

# BASIC TECHNIQUES IN CIRCUS ARTS



## HANDSTAND



FONDATION  
CIRQUE DU SOLEIL™



## **CIRQUE DU SOLEIL**

Created and directed by: Michel Lafortune  
Production coordination: Carla Menza  
Production assistant: David Simard  
Linguistic coordinator for English version: Cláudia Marisa Ribeiro  
Technical support: Darlene Lenden, Véronique Ricard, Jessenia Villamil Dos Santos  
Special advisors: Bernard Petiot, Martin Bolduc

### Design:

Artistic direction: Pierre Desmarais  
Graphic design: Emmanuelle Sirard, Maria Masella  
Graphic production: Eric Sauvé  
Photo selection: Jean-Marc Gingras  
Cover photos: Éric Saint-Pierre, Lyne Charlebois, Ierê Ferreira, Sarah Bédard-Dubé  
Editing and layout: Karine Raymond, Anne Tremblay

### Linguistics:

Translation from French to English: Asiastis  
Revision and manuscript standardization of original version (French): Patrice Aubertin, Violaine Ducharme, Darlene Lenden, Carla Menza, Sylvain Robitaille, David Simard  
Revision and manuscript standardization of English version: Patrice Aubertin, Cláudia Marisa Ribeiro, Johanne Gélinas, André Vallerand, Mitch Head, André St-Jean, Dominique Loignon  
Reading committee for original version (French): Hélène Brunet, Lino de Giovanni, Stéphane Groleau, Michel Lafortune, Karine Lavoie, Carla Menza, Simon Rioux, David Simard, Paul Vachon  
Reading committee for English version: Patrice Aubertin, Carla Menza, Cláudia Marisa Ribeiro, David Simard  
Contribution to lexicon definitions of original version (French): Stacy Clark, Marceline Goldstein, Marie-Andrée Robitaille  
Lexicon revision of original version (French): Sandy Gonçalves, Diane Martin, Marie-Odile Pinet, Cláudia Marisa Ribeiro  
Linguistic revision and proofreading of English version: Sylvie Lemay, Veronica Schami Editorial Services

### Global Citizenship trainers:

Emmanuel Bochud: [Diabolo](#) – Emmanuel Bochud, Karine Lavoie: [Group Games](#), [Flower Stick](#)

## **NATIONAL CIRCUS SCHOOL**

Content direction: Daniela Arendasova, Director of Studies  
Content direction assistants: Patrice Aubertin, Coordinator, Programs for Instructors and Trainers; Annie Gauthier, Coordinator, Academic Organization and Students Services

### Writing:

**TEACHERS:** Nathalie Hébert: [Acrobatics](#), [Aerial Hoop](#) – Anne Gendreau: [Rope and Silk](#) – André St-Jean: [Stilts](#), [Mini-Trampoline](#), [Rola Bola](#) – Sylvain Rainville: [Handstand](#), [Hand-to-Hand](#), [Pyramids](#) – Nicolette Hazewinkel: [Tightwire](#) – Yves Dagenais: [Acting](#) – Sergey Perepelizki: [Juggling](#) – Luc Tremblay: [Unicycle](#) – Véronique Thibeault: [Fixed Trapeze](#) – Antoine Grenier: [Head Rigger](#)

### Video and photo demonstrations:

**STUDENTS:** Laurie Adornato, Devin Henderson, Maxim Laurin: [Acrobatics](#) – Anna Kichtchenko, Andréanne Nadeau: [Aerial Hoop](#) – Anne-Fay Audet-Johnston, Simon Nadeau, Natalie Oleinik: [Rope and Silk](#) – Chloé St-Jean-Richard: [Stilts](#) – Louis-Marc Bruneau-Dumoulin, Valérie Doucet: [Handstand](#) – François Bouvier: [Tightwire](#) – William Bonnet, Ugo Dario, Matthew Holsbeke, Giulio Lanzafame, Jonathan Morell, Jeff Retzlaff, Thomas Saulgrain, Vanessa Vollerling: [Acting and Group Games](#) – Yann Leblanc, Jonathon Roitman: [Juggling](#) – Camille Legris, Tristan Nielsen: [Hand-to-Hand](#) – Maxim Laurin, Chloé St-Jean-Richard: [Mini-Trampoline](#) – Joachim Ciocca: [Unicycle](#) – Alma Buholzer, Marie-Pier Campeau, Lisa Eckert, Miguel Angel Giles Huayta, Anny Laplante, Yann Leblanc, Léonie Pilote, Jonathon Roitman: [Pyramids](#) – Simon Nadeau: [Rola Bola](#) – Rosalie Ducharme: [Fixed Trapeze](#)

Legal deposit: Summer 2011

\* The masculine form is used in this text generically and for readability purposes only.

### **We would like to thank:**

Gaétan Morency, Vice-President of Global Citizenship, for his support in the production of this project.  
Marc Lalonde, Executive Director of the National Circus School, as well as all the employees of Cirque du Soleil and the National Circus School for their collaboration.

Any reproduction is strictly prohibited without prior authorization of the copyright holders. Any infringement is subject to civil or penal sanctions.  
All rights reserved  
Produced in Canada



© 2011 Cirque du Soleil  
[cirquedusoleil.com](http://cirquedusoleil.com)

*Cirque du Soleil* is a trademark owned by Cirque du Soleil and used under license.

# FOREWORD

## NATIONAL CIRCUS SCHOOL

Based in Montreal, the National Circus School is an institution for secondary and higher education whose primary mission is to train circus artists. It is the only institution in North America to offer a complete training cycle in circus arts, starting with the preparatory program, followed by the Circus and High School Studies program, and culminating in the higher education program (leading to the Diploma of Collegial Studies in Circus Arts). Since 1981, more than 400 artists have been trained at the School. A pioneer in the revival of circus arts in Canada and North America, the School has contributed to the emergence of Quebec's great circuses, which were to become *Cirque du Soleil*, *Cirque Éloïze* and *The 7 Fingers*, and has lent a helping hand to numerous foreign circus companies.

Today, the National Circus School enjoys a unique position in the world of circus arts instruction. With a team of more than 60 teachers providing a wealth of educational and artistic experience in circus arts, acrosports, performing arts and education, the School is regularly invited to share its expertise at educational exchanges, meetings and symposia in Canada and abroad, especially those organized by the International Network for Social Circus Training (INSCT), the European Federation of Professional Circus Schools (FEDEC), the European Youth Circus Organisation (EYCO) and the American Youth Circus Organization (AYCO).

