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Cirque's Brian Dewhurst marks 7 decades of clowning around By JOHN KATSILOMETES  
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In his 70 years as a circus artist, Brian Dewhurst has done it all. He's juggled knives, danced on stilts and somersaulted across a high wire.

He's even rescued an audience member suffering from claustrophobia mid-act during a "Mystere" performance at Treasure Island. As clown/usher Brian Le Petit, Dewhurst had pulled the man from his seat and put him in a crate painted like a jail cell.

Dewhurst returned to the man's date, produced candles and a bottle of Champagne, and gave a mocking wave to his "prisoner."

But this night was not like the hundreds of others, because the man was terrified of enclosed spaces.

"He goes, 'Let me out! Let me out!'" Dewhurst said recalling the moment. "I felt he was about to kick the door out. So I led him back to his seat."

Dewhurst stood silent and solitary onstage as anticipation rose in the room.

Then he called out, "Any other volunteers?"

Laughter erupted.

Decades of comedic training made improvising the impromptu moment natural for Dewhurst, who turns 85 in May and is the beloved elder statesman among Cirque du Soleil performers in Las Vegas. He's the star of the troupe's annual "One Night For One Drop" fundraiser at Zumanity Theater, taking place Friday at New York-New York.

"Comedy really hasn't changed. The methods are still the same," he says during a break in a rehearsal one recent afternoon. "The most important thing is timing. When something goes wrong, if you're inexperienced, you'll think, 'I need to rush this and get through.' But you can slow it down, stop in the middle of the stage, look at people and just be quiet. You can just be there and show you are confident and in control."

In "One Night For One Drop," Dewhurst plays the wizened ringmaster Morales in the show's circus-themed plot. The show is co-directed by his son, Nicky Dewhurst, and daughter-in-law Laetitia Dewhurst, who are both "Zumanity" cast members.

"I'm technically in charge, but I'm not really in charge," the younger Dewhurst says, smiling. "We've worked together since I was a kid and over the years that relationship has grown from him telling me what to do and where to be to more of a partnership. It's more like a conversation now."

William Shatner will also appear in the show, as will The Tenors and LMFAO rapper Redfoo, “America’s Got Talent” champ Grace VanderWaal, the acrobatic duo Sky Angels and Malevo, an Argentinian dance group.

But it’s Dewhurst’s character that is central to the story, retelling his life as a circus performer through a series of flashbacks to his childhood.

“The story is really a message about the way people forget what happened in the past,” he says.

Growing up in Manchester, England, Dewhurst began performing at 13, when he was first photographed in a clown costume. He left school a year later (never to return) to tour full time with his family of acrobats, later becoming a renowned high-wire walker and developing all kinds of circus acts over the years.

Dewhurst was already famous in circus circles when he was recruited to be artistic director of “Mystere.”

The show opened at Treasure Island on Christmas Day 1993. That night, Dewhurst’s wife of 40 years, Julie, passed away.

“That changed everything,” Dewhurst says. “We had been very happy here, had everything going well for us, had a house up in Summerlin. Then I wasn’t quite sure what I wanted to do. I found after a year, or 18 months, I was not really feeling ‘Mystere,’ I was just looking at the show. I needed to get away from it.”

Dewhurst went on tour with Cirque’s “Saltimanco,” returning to be artistic director of “O” at Bellagio. He returned to the stage after “Mystere’s” original clown/usher, Wayne Hronek, left the show after suffering a knee injury.

At 75, Dewhurst again donned a circus costume.

Dewhurst has been hindered by the expected physical maladies caused by playing a clown in his eighties. He missed a few shows recently while recovering from a knee injury, but is back onstage in his regular rotation in a show that this month celebrated its 11,000th performance on the Strip.

“The only time it’s a grind is driving to the theater,” Dewhurst says with a chuckle. “But when I get here, I feel at home. It’s so fulfilling, it’s unpredictable with a different audience every night. As long as I’m enjoying it, I’ll keep going. When you stop enjoying it, is when you stop. I still look forward to coming to the theater, performing, and getting the applause.”