

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



PHOTOS BY LEILA NAVIDI / LAS VEGAS SUN

Q+A: Brian Dewhurst

A Cirque-uitous route to Vegas

By Jerry Fink, Las Vegas Sun

It takes a few minutes for the two unwary ticket holders to realize they seamlessly have become part of “Mystere.”

The show of acrobatic mastery has not yet begun as the couple enters the theater and are randomly met at the door by a man dressed in a baggy black suit, black-and-white tennis shoes, wearing makeup and spiked hair pointing to the high ceiling.

Brian Dewhurst grabs their tickets, looks at the numbers, and before they can protest, leads them on. And on. And on. Up one aisle, down another, across rows of seats, forcing people to stand to let the couple pass.

As the parade continues and becomes more absurd, the audience begins to laugh.

Finally, Dewhurst, alias Brian Le Petit, abandons the two dumbfounded fans, returns to the front door, finds another couple, takes their tickets and leads them on a similar trek through the theater.

It’s an act Dewhurst, 75, repeats during 10 shows a week, a gig the native of England has held for eight years — his longest engagement during a lifetime of circus performing.

“Mystere,” the flagship of five local Cirque du Soleil productions, has been at Treasure Island for 13 years. When it opened in December 1994, Dewhurst was artistic coordinator.

“I did that for a year and then I told them I needed to move on and they said ‘Would you like to go to Europe, we’re putting a show there?’” Dewhurst says.

He was with “Saltimbanco” for a couple of years as artistic coordinator before the wanderlust got the better of him again and he began doing a variety of work in the United States and Europe until Cirque persuaded him to join “O” at the Mirage, again as artistic coordinator.

Julie, his wife of 40 years, died on opening night. “It was very poignant,” he says.

In 2000 he was asked to join the cast of “Mystere,” to replace retiring Wayne Hronek in the role of the clown Benny Le Grand. Dewhurst changed the character’s name to Brian Le Petit and has been with the show ever since.

Dewhurst comes from a traditional circus family whose roots stretch back generations to a time long before iPods, the Internet and instant messaging — a time when the circus

IF YOU GO

What: Mystere
When: 7 and 9:30 p.m. Saturdays through Wednesdays
Where: Mystere Theatre at Treasure Island
Tickets: \$75 to \$95; 894-7722
Locals only: “Mystere” is offering a special price for locals through Feb. 2. Adults pay \$37.50 and \$47.50 (regular children’s prices) for admission.

was an important part of the entertainment culture.

He recently discussed his life with the Sun.

Q : What was it like growing up in the circus?

Tremendous. Very exciting. I left school at 13, a year before I was legally allowed to — but my father was traveling all the time. My family were knife throwers and rope spinners and stilt walkers. They did kind of everything and so I learned all these skills from them — stilt walking, acrobatics. You did everything. A little bit of trapeze. Trampoline. Being with the circus, every morning people would rehearse and you’d go in and you’d learn to juggle — a juggler would help you, teach you how to juggle. Then the next show you went with the wire walker, who would say, “You want to learn wire walking?” That’s something I became best known for, wire walking. So you learn all these skills. I still have a lot of them.

Were there tutors with the circus so you didn’t miss school?

No, that was the end of schooling for me, but for the school of hard knocks.

What kinds of circuses did you work with? Large? Small? What was it like?

There were two or three big circuses in Europe at the time. I worked with two of them when I went on my own. When I was with my family we worked in smaller circuses, constantly traveling. I grew up in a trailer. We traveled all summer with the circus and in the winter we’d go with a permanent building. The winter season would last six or eight weeks. We’d start again in March and go till October. In between we would work in variety theater. It was still the vaudeville days, the last days of vaudeville.

What was it like growing up in those conditions?

It was a great way of life, very stimulating. I saw the world. I spent a year in Africa and probably saw more of Africa than any tourist ever has. We traveled the whole continent. That was 1947. I was 14 or 15. We traveled on a train. You could stand on the balcony at the back of the car, or sit and have cup of tea, and you’d look out and see giraffes and elephants.

Was there political turmoil at that time?

Not really, but it was a vicious time for the native Africans. The continent was dominated by the Afrikaners. On reflection it was pretty harsh, but at the time I was 15 or so and working hard and training. I didn’t understand the political side of it and how badly the white people treated the Africans. In a city when an African would have an accident, he’d have to find his own way to the hospital or to a doctor. A white person, they would take him to the doctor.

Did you play for blacks and whites?

Oh yes. There were “colored” sections and “white” sections. We went to 200 and something cities. My father kept a diary of all the cities, what the weather was like and how far the journeys were. It was quite educational. I shared space with a Danish fellow and so I learned Danish over the year’s period.

How long were you a nomad?

My whole life. When I got married we bought this big old house. My father — we have an expression in England — my father didn’t have a pot to piss in. They lived in a trailer. So when Julie and I got married we decided to buy a house — my wife was a singer. She did variety theater, a lot of that. I actually met her when we were both doing a variety theater show with Nat King Cole. So we got married and bought a big old Victorian house in England with 20 odd rooms and we turned the house into four or five apartments. We moved my family in and her family in and we had an apartment. This was five miles from Big Ben. We stayed in this house until my wife passed away nine years ago last month. A couple of years later I sold it — I couldn’t live there. We were married 40 years. We have two kids — Nicky and Sally. I just got remarried three months ago, and we’re still together. Nicky is working in “Zumanity”; he’s the naughty Frenchman.

Before that he worked with me in “Mystere” as the pink character. My daughter works at Lake Las Vegas as director of special events.

You had the house, but you were still traveling?

I was very fortunate. We traveled with our kids all the time until they were school age. Once they were school age I would go to Europe and do a month and come back. I tried to work during the kids’ holidays. I would work in London, doing anything — film work, commercials, anything that would keep me at home so I could see the kids grow up.

After you became Brian Le Petit, did you change the character?

The first three months I sort of did it the way Wayne did. He was a nasty clown, a great artist but nasty. He liked to live on the edge. I did it but I wasn’t enjoying it. I had to be me, my personality. Basically it’s the same structure.

What’s the purpose of the clown?

He’s the fly in the ointment. I’m really not part of the show. That’s why I don’t do the finale. I just interrupt the show and come in and do my thing. He really doesn’t do too much with anybody else, but for the pink character. It’s the nuisance factor. I get thrown out twice.

How would you compare American and European audiences?

In Europe people are more used to going to the theater. I remember in particular I was working in a circus in Munich. One day we brought all these kids in from an American military base. It was an entirely different atmosphere. European people came to see the show, but when the American servicemen’s kids came, it was like “Where’s the popcorn?” It was noisy. I couldn’t believe it. It just shows the difference in cultures.

What’s your plans for the future?

Have a deal with Cirque so I can take time off when I feel like it. I’ve taken 2 1/2 months off this year. I live up on Mount Charleston. I chop wood. I go for hikes through the woods with my wife, Helene, and our dog. But I won’t stop working. I can’t stop. It’s in the blood.

Jerry Fink can be reached at 259-4058 or at jerry@lasvegassun.com.