With the enthusiasm for social circus, the spread of circus arts as a recreational activity and the overwhelming demand for qualified personnel, the School believed it was essential to support the development of services providing high-quality, safe introductory courses and training programs in the circus arts. Since 2004, its Instructor and Trainer programs – leading to an Attestation of Collegial Studies and recognized by Quebec's Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) – have trained some 100 teaching professionals. These teachers are actively involved in all areas of circus instruction, the education of young people, leisure activities, social circus and even the specialized training of professional artists.

In addition to the skills needed to introduce circus techniques, the role of a circus arts instructor – whether for recreational activities or social outreach purposes – requires particular knowledge of safety issues and of an individual's stages of motor, psychological and social development as well as the ability to organize and manage a class. This manual is intended as a useful and relevant educational tool, but it certainly does not replace actual training for teaching the circus arts. Although these techniques are essential for performing circus arts, these disciplines also need creativity and poetry in order to be truly artistic and meaningful, and this is true at both the professional and amateur levels.

On behalf of the teachers and professionals who were so enthusiastic and thorough in putting together the content of this manual, I would like to thank *Cirque du Soleil* for its generous contribution to the development of an educational work of this magnitude. By taking part in circus arts and with the help of qualified personnel, it will certainly help a great number of young people to achieve their potential more easily.

**Daniela Arendasova**  
Director of Studies  
National Circus School  
Montreal





# INTRODUCTION

The practice of circus arts implies knowledge of and proficiency in one or several techniques, which usually requires progressive and ongoing learning. Use of these techniques opens up a wide range of possibilities intended to develop physical abilities, as well as creative potential and social skills.

Today, there is growing interest in using circus arts for purposes other than performance and shows. Professionals involved in the fields of leisure and recreation, humanitarian development, mental health and physical rehabilitation are watching the development of current initiatives with great interest.

As the learning of these techniques is set to develop in various areas, and with rising interest in circus arts as a recreational pursuit, it seems appropriate at this time to develop a document that fulfils the need for technical knowledge, while also ensuring that learning is done in safety and progressively, according to the basic techniques in the circus arts.

We also believe that this document will be useful to all those organizations involved in the teaching of circus techniques. Circus schools, recreational circus programs, acrobatic gymnastics federations and the educational sector in general can use the knowledge and information contained here to improve their own teaching.

## **Collaboration between National Circus School and *Cirque du Soleil***

This multimedia educational kit brings together 17 circus disciplines and 177 technical elements. Written with the help of teachers at the National Circus School, it recommends and outlines the principles of teaching basic circus arts techniques. Illustrated by NCS students, this work recommends gradual development of skills and the mastering of various basic circus techniques.

## **The work comprises two main parts: written documents and video documents.**

**Written documents:** The written part of *Basic Techniques in Circus Arts* comprises 17 chapters, each corresponding to a colour-coded discipline. Every chapter is divided into two sections. The first section introduces the terminology specific to the discipline, the equipment required and, specific information, as well as advice about safety and the prevention of injury. The second section illustrates in detail the different technical elements that constitute the discipline. This section comprises a description of the technical elements, detailed explanations of the movement, educationals enabling step-by-step learning of each component, tips for manual aids, corrections and corrective exercises addressing the most common mistake and variants of the movement.

**Video documents:** The video part of *Basic Techniques in Circus Arts* is intended to promote a better understanding of the written material and to provide a visual aid to learning. To make it easier to find information, the colours used for the disciplines in the written documents correspond to those on the video documents. Similarly, the photos shown alongside the explanations of the movement, the educationals and the variants are taken from the video documents. When necessary, close-ups and slow motion are used to make it easier to understand more complex technical positions and quick sequences. When movements are displayed, extra information or warnings about safety or injury prevention will pop up onscreen.



For practical reasons, the section on “Common Mistakes” is not included on the DVDs so that the focus is on showing the correct way of performing the movements. The educationals required for learning the various technical elements however, are presented in the video documents. In any case, the written document must be consulted to see the complete list of educationals.

All the exercises contained in the written documents and videos are presented in such a way so as to ensure they are performed as safely as possible (ideally under the supervision of an instructor or coach), with proper preparation and using the right equipment.

**The written and video documents included in *Basic Techniques in Circus Arts* are complementary: they were designed to be used together. The written documents contain information that is not available on the video documents. Likewise, the video documents allow a fuller understanding of the movements that is not possible from consulting the written documents alone.**



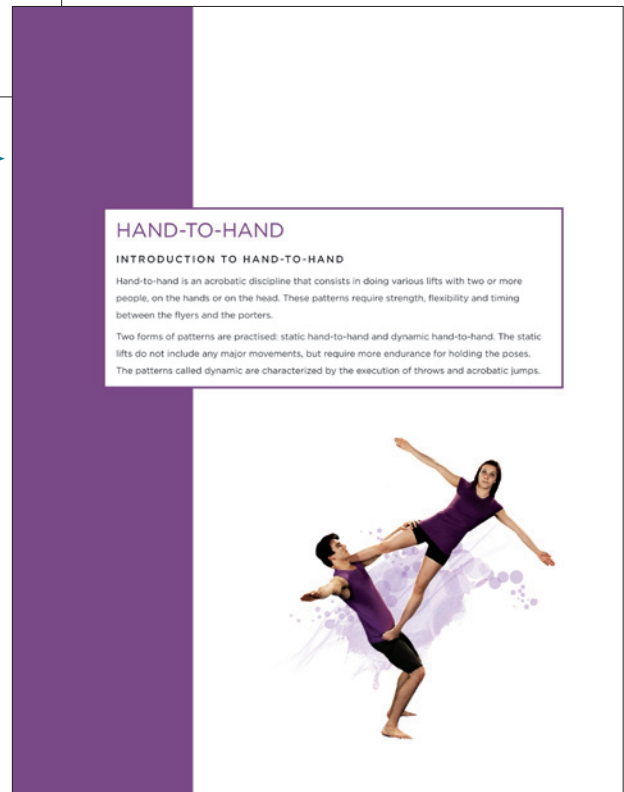
# INSTRUCTIONS - WRITTEN DOCUMENTS



## Introduction

The first page of each chapter describes in general terms the specifics and characteristics of each discipline.

Each discipline is colour-coded. →  
The different colours, corresponding to those used on the video documents, make it easier to find what the user is looking for.





