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LSU AT EDINBURGH FRINGE ([HTTP://CIRCUSNOW.ORG/LSU-AT-EDINBURGH-FRINGE/](http://circusnow.org/lsu-at-edinburgh-fringe/))

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As a circus writer based in central England, one of my biggest surprises this summer was discovering *Origin* (<http://www.lsuorigin.com/gallery.html>) at Edinburgh Festival Fringe. *Origin* is a work of aerial - and structural - physical theatre by students of Louisiana State University. Not only was I impressed that the company had managed to make it all the way to our little island to perform, but this was the first time that I'd heard of aerial skills being taught as part of a non-circus school degree program.

Every August, the largest arts festival in the world takes over the quaint, cobbled streets of Scotland's capital city. The Edinburgh International and Fringe Festivals bring together established and emerging artists from all fields of the performing arts for a month-long melting pot of international culture, with events (both free and ticketed) taking place all over the city, at all times of day and night. The festival is an important part of my calendar, giving me the chance to experience a wide variety of circus-based productions within a neat time frame. This year was especially exciting: the prestigious Total Theatre Awards (<http://totaltheatre.org.uk/total-theatre-awards/>) launched a new prize for Circus Theatre, in association with London's leading venue for new circus development, Jackson's Lane (<http://www.jacksonslane.org.uk/>).

Since 2008, LSU has provided students with a biennial opportunity to perform at the Edinburgh Fringe under the auspices of the school's Academic Programs Abroad. The LSU Edinburgh Fringe program is under the direction of Associate Professor, Nick Erickson. A founding member of Diavolo Dance Theatre (<http://www.diavolo.org/>), Erickson brings his interest in movement and architecture to the university. He teaches two Aerial Practice modules, as well as the Devising for Physical Theatre elective.

In *Origin*, the nine performers work with aerial silks and a large aluminum frame they call, 'the ball'. The structure is a truncated icosahedron - the same shape as a soccer ball - and was created for the production through an EnOvation Grant from the College of Music and Dramatic Arts. This \$3000 grant facilitated collaboration with LSU Civil Engineering student Joshua Brown, and local fabrication company Custom Metal Works. In keeping with the inclusive and collaborative spirit of circus, original music was composed by LSU Doctoral candidate Nick Hwang, who also travelled to Edinburgh to act as Sound Technician, and the artistic concept and creation of the show were developed by recent pre-med graduate Mark Gibson as an Honors Thesis (<http://www.honors.lsu.edu/news/french-house-focus-mark-gibson>).

Young performers at LSU come from all corners of the University. It doesn't matter what their majors are, and sophomores can stand on an equal footing with seniors. Productions provide ample opportunity for engagement. In addition to the students who were able to raise the funds to travel to Europe with the *Origin* project, another 30 were involved in the production's development. Such opportunities provide students with insight into real working practice, recalling the way many traditional touring circuses develop their shows around company members, rather than casting artists to follow a strict pre-conceived formula.

All the performers work with the silks at different points in the show, and all are involved in the interplay with 'the ball'. The concept of the production is an evolution of species, explored through movement, and set against a cyclorama of glorious color-changes. There are some high-level traditional techniques, particularly from super-flexible Gibson, Elise Duran (who also teaches community aerial classes as part of the LSU Leisure Class system), and Katie LaPlace and Regionna Foster, superbly synchronized on individual silks.

There is also burgeoning innovation in the work; a low cloud swing is created by knotting the silks, and the rolling structure becomes both climbing frame and novel apparatus for Chinese hoop diving. The precision and control needed to balance the metal frame as bodies move in, around, and through its sides is essential and well-honed, and I hope to see a continued exploration of the structure's potential as a piece of performance equipment.

After the show, the cast members are heading straight out to see Java Dance Company from New Zealand. An important part of the program for the students is watching, researching, and exploring other companies' work in a wider performance context than can be found in Baton Rouge. Erickson has explained:

"This trip culminates a two-year preparation in training new skills and techniques to engage with the international marketplace of the arts. After this program, students can see themselves as emerging professionals with a place in the competitive world of live performance. They understand that they have to consider their work academically and professionally with a new seriousness of resolve, commitment and dedication. After viewing emerging and established companies from around the world, they are inspired and driven to raise their standards and have a clearer idea of where they would like their careers to go... I am proud to see our students go through this gauntlet of a reality check and come out stronger, better equipped and more driven than ever."* (<http://www.lsu.edu/highlights/2010/04/silks.shtml>)

Erickson joined the faculty in 2001 and, after a summer in California studying silks with star aerial choreographer [Dreya Weber](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dreya_Weber) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dreya_Weber), introduced the technique to Louisiana State University. In 2009, a new movement studio opened on campus with a 27-foot high ceiling, allowing students to further blossom. The department is at the forefront of recognition for circus disciplines within a traditional academic framework, and is a boost to the arts of the whole region. According to Erickson:

“We’re trying to keep students here in Louisiana, whether it’s undergrad or graduate students, to counter the historic talent drain in the state. Having an aerial silks practice studio like this here is great because it keeps students here, instead of them having to go elsewhere to find a facility that offers silks.” * (<http://www.lsu.edu/highlights/2010/04/silks.shtml>)

Although the students may have come to the university with no concept of aerial performance, they are offered a chance to leave with a strong foundation from which to pursue a professional career as circus artists. The web of pathways into this niche industry is expanding, and so is the community of people who will advocate for its continued progress.



(<http://circusnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/smile09.jpg>) Katharine Kavanagh writes critically on circus within the UK, and runs The Circus Diaries website (<http://thecircusdiaries.com> (<http://thecircusdiaries.com/>)). She holds a First Class Degree in contemporary theatre practice, and was introduced to circus during two seasons touring as a volunteer with NoFit State Circus. Her 'drug of choice' is the tight wire.

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