." Interestingly enough, *Saltimbanco* was perhaps best known for its introduction of a beautiful flying man who went by the name of "Vladimir."

On the face of it, Vladimir did nothing special—he merely was a buff fellow who flew around the tent with the help of a few bungee cords. But thanks to Dragone's ability to enrich his performers within narratives of desire and exhibitionism, Vladimir became a kind of slate upon which the audience could detail

DRAGONE HAD FIGURED OUT A WAY TO BURROW INTO THE PSYCHE OF A BROAD SPECTRUM OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC.

their own physical desires. Dragone turned Vladimir into an intense kind of star—a dream-like vision able to fly in and out of one's reality.

After the long *Saltimbanco* tour, there really was only one place for Vladimir to end up—Las Vegas.

Meanwhile, the touring Cirque shows allowed Dragone a minor flirtation with Hollywood. He directed *Alegria* (a movie based on his Cirque

production of the same name). He also worked with the famed movie director Norman Jewison on the film *BOGUS*, and put together several music videos with Cirque themes.

But it was in 1993 that Dragone, the Cirque, and Las Vegas came together for the first time. The show was *Mystere* at the Treasure Island. *Mystere*, which continues to play to capacity crowds, revolutionized both the economics and the aesthetics of Las Vegas entertainment.

Mystere is the quintessential Dragone show. It is a celebration of play, with constantly recurring themes of parents and children (most patrons remember a massive ball that rolls around the theater). But it also introduced Vegas to Dragone's way of doing business. Vegas came slowly to the table. According to Dragone, Wynn (the show's patron) first compared the show to "French opera" and called it "boring like a German opera." In subsequent commissions for Wynn, Dragone banned the mogul from the theater unless he had a specific invitation from the director.

Dragone calls rehearsals "creation" (using the French pronunciation of *cray-arss-eon*) and locks all the doors when his performers are working. As a rule, he sits in the theater and speaks slowly and soothingly into a microphone, using a more organic language than you'd typically find among directors who create product-driven entertainments on this scale. "I want my actors," Dragone says, "to be willing to open their hearts."

Dragone doesn't so much direct from a point of view of external form, as from an obsession with internal truth. Most directors working in the circus tradition focus on such matters as style and flourish, concentrating on how things look. Dragone approaches his shows as if they were, say, a classic American play that requires the kinds of emotional techniques developed by Sanford Meisner. He works on his performers' "inner lives," on the theory that emotional truth is more important than a slick veneer.

Indeed, it was that palpable emotional quality that made *Mystere* such a hit.

But it was Dragone's *O*, with its \$80 million dollar budget, which made his career. Produced at the Bellagio, where it continues to run, the water-themed show caused a critical and popular sensation by employing a stage that could be lowered and raised on

cue to create a swimming pool of constantly varying depths. Since his actors had the ability to enter and exit below the surface of the water, Dragone was able to forge separate, sensual dreamscapes, transforming the performance space into the edge of a shoreline, or a diving pool, or a watering hole on the African savannah.

Seeing *O* is like walking through a gallery of images

Dragone also rehearses a great deal in Belgium.

Dragone works with a fairly consistent group of collaborators—the lighting designer Yves Aucoin, associate director Pavel Brun, set designer Michael Crete, projectionist Dirk Decloedt, and costumer Dominique LeMeux.

“We all try,” LeMeux says, “to reveal Franco’s vision.”

PLAYING ALONG WITH “WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD” ARE RECOGNIZABLE STRAINS OF “GIVE PEACE A CHANCE.” DRAGONE SNUCK IN A BACKTRACK—WHICH HE SAW AS NOTE OF ACCEPTABLE SUBVERSION.

of which Dragone was the creator. The piece eschews a traditional narrative—there is no real story. But as *O*’s decade-long success surely proves, Dragone had figured out a way to burrow into the psyche of a broad spectrum of the general public. Audiences may not feel like they understand the whole thing, but they tend to understand with unusual ease that this is also a piece designed to work on their collective subconscious.