**TERMINOLOGY**

**Centre of mass (COM)**  
Point in an individual's body where the body mass is considered to be concentrated and where the three axes of rotation meet.

**Closed foot**  
Position with the foot straight on the wire.

**Demi-pointe**  
Maintaining a standing position on the balls of the feet.

**Frame**  
A-shaped structure that allows anchoring the wire while lifting it off the ground.

**Open foot**  
External rotation of the foot of approximately 45°.

**Retirés**  
Action of flexing a leg, bringing the foot up and placing it on the knee of the opposite leg.

**Wire**  
Cable on which one walks.

**EQUIPMENT**

- A cable (the wire) to walk on;
- Two A-frames to anchor the cable;
- Side cables;
- A hand-operated winch to tighten the wire;
- A spring;
- Shackles for assembly;
- A floor mat the length of the wire and at least 1.40 m wide.



Side cables      A-frame

2      Basic Techniques in Circus Arts - TIGHTWIRE - © 2011 Cirque du Soleil

## Terminology

The technical terms essential to understanding the elements specific to each discipline.

In-depth terminology research was carried out in conjunction with teachers at the National Circus School in Montreal to determine the most commonly used expressions and terms in circus and acrobatic communities.

## Equipment

The equipment needed to practise the different disciplines covered.

## Specific Information

Specific information needed to practise the discipline and essential for performing the technical elements properly, bringing together such topics as identifying the dominant side when performing twists and body positions in aerial phases.

## Safety

Essential information to consider when training with the aim of minimizing the risk of injury.

These points are specific to each discipline and are of the utmost importance. They concern both the instructor's role and the work environment.

**TERMINOLOGY**

**Aerial silks**  
Fabric rigging, generally made of Lycra, folded in half and hung from an anchoring point, on which the acrobat executes various acrobatic patterns.

**Flexed feet**  
Position with the ankle in flexion.

**Hip flexion**  
Action of bringing the legs and the upper body together, or decreasing the torso/leg angle.

**Iliac crest**  
Flat bone forming the upper edge of the pelvic bone.

**Pike inverted hang**  
Hip flexion in the inverted position.

**Rope**  
Aerial rigging made up of a twisted or braided cotton rope with a diameter of 3 to 5 centimetres, positioned vertically and from which the acrobat executes various acrobatic patterns.

**SPECIFIC INFORMATION**

The rope and silk practice is performed on a vertical axis, which requires sustained physical endurance. The participant is constantly subjected to gravity; the challenge is to limit the loss of height while executing placements and to find combinations that limit the necessary manipulations and the inevitable need to climb back up again.

The practice of these two disciplines requires general muscular endurance and develops good muscle tone. It specifically requires upper body strength in the arms, shoulders and abdominals, as well as grip strength.

**Note:** In order to simplify the text, the word "rope" will be used in the descriptions to designate both rope and silk, except for the parts specifically dedicated to silk.

**SAFETY**

As rope and silk allow plenty of room for freedom, creativity and exploration, safety remains the only real rule. Consequently, the equipment must be in good condition and properly installed. Also, it is essential to always use a landing mat. The instructor should be aware of his limitations and be able to assess those of the participants.

Rope and silk are practised without a lunge or safety device, but with a landing mat. It is therefore necessary to ensure that an element can be performed completely, which includes controlling both the movement and the release. During the descent, despite the use of a landing mat, the possibility of deliberately falling should never be considered.

Since rope and silk can cause abrasion burns, it is recommended to wear suitable clothing that covers the legs and torso as much as possible. Despite these precautions, it is normal for people new to these disciplines to experience some discomfort. The rope and silk may cause cramping of the feet, thighs and torso, and may sometimes cause minor burns to the feet or other exposed parts. In order to increase grip and limit involuntary sliding, a resin powder is used, applied to the hands and, if necessary, to the feet and back of the knees.

2      Basic Techniques in Circus Arts - ROPE AND SILK - © 2011 Cirque du Soleil





**ACROBATICS**  
**MENICHELLI**

**Technical Element Description**  
Rotating 180° around the transversal axis, going into a handstand and finishing with a walkout.


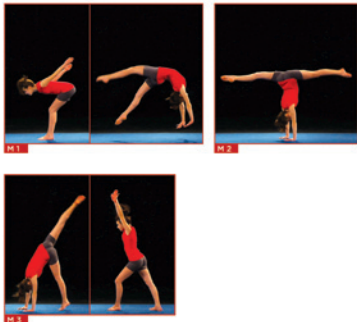
**Prerequisites**

- Back walkover.
- Handstand with stride split.
- Walkout.

**Explanation of the Movement**

- From the standing straight position with the arms on either side of the head, rock backwards slightly and lower the arms. Flex the arms until they are in line with the body and extend the legs and hips. **M 1**
- Transfer the COM over the hands and go into a handstand with the legs in a stride split, with the gaze on the hands. **M 2**
- Walk out and get back to the standing straight position, with the gaze forward. **M 3**

**Note:** Once the leg push is finished, the arms should remain aligned with the body.

Basic Techniques in Circus Arts - ACROBATICS - © 2011 Cirque du Soleil

## Technical Element Description

A concise description explaining the nature or the key movements of the technical element in question.

## Prerequisites

Figures, body patterns and technical skills to master before starting to learn the element.

## Explanation of the Movement

A detailed description of the different sequences of movements making up the element.

Identified by the icon **M**

These explanations are illustrated by one or more photos. The use of numbers added to the letter **M** allows the user to follow the sequences represented visually: **M 1**, **M 2**, etc.

## Safety Notice

In addition to the information provided in the first section, the safety notices set out essential aspects to consider when performing the movement in order to avoid injury.

**PYRAMIDS**  
**EGYPTIAN PYRAMID**

**Technical Element Description**  
Seven-person pyramid.



**Prerequisite**

- Flyer standing on a porter in a sumo pike position.

**Explanation of the Movement**

- Four porters are positioned next to one another in a sumo pike position, interlacing their legs with those of neighbours so as to stabilize the base of the pyramid and form a straight line. Their backs must be horizontal and all at the same height. **M 1**
- A first flyer gets up on the two central porters' supporting himself with his hands on their backs, ascending either directly or by stepping on a porter's thigh. Once up, the flyer puts one foot on each of the central porters' pelvises and rests his hands on their shoulder blades. Two other flyers repeat this sequence, one positioned on the left porters' backs and the other on the right porters' backs. **M 2**
- When the three flyers are stable, they lift their torsos so as to have their backs horizontal. Simultaneously, porters and flyers extend their arms out to the side, resting on their neighbours' shoulders, if they have a neighbour. The porters complete the sequence by straightening their legs. **M 3**
- During the descent, the flyers again put their hands on the porters' shoulder blades, then jump backwards one after the other, from the centre, avoiding any sudden movement.

