



## Local diver hopes to run away with famous Cirque du Soleil

Melinda Dalton, Chronicle Staff

Published on Jun 10, 2009

After spending most of his life rigorously training to become a fine-tuned, competitive athlete, Alex Taylor is embarking on a career change most of us have only fantasized about.

"I'm running away with the circus," the 21-year-old Waterloo diver says with a wide grin. "Or trying to, at least."

He means it quite literally. If all goes to according to his aspirations, Taylor will be the newest cast member in Cirque du Soleil's Las Vegas aquatic production, titled "O".

It's an ambitious undertaking, even for a competitive athlete. Anyone who has seen a Cirque show can attest to the calibre of physicality their performers exude.

But Taylor certainly has that covered. As a child in Quebec, he trained as a gymnast. It was in those early days in the gym that he was first pulled in by the thrill of Cirque.

"Whenever we had a gymnastics camp, Cirque du Soleil would always be the thing they'd show us on TV. Everyone would say, 'That's what I want to do,'" he said.

"But, I'd never seen a show until I moved here and started diving. That's when I really, really became fascinated by it. "

One of the most recognizable and successful entertainment ventures to emerge from Canada, Cirque du Soleil marks its 25th anniversary next week. What started as a group of 20 street performers in Montreal has evolved to more than 1,000 artists performing in 19 shows around the world in 2009.

It's this exclusive group of highly-skilled artistic athletes that Taylor aspires to work among.

For the past decade, he has trained as a competitive diver with the K-W Diving Club. He's competed on the national stage and now trains some of the local up and coming talent.

He found out about the Cirque audition, an open call that took place in Burlington on Sunday, earlier this year and has been in preparation mode ever since.

"I actually had a coach who had auditioned for Cirque du Soleil and he recommended that I go and try out," he said. "It's pretty good timing because I'm getting close to the end of my diving career and not doing as much."

The audition itself is notoriously rigorous. Talent scouts test strength and flexibility, trampoline skills,



The K-W Diving Club's Alex Taylor underwent a gruelling eight-hour audition with Cirque du Soleil last weekend as he attempted to fulfill a lifelong dream of performing with the world-famous circus.

tumbling and mat exercises. It can take anywhere from an hour to a full day. Taylor has heard tales of people flying in from around the world for their shot, only to be cut in the first half an hour.

"I'm kind of relying on my versatility," Taylor said, a few days before the audition. "But, I'm up against people who are Olympians and world championship attendees. Though I've competed nationally, there's still a difference between that and having all of those credentials from being sixth in the Olympics."

Heading into the audition, Taylor started up tumbling classes again and kept up with his strength and resistance training.

His athleticism apparent as soon as he takes to the trampoline at the diving club's land training centre. But, Taylor has worked hard on becoming well-rounded. He took theatre training in university and, more recently, dance classes to brush up on his skills. He's also an award-winning public speaker.

"I'm someone who is not only really, really focused in terms of athletics, but also in terms of arts and artistic expression," he said.

"Cirque du Soleil, the reason why it is world famous is because it's not just any other circus. It combines feats of athletic performance with unbelievable artistic expression. They can just convey it in a way that's incredible and to be able to partake in that would be pretty fantastic."

Taylor felt his dream of making it to the Cirque stage was within reach in the days leading up to the audition. But, realistically, he does have a Plan B.

Today, he'll receive his diploma in kinesiology from the University of Waterloo.

If Cirque doesn't come calling immediately, he'll head down to complete his masters at Australia's Griffith University.

While his diving training may get him in the door, Taylor said he's heard of many other athletes who arrive with one skill set that lends itself to another Cirque routine.

While "O" has a cast of acrobats, swimmers and divers performing in a 1.5 million-gallon pool, divers have been cast in other shows that require similar skills, like bungee acts.

Taylor came prepared Sunday with an audition tape and the versatility he hoped would propel him through the cuts. He was among a group of gymnasts, power tumblers, trampolinists, synchronized swimmers, dancers and one other diver from around the world.

"At the audition, they pulled everything out of you," Taylor said. "I wasn't expecting it to go as smooth as it did. You didn't feel like you were in competition against each other . . . it was a fantastic experience."

The entire process took more than eight hours. Cut after cut, Taylor made it through. At the end of the day he was told he'd made it into Cirque's casting database.

If a spot comes open in an existing show or a new show is developed, he'll be among the pool they select from. Its one step further to a dream that extends beyond simply performing on a stage as big as Cirque's.

"Even if nothing happens in terms of job opportunities, the whole audition process is a blast, even if it is grueling," he said.