He also had reconceived the Vegas show as an event that could not be duplicated, in part because it required a custom-designed theater and because the sheer production cost would not make economic sense anywhere else. It is impossible to overestimate the influence of *O* on both Las Vegas and global live entertainment. With *O*, Vegas had a unique attraction. And *O* reinvented the city as an elite cultural destination.

Following *O*, Dragone and the Cirque parted ways on what both sides say were amicable terms. Dragone wanted to strike out under his own name, rather than the Cirque brand. And he felt like he had the clout to do so. For its part, Cirque’s vision always had been to work with a multiplicity of creative individuals to avoid being overly linked with one figure. Thus both sides were happy enough.

“Franco is a genius,” says Daniel Lamarre, the Cirque’s president and chief operating officer. “We remain great friends.”

Dragone went on to form his own Belgium-based production company, Creations du Dragone, albeit one operating mainly in Las Vegas. “I try,” Dragone says, “to use the major projects in Las Vegas to make it possible for me to work more on smaller shows in Belgium.”

Since Dragone appears to be gone from their stable for the foreseeable future, the Cirque has begun to work with other artists, even if many observers would argue that it has not yet been able to match Dragone’s ability to engage the spiritual and sensual or the merely spectacular. These days, Cirque shows tend to be harder-edged than in the Dragone era.

“We’re interested in crossing the boundaries between forms and exploring everything that the human body can achieve,” says Nicolette Naum, the artistic director of the recent touring Cirque show *Varekai*. “The shows are getting more and more complex in terms of the disciplines. All material is possible now.” Outside of Vegas, at least, Cirque shows are including more dance and more material with specific and identifiable cultural and ethnic roots. Even the use of dialog (formerly a no-no at the Cirque) is coming into play. Rather than imitate Dragone, Cirque has been forced to go in a wholly different direction. Still, in contemporary Las Vegas, Creations du Dragone and the Cirque are functioning as a kind of ongoing duopoly.

After a decade of working in Vegas, Dragone has come to see the town differently. “Everyone,” he says, “eventually finds their way here.” In other words, Vegas is so colossally popular as both a personal and a business destination that its visitors cannot be stuck into any single category. And the number inevitably includes some of a progressive disposition.

Dragone was the creative force behind the colossal, \$30 million dollar Celine Dion production in 2003 at Caesar’s Palace. Meanwhile, Cirque has produced the edgier *Zumanity* at the New York, New York hotel and

Cirque/Le Page's *Ka* at the MGM Grand. Current plans call for a Beatles-themed show to be produced at the Mirage, where Siegfried and Roy no longer perform due to Horn's much-publicized on-stage injury.

Between the two of them, Dragone and Cirque run the town. And both are in constant demand by other cities to operate elsewhere.

Dragone's work on the Dion show drew special notice, not least because it tried to combine the traditional iconography of the pop concert with the Dragone spectacle aesthetic. The show's primary visual feature was a massive Jumbotron screen of a size that previously had only been employed in outdoor venues like New York's Times Square.

Not only did Dragone fill this enormous screen with painterly imagery (as distinct from the harsh realities we are used to seeing on such a screen), but he also employed a variety of flying and other technological tricks to move a huge cast of performers across the stage in symbolic evocations of Dion's songs.

Clearly, the show presented Dragone with unusual challenges. In the past, he had always worked with his own material. But while he had a large measure of creative control on the Dion project, he also had to deal with the superstar's catalog of nonnarrative pop songs that the audience would expect to hear. Before this, Dragone had avoided working with stars, preferring to create conceptual shows that did not especially rely on any one individual or play on a culture of celebrity. Obviously, the Dion show had to be a star vehicle (regardless of the shared, French-speaking heritage of two artists who come from a culture without a plethora of international stars). And her hits—which many people would describe as bland if competently performed pop ballads—had to form the bulk of the show's material.