**Safety Notice:** It is important to have a landing mat behind the pyramid in case of falls. In this case, the participant should fall on the person below. This way, the speed and height of the fall will be reduced.

Basic Techniques in Circus Arts - PYRAMIDS - © 2011 Cirque du Soleil



**Educationals**


1. One person holds the diabolo with his hands and moves it so that the participant practises corrections with the handsticks. The diabolo is corrected with the hand that provides the rotation speed, that is, the right hand. While correcting it, continue to give it speed by making up-and-down movements with the right hand. ED 1

Three corrections:

1. Stand facing the diabolo; if it turns, follow it.
2. If the diabolo leans inward toward the feet, move the right hand forward; the string will then rub the diabolo's cup and the diabolo will straighten out.
3. If the diabolo leans toward the outside, move the right hand back; the string will then rub the diabolo's cup and the diabolo will straighten out.

Corrections should be made more quickly with practice and therefore should become increasingly smaller.

2. Roll the diabolo along the ground using the handsticks and lift it into the air.



**Manual Aid**

- The spotter stands behind the participant and manipulates the handsticks with him, providing the rotation speed and applying the corrections.

Common Mistakes	Corrections and Corrective Exercises
1. From the beginning, the participant places the diabolo on the wrong side on the ground.	1. Placing the diabolo on the correct side. If the participant wishes to manipulate it with the right hand, it is placed on the right side.
2. The participant is badly positioned.	2. Staying facing the diabolo.
3. The participant waits too long to make a correction.	3. Correcting the diabolo from the first signs of instability. With practice, one will be able to anticipate corrections.
4. The diabolo becomes unstable and loses speed.	4. Always providing speed when applying the correction.
5. The participant overcorrects and tips the diabolo.	5. Making small correction movements.

6 Basic Techniques in Circus Arts - DIABOLO - © 2011 Cirque du Soleil

## Educationals

Step-by-step exercises and sequences of movements recommended to successfully perform the technical element. They make the principle of progressive learning easier, focusing on coordination and physical preparation as well as concentrating on the movements.

Identified by the icon **ED**

These educationals are often illustrated by one or more photos. The use of numbers added to the letters **ED** allows the user to follow the sequences represented visually: **ED 1**, **ED 2**, etc.


## Manual Aid

Assistance that the instructor or the spotter should provide when teaching the movements. The images allow the user to see the movements to make and the actions to take to ensure learning is carried out safely.

Identified by the icon **MA**

**Manual Aid**

- To assist the participant, the instructor stands with his arm solidly extended into a fist in front of the participant. The participant supports himself on the fist, trying to let go of it for as long as possible. **MA 1**
- The instructor should not hold the participant by the hips, because he will not control his balance.



Common Mistakes	Corrections and Corrective Exercises
1. The participant's arms drop during the half turn.	1. Developing the reflex of lifting the arms during the half turn. <b>EX</b>
2. The participant puts too much weight on the right foot.	2. Keeping the COM over the left foot. The right foot must assist in the turn.
3. The participant bends his body.	3. Bending the knee of the left leg more, lifting the arms.

**Variants**


1. Sequence: Walking, half turn at the end of the wire, walking.
2. Sequence: Four half turns in the middle of the wire.

23 Basic Techniques in Circus Arts - TIGHTWIRE - © 2011 Cirque du Soleil



**HANDSTAND**  
**THE "L" SIT**

**Technical Element Description**  
Sitting up straight with the legs extended with support on the hands.



**Explanation of the Movement**

- Press the hands into the ground with the index finger facing forward and the COM over the palms of the hands. Keep the legs together and outstretched with the feet pointed. Press with the arms while contracting the abdominals and bring the pelvis slightly backwards.

**Educationals**

- "L" sit on canes or on parallel bars.
- "L" sit with the legs tucked.


**Manual Aid**

- Watch out for possible backwards falls, especially when the exercise is done with balancing canes or when the participant lifts the legs very high.

Common Mistakes	Corrections and Corrective Exercises
1. The participant cannot lift the legs.	1. Performing strengthening exercises for the abdominal muscles. EX
2. The participant cannot keep the arms straight.	2. Turning the hands toward the outside, the index finger facing front.

**Variant**

- "L" sit with legs in a straddle position. V 1



Basic Techniques in Circus Arts • HANDSTAND • © 2011 Cirque du Soleil

## Common Mistakes

The most common mistakes to avoid.

## Corrections and Corrective Exercises

Modifications to make either by correcting movements or by corrective exercises.

The corrective exercises are identified by the icon EX

## Variants


Images illustrating the technical elements give the user the opportunity to progress and to vary his learning.

Identified by the icon V

**Manual Aid**

- The instructor puts his hand on the participant's ankle to make sure the angle of his knee does not exceed 90°, otherwise the participant could fall. MA 1



**Note:** Avoid pressing too hard on the leg; the angle should not be tighter than that of the double knee hang position. If the trapeze is higher, the instructor puts his hands under the participant's shoulders.



Common Mistakes	Corrections and Corrective Exercises
1. The participant lets the free hip and leg fall and has difficulty returning the knee to the bar.	1. Keeping the hips even throughout the movement.
2. The participant stays in a pike position and has difficulty maintaining a secure knee angle.	2. Opening the hips by tightening the buttocks and pressing the pelvis forward, pulling the heels toward the buttocks.

