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## Artcirq's scary high wire financing act

## The international acclaim is great, but Igloolik's clown princes are desperate for cash

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They've brought tears to the eyes of onlookers with a strangely moving acrobatic performance that is, in turns, as dark as Arctic winter and as bright as the midnight sun.

They're Artcirq, Igloolik's ragtag circus troupe. And they're gaining international exposure.

In October five Artcirq members found themselves in Monterrey, Mexico's third-largest city, where they performed during a United Nations conference.



Five clowns from Igloolik's ragtag circus troupe, Artcirg, performed in Monterrey, Mexico in October during a United Nations conference, where they swapped circus tricks with Cirko Dementes. Artcirq has artistic allies around the globe, but finding government support has proven more difficult. One of Nunavut's success stories may soon be broke.

(PHOTO COURTESY OF ARTCIRO)

And in January they have been invited to perform at the Festival in the Desert outside Timbuktu, Mali.

Such globetrotting is a big leap for a group that has its humble beginnings inside their community's abandoned swimming pool, long drained of water, which is their place of practice. Old mattresses scavenged from the dump still serve as crash mats.

Yet, despite growing global acclaim, the clowns have one big worry.

Like almost any non-profit organization in the territory, Artcirq survives on money doled out by different federal programs. There's little security for the group's four employees, who depend on grants that are only renewed every three months.

"We're at a critical moment right now," says Guillaume Saladin, leader of the troupe.

He says the group needs a dependable source of money to fund its activities. He hopes Nunavut's government will help.



When the circus came to Iqaluit this summer, the crowd was dazzled by Artcirq's gutsy performance inside Arqsarniit Middle School. Yet the Igloolik clowns lost an important grant, doled out by a federal crime-prevention program, shortly afterwards. (PHOTO BY JOHN THOMPSON)

"We for sure need Nunavut's help, to support us now."

Since 1998 Artcirq has given more than 20 Igloolik kids, who used to wander town and loiter in front of the Co-op store, something to do during circus practice several times a week.

It may even have given some members a reason to live in a place that can sometimes seem unbearably bleak.

When the circus arrived in Iqaluit this summer during the Alianait festival, many audience members probably wondered if the clowns would be any good.

The sight of Saladin breathing fire near the entrance of the venue, Aqsarniit Middle School, helped cast some doubts aside.

Any remaining doubts dissolved as the performance began. The stage fell dark. Somber strumming of an electric guitar set the mood. Spotlights lit up clowns in amautis and silipaks who expressed, without saying a word, the highs and lows of life in a small Arctic community.

Backflips, human pyramids and other acrobatic stunts punctuated the performance. One clown dangled high in the air from a long sheet suspended from the ceiling and tied himself in knots.

The act ended with a long standing ovation from the crowd. The

performers glowed with pride.

The show also featured a throat-singing interlude by Iqaluit's Qaggiq theatre troupe, who crept about the darkened room in Greenlandic masks and made menacing gestures.

It was a true Arctic circus, complete with a polar bear - or, to be precise, an Artcirq member garbed in the skin of a bear he shot - lumbering on stage.

Yet that same summer, Artcirq lost one of the funds it depends on, provided by a federal crime-prevention program.

As a result, the group is in "big economic difficulty" right now, Saladin says.

Artcirq has given its young performers a sense of purpose for their lives. It's also let them travel to faraway places - places with pools filled with water, rather than old mattresses.

So, while in Monterrey, the clowns took advantage of the locale and swam during their time off.

The trip also let them swap circus tricks with a Mexican circus troupe, Cirko Dementes. Artcirq taught the Mexican clowns the "seal dance" that's part of their routine.

The Mexicans had never seen a seal, but, as well-practiced dancers, they quickly learned the flopping motion.

The Artcirq crew couldn't speak much Spanish. The Mexicans couldn't speak much English, let alone Inuktitut. Yet the two groups quickly bonded.

When you're counting on someone to catch you as you stand on another person's shoulders, you bond fast.

"Very fast we became friends," Saladin said. "After six hours of workshops, we were already hugging each other. Here, we only shake hands with our friends."

Artcirq already has its share of artistic allies, including their big brother, Igloolik Isuma Productions, the creators of the acclaimed movie, Atanarjuat.

But without help from Nunavut's government, Saladin worries that one of the territory's success stories may soon be broke.