

Superlatives

PEOPLE, CULTURE, STYLE

Welby Altidor busts a move, backed by two of the 63 performers in *Michael Jackson ONE*.

POWER STRIP

is eight enough?

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL IS ADDING A RECORD-BREAKING EIGHTH PRODUCTION TO ITS STRIP REPERTOIRE, AND WELBY ALTIDOR, THE SHOW'S DIRECTOR OF CREATION, IS LEADING THE CHARGE.

BY LISA ARCELLA

Welby Altidor acquired his unusual moniker from Haitian immigrant parents, who hoped that if they named him after the 1970s TV character Marcus Welby, MD, he would be predisposed to become a doctor when he grew up. "I just found out about that," Altidor says with a laugh. "It's a crazy story but true." Instead they had to settle for a creative genius.

The Montreal native followed his own bliss into the arts, spending the last 14 years with the acclaimed Cirque du Soleil. Now he has reached what he describes as a major turning point in his career, as the director of creation of *Michael Jackson ONE*. After intense rehearsal in Montreal, Altidor moved with his troupe to Vegas in February to prepare for their soft premiere on May 23 and their opening on June 29 at Mandalay Bay. By his side: the show's writer and director, Jamie King, who actually began his career as a dancer on Jackson's *Dangerous World Tour* and later directed the Cirque
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Dancers rehearse at Cirque's Montreal home base, which Michael Jackson visited several times.

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arena show *Michael Jackson The Immortal World Tour*. (That show spent a month in Vegas in 2011 and is touring Asia through June.)

Michael Jackson ONE, produced in collaboration with the late singer's estate, will feature 63 performers of 17 nationalities. It follows the journey of four misfits who meet an array of dancers and acrobats who help them discover in themselves Michael's agility, courage, playfulness, and love. About 70 percent of the songs in the show were number-one hits, although Altidor thought it important not to have a Michael character, instead incorporating him in ways reminiscent of *The Beatles LOVE*'s treatment of the Fab Four. "We will hear him, we will obviously hear his music, and we will hear him speak," he says. "We will get a multifaceted experience of Michael without being literal about it."

BELOW: One of the show's dancers works on a move. BOTTOM: Altidor watches rehearsals with writer/director Jamie King, who danced with Jackson on tour.



As a young adult, Altidor hardly seemed destined for a career in the circus. "I did a lot of things to please my parents, which is not an unusual story in immigrant families," he says. "I went to university and studied philosophy and political science, but I also

studied theater without them knowing." While he was working toward a PhD in political philosophy, a Cirque ad caught his eye. "I was really cheeky in my letter to them," he says, "because I didn't have half the experience on the requirement list." Nonetheless he was hired, and 14 years later he is bringing a record-breaking eighth Cirque show to Las Vegas.

Prior to his death in 2009 at the age of 50, Jackson had seen many Cirque performances, including almost every Strip show at least twice, and even visited the company's home base in Montreal on several occasions, as he was interested in developing a project with Cirque. Altidor says they feel Jackson's presence in every decision they make.

"That's been our creative compass in a way," he says. "Sometimes we invite the cast and the designers to imagine that at some point Michael just shows up while we are at the theater rehearsing. Every time we thought that he would be honored or inspired by something, we felt we were on the right track."

Performances begin May 23 at Mandalay Bay. For tickets call 877-632-7400 or go to mandalaybay.com. V



VIEW FROM BACKSTAGE

Welby Altidor's inclinations and inspirations.

*renaissance man

"I can enjoy a film like *Talk to Her* from Pedro Almodóvar, but I also enjoyed *Skyfall*. And I still want to see *Lincoln*. In fact, I love American politics and follow Politico and Huffington Post. I have many interests."

*time to unwind

"When you put your heart and soul in a project, you don't count the hours. But I do believe in recuperation, and I try to disconnect at times. Right now I like to discover all the special coffee shops in Las Vegas."

*favorite city

"I really love New York. It's a cliché, but when I go there the ideas just flow in a way that is special. I have a sentimental connection to Cape Town, because the mother of my 5-year-old daughter, Ella, is South African."

*like father, like daughter?

"We didn't want to be those parents who force our kid to do anything, but it turns out she is already so creative. She moves like Michael Jackson! She wants me to play the music all the time. Obviously I am a bit biased, but as objective as I can be, she is very talented and articulate for a child of that age."