**Variants**

- Front leg to the side in a split. V 1
- Arabesque: Leg to the back, foot pulled toward the head. V 2

Basic Techniques in Circus Arts • FIXED TRAPEZE • © 2011 Cirque du Soleil



# INSTRUCTIONS - VIDEO DOCUMENTS

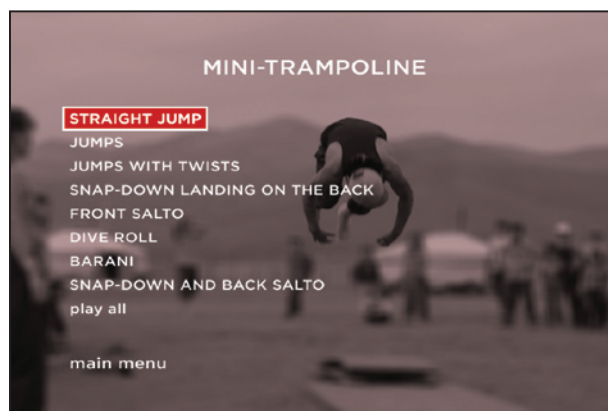


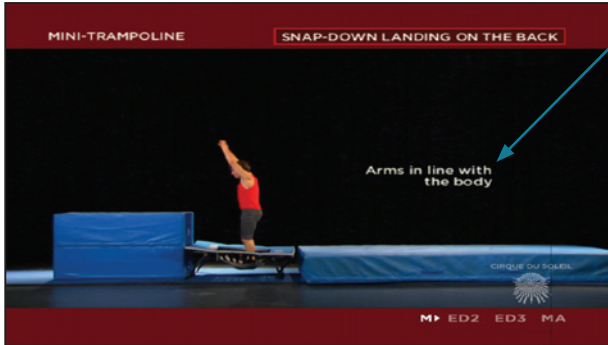
## Main Menu

After the opening sequence, a first window presents the disciplines covered on the DVD.

## Elements Menu

Once a discipline has been selected, a second window allows the user to go from one technical element to another. The “play all” button, at the bottom of the window, provides the option to watch the elements one after the other.



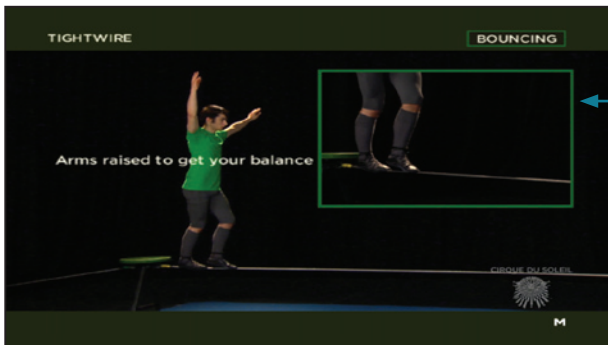


## Warnings

Extra information or warnings about safety or prevention of injury pop up onscreen at key moments while the movements are being viewed.

## Icons

When highlighted, the icon corresponding to the one in the written document indicates the technical element component being played.



## Close-ups

In some cases, special attention is given to an image, part of the body or manual aid as a movement is being demonstrated by showing a close-up or by showing the movement from a different angle.

## Technical Notes

The different parts of the element may be viewed out of sequence using the “Skip” function to select the icons at the bottom of the screen. The slow-motion function, available on most DVD players, also allows the user to watch each movement more closely.





# HANDSTAND

## INTRODUCTION TO HANDSTAND

Practising this age-old acrobatic discipline consists in executing various patterns while balancing on the hands and the head. Handstand is practised both on the floor and on various acrobatic apparatuses, such as canes and parallel bars.

Learning handstand contributes to the development of body awareness, flexibility and muscular endurance.





## TERMINOLOGY

### Anterior tilt

Action of tilting the pelvis forward without flexion.

### Arch position

Position in which the body forms a slight curve to the back, with the arms extended on either side of the head or of the torso and the pelvis in an anterior tilt.

### Butterfly

Action of going from the tuck position to the split, and then returning to the tuck position.

### Candlestick

Inversion supported on the shoulders.

### Centre of mass (COM)

Point in an individual's body where the body mass is considered to be concentrated and where the three axes of rotation meet.

### Frog

Position balancing on the hands with the arms flexed to 90° and the inside of the thighs supported on the elbows.

### Hamstrings

Muscles on the posterior face of the femur that make up the hip extensors and knee flexors.

### Handstand

Balancing on the hands.

### Hip extension

Action of moving the legs and the upper body away from each other, or increasing the torso/leg angle in the standing straight position or a handstand.

### Platform

Surface providing raised support.

### Posterior tilt

Action of tilting the pelvis backwards without flexion.

### Spotter

Individual who manually assists the execution of a movement or a position.

### Swimming

Movement of the legs, starting from the tuck position and extending them into a split while in a handstand.

### Upward arms swing

Moving the arms, which are outstretched, to a raised position from a lowered position in a synchronous and parallel movement.



## **SPECIFIC INFORMATION**

Body awareness plays a major role in learning handstand. It facilitates proper positioning and alignment. In the beginning, developing body control is more important than holding the balance. It is imperative to provide participants with manual aid in order to help them position their bodies, and to give them clear and precise directions.

Participants can concentrate on body alignment by performing exercises, often with the help of a wall, and working on flexibility at the same time. Note that the most important joints are the wrists, the elbows and the shoulders, and that the most demanding positions are bringing the legs and the torso together, and splits.

The exercises must be done progressively. It is essential to limit repetitions to prevent acute wrist pain during the first weeks of training. A full year of training is often necessary before muscles are sufficiently developed to support the body weight on the hands.

## **SAFETY**

During the first sessions, the participant should avoid balancing for too long and be attentive to wrist pain. If necessary, reduce the frequency and the duration of the elements that are more demanding for the hands.

At all times, the instructor must make sure the participant's neck is protected and physically supported during descents and falls during the learning phase.

Always make sure participants learn how to get down with different exercises and that they practise in order to prevent uncontrolled falls. For example, from balancing on the hands, the participant can come down into a front roll, a bridge or a front walkover, or sideways in a cartwheel.





# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## HANDSTAND

### TECHNICAL ELEMENTS

#### Basic moves

Tripod	7
Planche	9
The “L” sit	11

#### Wall moves

Handstand	12
Cartwheel kick to handstand	14
Handstand, dismount from blocks	16

#### Free moves

Kick to handstand	18
Press to handstand tuck	20
Press to handstand straddle	22
Hold handstand in tuck position	24







## HANDSTAND TRIPOD

### Technical Element Description

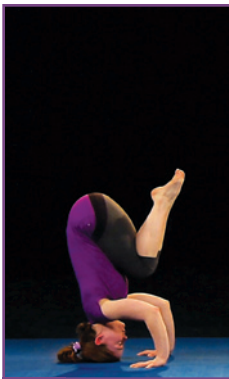
Balancing on the head with support on both hands.

### Prerequisites

- Body alignment on the back, lying on the ground.
- Front roll. (See *Front roll, Acrobatics*, p. 23.)