But Dragone went out of his way to treat it as something else. "Obviously," he says, "I could not interpret the songs literally. If I did, the show would have been 'I love you, I love you, I love you.' I had to find the metaphors behind them."

That meant he had to give the show an uber-text, a metanarrative, virtually from scratch.

At one final rehearsal, with Celine Dion cooling her

heels on stage, the towering digital screen shimmering in the background, and a slew of young, international performers standing in complete silence, Dragone looked a tad ruffled.

He had been confronted with Dion's desire to end her show with a rendition of Louis Armstrong's classic "What a Wonderful World." For Dragone, this presented difficulties. Overly familiar songs lend themselves to clichés. Throughout his career, Dragone had preferred unfamiliar sounds and texts—his Cirque projects never used any material that the audience had encountered before.

But this time around, he was faced with the Canadian superstar performing one of the best known songs in the world. So he came up with the idea of putting cameramen in the audience and capturing, free-frame style, people's emotions and expressions and then projecting them on the massive screen. The problem, though, was that the videographers were coming up with a succession of cold, emotionless faces—the kinds of reaction shots one might see from a reporter on the nightly news.

This greatly irritated Dragone, who wanted to see a more emotionally resonant set of images.

"I don't want to see photos," he said (in French) down his microphone. "I want to see life."

That seemingly vague instruction was enough to engage the cameraman, who instantly changed the shots to those more evocative of deeper emotion. It was vintage Dragone. A master of the performance

HIS SHOWS REMAIN COLOSSALLY POPULAR—RUNNING NIGHT AFTER NIGHT, TWO SHOWS A NIGHT, FOR A DECADE OR MORE. AND YET HE HAS ACHIEVED THIS WITHOUT OBVIOUS OR DEBILITATING CREATIVE COMPROMISE.

form, he has brought to the cold Vegas spectacle a touch of genuine heart.

"Dragone's work," says Le Page, "is full of emotional resonance. In many ways, he interprets people's dreams."

Dragone hasn't entirely censored his identity as a political artist. For the thousands of people every week from all over the world who go and see Celine Dion at Caesar's, there's at least the hint of a political message. Playing along with "What a Wonderful World" are recognizable strains of "Give Peace a Chance." Dragone had snuck in a backtrack—which he saw as note of acceptable subversion.

"We don't make a political statement," Dragone says. "My shows are too visual for that. But we do talk about people." And you could argue that necessitates some consideration of politics. After all, the moment a Vegas spectacle interacts with actual human behavior in real-life situations (as distinct merely from songs or circus acts), some intrusion into socio-political discourse is inevitable.

But the show's "talking" hardly resembles conversation. There's no doubting the core aesthetic values of Dragone's work—emotion, heart, community, beauty, dreamscape. As a visual artist, he is not alone in making such explorations. And he's certainly far from the first theater director to concentrate on the intersections of traditional categories of performance like theater, dance, circus, or the electronic arts and media.

But because he has worked in Vegas, there's no question that Dragone has reached far more people than the conceptual directors one would think of as his peers. His shows remain colossally popular—running night after night, two shows a night, for a decade or

visions to work there, too.

"Now," says Le Page, "the people in Vegas are very happy to pay the artist and then just get out of their way."

Nothing, however, lasts forever.

Dragone's newest project at the Wynn Hotel Las Vegas, which opened in May, 2005, has proven to be his most troubled show. Entitled *Le Reve: A Small Collection of Imperfect Dreams*, the project has been the victim, perhaps, of both heightened expectations and the specter of repetition.

Le Reve is presented in a theater in the round within Wynn's astonishingly luxurious hotel. As with *O*, *Le Reve* is a water show (the stage can be transformed from hard-surface to swimming pool with a touch of a button), but since there is no backstage, all of the mechanics of the showroom are entirely visible to the audience. It's also an unusually intimate set-up by Dragone's standards—all members of the audience are within forty feet of the performers.