### Explanation of the Movement

- From a kneeling position, bend the arms and place the hands under the elbows, forming a triangle with the head.
- Gradually transfer the body weight onto the head, beginning with upper back. Keep the tuck position with the pelvis in posterior tilt until the balance is mastered. **M 1**
- Once the balance is controlled, the legs can be extended vertically with the feet in line with the back. **M 2**



M 1



M 2

### Educationals

1. Start in candlestick position. This educational helps to develop the feeling of elongating the body and stretching the pelvis. This can be done with the hands on the hips, the arms extended along the ground behind the back or behind the head.
2. Hold the tuck position in the tripod.
3. Hold the legs in a split position in the tripod.
4. Sequence the tuck position and the legs in a split position several times by making the butterfly movement.



## Manual Aid

- Hold the participant's pelvis and make sure his head is in line with the rest of the body, in order to prevent a backwards fall.

**Safety Notice:** Teaching the tripod to young children is not recommended because of the risk of injury to the cervical vertebrae.

### Common Mistakes

1. The participant cannot lift up into the tripod.
2. The participant falls backwards while kicking up.
3. The participant is unstable.

### Corrections and Corrective Exercises

1. Positioning the COM above the base of support. Beginning with the upper back and unrolling it gradually until the pelvis is properly aligned over the back.
2. When the legs are extended, perfectly aligning the feet over the thoracic cage.
3. Placing the elbows over the hands. Keeping the gaze on both hands during the tripod.

## Variants

1. Tripod with the arms outstretched. V 1
2. On the hands, the arms folded over the legs, in frog position, hold the balance resting on the forearms.



V 1





## HANDSTAND PLANCHE



### Technical Element Description

Balancing horizontally on both hands.

### Prerequisites

- Front support in push-up position.
- Back support with hip extension.

### Explanation of the Movement

- The participant rests his elbows on his stomach with the arms bent and the hands wider than the elbows. The hands are turned to the back but aligned with the forearms. When the feet and the hands are supported on the ground, the COM should be moved forward until it is over the palm of the hands, with the legs and the head straight; the shoulders as relaxed as possible. **M 1**

**Safety Notice:** Perform the exercise on a floor mat since balance is sometimes lost to the front on the first attempts, and the face can hit the ground.



**M 1**

### Educationals

1. Make the planche keeping the feet on the ground.
2. Make the planche with the feet on a raised surface.



### Common Mistakes

1. The participant cannot balance.
2. The participant falls forward.
3. The participant cannot get to the straight horizontal position.

### Corrections and Corrective Exercises

1. Fully positioning the COM over the hands, the base of support, and not lifting the legs.
2. Keeping the head straight and not lifting the legs higher than the shoulders.
3. At the start, getting into position, lifting the head while relaxing the shoulders.  
Performing strengthening exercises for the back muscles. **EX**





## HANDSTAND THE “L” SIT

### Technical Element Description

Sitting up straight with the legs extended with support on the hands.

### Explanation of the Movement

- Press the hands into the ground with the index finger facing forward and the COM over the palms of the hands. Keep the legs together and outstretched with the feet pointed. Press with the arms while contracting the abdominals and tilting the pelvis slightly backwards.

### Educationals

1. “L” sit on canes or on parallel bars.
2. “L” sit with the legs tucked.

### Manual Aid

- Watch out for possible backwards falls, especially when the exercise is done with balancing canes or when the participant lifts the legs very high.

#### Common Mistakes

1. The participant cannot lift the legs.
2. The participant cannot keep the arms straight.

#### Corrections and Corrective Exercises

1. Performing strengthening exercises for the abdominal muscles. **EX**
2. Turning the hands toward the outside, the index finger facing front.

### Variant

1. “L” sit with legs in a straddle position. **V 1**



V 1





## HANDSTAND

### HANDSTAND

#### Technical Element Description

Maintaining a handstand facing the wall.

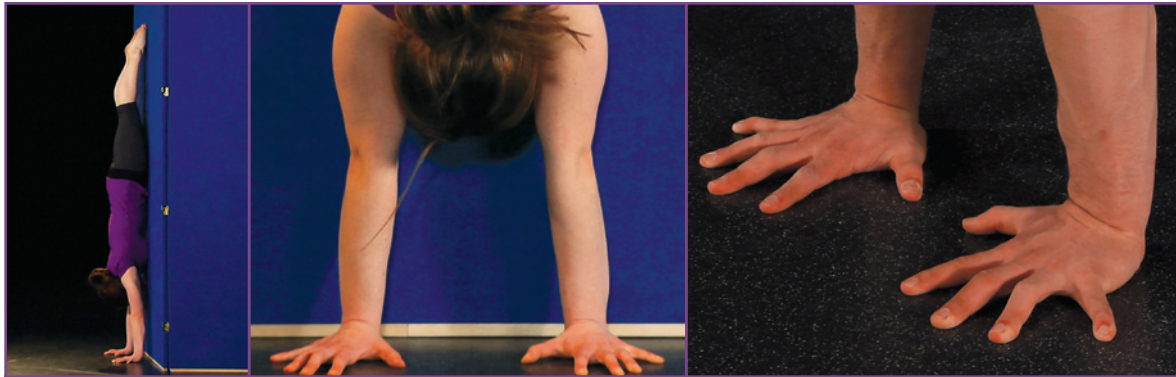
#### Prerequisites

- Lying on the ground, body aligned with a posterior pelvic tilt.
- Front roll. (See *Front roll, Acrobatics*, p. 23.)
- Cartwheel. (See *Cartwheel, Acrobatics*, p. 61.)

### Explanation of the Movement

- The participant stays balanced facing the wall, for 30 seconds, with the weight on the palms of the hands, the fingers spread apart and bent, the index finger forward aligned with the arms, and the pelvis in a posterior tilt. The shoulders, torso and pelvis are aligned, and the head can be slightly raised. The body must be perfectly aligned, both front to back and side to side. The muscles are contracted, but breathing remains regular. **M 1**

**Note:** Pay special attention to the thoracic cage, which should be closed so the back is straight. It is important to support the shoulders so as to stabilize the balance. This helps the participant to learn to open them better.



M 1

### Educationals

1. Body alignment in standing position.
2. Body alignment lying supine.



## Manual Aid

- The spotter helps the participant to get into the handstand and properly align his body. **MA 1**



**MA 1**

### Common Mistakes

1. The participant's shoulders are closed.
2. The participant's thoracic cage pops out.
3. The pelvis has an anterior tilt.
4. The participant's hands are not aligned and they are more than shoulder-width apart.

### Corrections and Corrective Exercises

1. Aligning the shoulders and the torso.  
Performing flexibility exercises for the shoulders. **EX**
2. Closing the thoracic cage while keeping an upward arms swing.
3. The spotter must manually help the participant give a posterior tilt to the pelvis.  
Practising the posterior pelvic tilt while standing. **EX**
4. The spotter must check the width of the shoulders and ask the participant to look at the position of the hands.



## HANDSTAND CARTWHEEL KICK TO HANDSTAND

### Technical Element Description

Facing the wall, lifting up in a cartwheel to balance on the hands.

### Prerequisites

- Handstand facing the wall.
- Cartwheel, both sides. (See *Cartwheel, Acrobatics*, p. 61.)

### Explanation of the Movement

- Put one hand at a time on the ground while keeping the body parallel facing the wall. The hands should be shoulder-width apart and the body properly aligned, with a posterior pelvic tilt.
- It is important to correctly position the shoulder of the first hand vertically and move the body over the support hand, beginning with the upper body. **M 1**



M 1

### Educationals

1. Perform a cartwheel kick to handstand with manual aid. The spotter supports the hips during the upward movement into the handstand and aligns the body, making sure the participant does an upward arms swing, the thoracic cage is closed and the pelvis has a posterior tilt.
2. Perform a cartwheel kick to handstand, hold the handstand and roll back down to the ground on the opposite side to the wall. (See *Handstand front roll, Acrobatics*, p. 26.)

### Manual Aid

- The spotter helps the participant to get into the handstand and properly align his body. **MA 1**





MA 1

### Common Mistakes

1. The participant falls backwards.
2. The participant has trouble kicking up.
3. The participant's shoulders drop to the front.

### Corrections and Corrective Exercises

1. Keeping the back straight and the legs aligned over the shoulders and the hands.
2. Making sure to correctly place the shoulders over the hands, especially the first hand.
3. Aligning the shoulders vertically when kicking up.







## HANDSTAND

### HANDSTAND, DISMOUNT FROM BLOCKS

#### Technical Element Description

In a handstand on blocks facing the wall, descending to the ground.

#### Prerequisite

- Handstand facing the wall.

#### Explanation of the Movement

- In a handstand on blocks facing the wall, transfer the body weight onto one hand in a pendulum movement. Move the block to the outside and bend the support arm to move the other hand to the ground. **M 1**
- Transfer the weight to the hand on the ground, move the other block and put the second hand on the ground. Bend one arm during the descent, properly align the body and the COM over the support, and move the entire body at the same time. **M 2**



M 1



M 2



## Educationals

1. Supported against the wall, perform a controlled pendulum movement with manual aid on the ground.
2. Coming down from one block with manual aid: The spotter holds the participant's legs and hips in order to guide him during the weight transfer and to promote proper body alignment.

## Manual Aid

- The spotter helps the participant to control the pendulum movement and properly align his body. **MA 1**



MA 1

### Common Mistakes

1. The participant loses his body alignment.
2. The participant has difficulty controlling the transfer of weight onto one hand.

### Corrections and Corrective Exercises

1. Keeping the hips aligned during weight transfer from one hand to another. Always performing weight transfer like a pendulum by keeping the body as a whole unit from the shoulders to the feet.
2. Bending the arm on the supporting side to maintain alignment during the descent. Keeping the shoulder properly aligned vertically over the support hand.

## Variant

1. Handstand on blocks, legs in a straddle position.





## HANDSTAND KICK TO HANDSTAND

### Technical Element Description

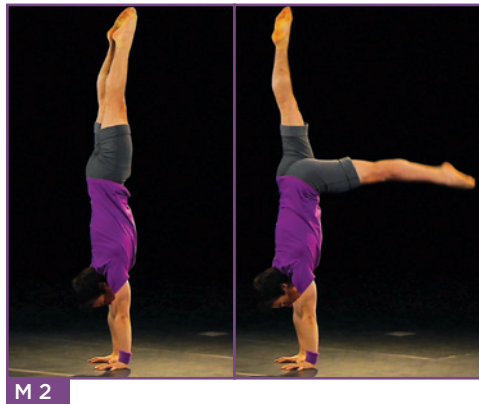
Kicking to handstand and balancing on the hands.

### Prerequisites

- Handstand facing the wall.
- Front roll. (See *Front roll, Acrobatics*, p. 23.)

### Explanation of the Movement

- From the standing position, go up into handstand one leg at a time, using the kick-off leg to push against the ground. **M 1**
- Once in the handstand, put the legs together. Separate the legs during the descent. **M 2**



### Educationals

1. Kick to handstand with manual aid: The spotter lightly holds one of the participant's ankles and guides him backwards, supporting him until his nape is resting on the ground. The participant then continues into a front roll. **ED 1**
2. Kick to handstand, then fall into a roll on the floor mat.





ED 1

## Manual Aid

- Align all the segments of the body, paying special attention to the thoracic cage and the upward arms swing. Once the participant is in the handstand, the instructor holds his legs. **MA 1**
- The instructor lightly holds one of the participant's ankles and guides him backwards, supporting him until his nape is resting on the ground. The participant then continues into a front roll.



MA 1

### Common Mistakes

1. The participant has trouble kicking up.
2. The participant falls backwards.
3. The participant is unstable.

### Corrections and Corrective Exercises

1. Waiting to be in handstand before bringing the legs together. Positioning the shoulders over the hands while kicking up in order to subsequently unroll through the back.
2. Positioning the legs over the base of support and correctly aligning the entire body.
3. Trying to balance with the hands and not with the legs or hips.



## HANDSTAND PRESS TO HANDSTAND TUCK

### Technical Element Description

Pressing to handstand tuck and balancing on the hands.

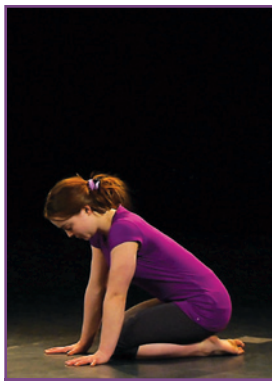
### Prerequisites

- Handstand facing the wall.
- Tripod.
- Posterior pelvic tilt exercise.