Cost estimates for the show have varied, but newspapers report that the show and its customized showroom cost in the range of \$100 million. The cast and crew number about two hundred.

In Dragone's mind, *Le Reve* is precisely as billed—an exploration of dreams with nods to Sigmund Freud. "Not all of the things that come to our head at night," Dragone says, "are pleasant."

HIS NEW CREATIVE DARKNESS, PERHAPS, WAS TESTING THE ARTISTIC BOUNDARIES OF A CASINO SHOW AIMED AT SATISFYING A MASS MARKET OF VACATIONERS.

more. And yet he has achieved this without obvious or debilitating creative compromise.

Despite the fundamentally conservative and pecuniary nature of the city—and the people that go there—Dragone has turned this corner of the desert into a global showcase for grandiose yet avant-garde art of indisputable quality and sophistication. And by challenging the standard way of creating Vegas entertainment, Dragone also made it possible for other artists with unconventional but intense

With that in mind, *Le Reve* features many startling images—such as pregnant, semi-naked bodies rising up from the water, clinging to huge physical towers that emerge from the pool. Dragone seems to be evoking the recent tsunami, along with a variety of other water-bound nightmares. Dragone takes the benign waters of *O* (a show full of images of calm and beauty) and roils them in *Le Reve*. For many patrons, this has proven to be a surprise.

Long-time admirers of the director can't help but

wonder if Dragone has finally met his limits in Vegas. His new creative darkness, perhaps, is testing the artistic boundaries of a casino show aimed at satisfying a mass market of vacationers. Maybe Dragone, an artist sensitive to global politics, is merely reflecting the turmoil of the world, as any great artist should.

But suddenly, it seems like Vegas might not be able to accommodate such a dark vision.

Wynn largely left Dragone alone to create, but with the pressure of a massive hotel opening, and a theater that was designed to house one show and one show alone, there clearly are limits to a policy of artistic *laissez faire*.

“People are trying to get me to make the show more literal,” a harried Dragone said just a few days before his show’s official opening. “I don’t want to do that.” “People,” it seems, was a polite way of referring to Steve Wynn and his wife, Elaine.

In Las Vegas, the rumor was that they didn’t like the show.

“I always finished my show in front of the audience,” Dragone said. “I keep telling Steve that. There have to be people there. Then I do my fine tuning.”

Unlike all Dragone’s previous shows, *Le Reve* contains bits of English dialog, along with brief visual nods to Vegas icons like Sinatra and Martin. As a result, it feels the most overtly pastiche of all Dragone’s Vegas projects. It does not so much make its own rules as comment on—and push back against—everyone else’s strictures.

“I can’t do gibberish any more,” Dragone says. “Now, everyone does gibberish.”

But once you add a literal text—even if merely in fragmented form—the rules and aesthetic assumptions change.

Such are the dangers of imitation. With the Cirque/Dragone duopoly now dominating the Strip with so many shows, it perhaps was inevitable that people would tire of the form—or that the need for constant reinvention might exhaust the creator.

“This is my last show in a casino,” Dragone claims. The truth of that statement remains to be seen.

Clearly, Vegas has changed Dragone just as much as he has changed it. While he remains emotionally linked to Belgium and his weirdly funny low-tech shows like the gastronomically-themed *Pomp, Duck, Circumstance* and his work in the European community aimed at children, Dragone will forever be identified first for his work on the most iconic and strange of North American sights—the Las Vegas Strip, a modern monument to pleasure and transience where money has a different meaning than anyplace else on earth.

A lousy environment for art? Dragone has found otherwise. Unlimited resources and a hungry public are, in many ways, a conceptual artist’s dream, albeit one that almost always goes unrealized. Dragone merely was among the first of his ilk to figure out that you just have to go to this one weird city to find such things.

“Everyone comes here,” Dragone says. “The deep person. The scientist. The star. They all come to Vegas.”

And like the city’s millions of gamblers, Dragone found out that Vegas can be the happiest place on earth. Until your luck starts to turn. ✨