### Explanation of the Movement

- From the kneeling position, the hands should be turned to the outside, with the index finger forward. **M 1**
- Straighten the legs and transfer the COM over the hands, keeping the pelvis in posterior tilt and unroll gradually from the upper body to the lower body. **M 2**
- Take the tuck position, keeping the legs lower than the pelvis in order to make positioning easier. **M 3**
- Make a controlled descent by extending the legs before moving the pelvis.

**Notes:** It is important to keep the pelvis in a posterior tilt while extending the legs. Always try to balance with the hands, not with the hips. A fluid and even lift is vital.



M 1



M 2



M 3

### Educationals

1. Press to handstand tuck with support on an inclined surface: With the hands on the ground and the shoulders supported on an inclined platform, the participant pushes lightly with the feet and unrolls his back slowly, one vertebra at a time, in order to properly position his back. The platform should be inclined to the back at approximately 110° to 120°. **ED 1**
2. Straighten the legs slowly to learn how to unroll the back. Avoid pushing on the feet to lift the legs up. **ED 2**







ED 1



ED 2

## Manual Aid

- The instructor controls the participant's balance, one hand on his back, the other holding his knees. **MA 1**
- During the exercise, the instructor holds the participant's shoulders aligned with one hand while the other hand rests on the hamstrings to keep the pelvis in posterior tilt and the thoracic cage closed. During the descent, the participant must maintain the pelvic and shoulder alignment while extending the legs.



MA 1

### Common Mistakes

1. The participant cannot kick to handstand.
2. The participant falls backwards.
3. The participant cannot stay balanced.

### Corrections and Corrective Exercises

1. Unrolling the back, starting with the upper back, while maintaining the posterior pelvic tilt. Straightening the legs equally before transferring the COM over the hands.
2. Maintaining the posterior pelvic tilt, with the back straight and a good tuck position.
3. Keeping the shoulders over the hands and trying to balance with the hands and not with the rest of the body.



## HANDSTAND

### PRESS TO HANDSTAND STRADDLE

#### Technical Element Description

From kneeling, pressing to into handstand with a straddle split.

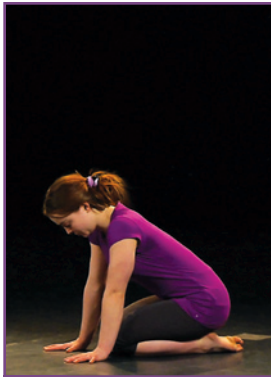
#### Prerequisites

- Handstand facing the wall.
- Tripod.

#### Explanation of the Movement

- From the kneeling position, the hands should be turned to the outside, with the index finger forward. **M 1**
- Straighten the legs while transferring the COM over the hands, starting with the upper back and maintaining the posterior pelvic tilt. Put the legs in the straddle position. **M 2**

**Note:** The start is the same as for the press to handstand tuck position. Emphasize mainly on the back's position before putting the legs in the straddle position.



M 1



M 2



## Educationals

1. Press to handstand straddle position with support on an inclined platform.
2. Press to handstand straddle position with manual aid: The spotter holds the participant's shoulders with one hand while putting the other hand on his ribs to maintain body alignment. During the descent, the participant must maintain the alignment of the pelvis and the shoulders when extending the legs.

### Common Mistakes

1. The participant cannot kick up to handstand.
2. The participant falls backwards.
3. The participant has trouble maintaining balance.

### Corrections and Corrective Exercises

1. Unrolling the back, starting from the upper back, while maintaining the posterior pelvic tilt.
2. Maintaining the posterior pelvic tilt with the back straight. The legs should be lower than the pelvis.
3. Keeping the shoulders over the hands and trying to balance with the hands and not the rest of the body.







## HANDSTAND

### HOLD HANDSTAND IN TUCK POSITION

#### Technical Element Description

Lifting up into tuck handstand and holding for 5 seconds.

#### Prerequisites

- Tuck tripod.
- Handstand facing the wall.

### Explanation of the Movement

- From the kneeling position, spread the hands, with the weight over the palms of the hands, and close the thoracic cage.
- Lift up into handstand by transferring the COM over the hands, while aligning the shoulders and the back over the hands.
- Unroll the back. Maintain the posterior pelvic tilt while bringing the thighs toward the thoracic cage. Try to balance with the hands and not the legs or pelvis.
- Make a controlled descent by extending the legs before moving the pelvis.

### Educationals

1. Handstand in tuck position with manual aid: The instructor helps the participant keep his shoulders aligned by pressing on his shoulder blades; then he presses the ribs in as the participant kicks up into the handstand.
2. Press to handstand in tuck position with support on an inclined platform.

#### Common Mistakes

1. The participant arches his back.
2. The participant falls backwards.
3. The participant is unstable.

#### Corrections and Corrective Exercises

1. Opening up the shoulders and drawing the ribs in.
2. Maintaining the posterior pelvic tilt.
3. Checking the body alignment and the proper position of the hands, with the COM over the palms of the hands. Trying to balance with the hands and not the hips, shoulders or legs.



## Variants

1. Butterfly: From the handstand in tuck position, extend the legs laterally into a handstand straddle split position. Flex the knees and bring the legs to the front to return to the handstand in tuck position. **V 1**
2. Swimming: From the handstand in tuck position, extend the legs until they are vertical; separate and lower the legs to the side into a straddle split. Flex the knees and bring the legs to the front to return to the tuck position. Extend the legs laterally again into the straddle split, bring the legs together vertically, bend the knees and bring the legs to the front to return to the original position. **V 2**



The mission of *Fondation Cirque du Soleil™* is to promote the circus arts as a development tool to help disadvantaged groups, especially at-risk youth, increase their creative potential, social skills and physical capacity. The foundation also ensures that all revenues from the distribution of *Cirque du Soleil™* educational material will be reinvested in the company's social and cultural programs.

Produced in collaboration with the National Circus School, and translated into multiple languages, *Basic Techniques in Circus Arts* aims to introduce the public to circus arts. As both a technical guide and an educational tool, this document illustrates 177 technical elements drawn from 17 basic circus arts disciplines. Accompanied by video documents, this work offers in-depth expertise and technical content that will enable the delivery of progressive and specialized instruction in a safe environment.

In collaboration with



Produced in Canada/Produit au Canada © 2011 Cirque du Soleil  
All rights reserved/Tous droits réservés

*Cirque du Soleil* is a trademark owned by  
Cirque du Soleil and used under license.  
*Cirque du Soleil* est une marque détenue par  
Cirque du Soleil et employée sous licence.