

# Feature



## Costuming Cirque du Soleil's Ovo

**Liz Vandal**

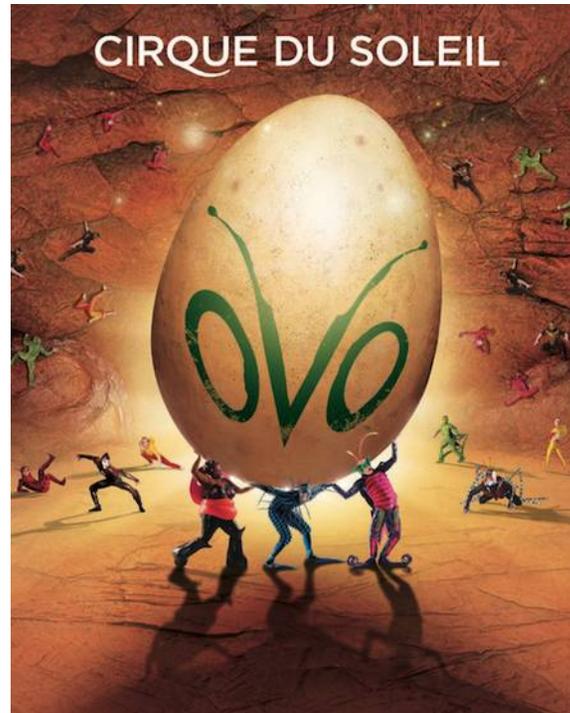
*The costume designer for Cirque du Soleil's insect-themed production, Ovo, talks about her design process and some of the challenges that she faced.*

I am self taught. My first dream was to dance, but I was often sick, so my parents preferred me to learn music. When I was 9, I remember at lunch time, taking a paper doll and drawing my first fashion design. I knew at that moment it would be my life.

When it was time to choose a college, I wanted to go into fashion design. My parents were pragmatic and didn't believe I could make a living at it. They encouraged me to go into the sciences. Fortunately, I was a good student, but I wasn't happy. I decided I'd go into computers, so I could get out of school as fast as possible and start my own business. I also worked as a model and bar maid to make money.

Some years later, after working on many other shows, I was contacted by Cirque du Soleil, and asked if I would be interested in doing *Ovo*.

*Ovo* is the first Cirque du Soleil show that I designed for. I was contacted twice before to design their costumes, but both times eventually fell through.



Logo for *Ovo* (Portuguese for "egg"), costumed by Liz Vandal. Illustration: Cirque du Soleil.

*Ovo's* creator and director, Deborah Colker, took inspiration for the show from the world of insects. The idea for *Ovo* was not to be about the acts, nor dancing, nor insects, but about movement. She told me that she wanted an evocation of the insects, not an imitation.

The world of insects was sort of my passion when I was a child. I put rocks down around the yard near the fruit trees and I lifted them regularly to watch the insects who had taken up residence underneath them. I petted caterpillars and let butterflies into the house. In fact when Cirque du Soleil first approached me, I thought someone was playing a joke on me. I was in the perfect position to pay tribute to this majestic world with my costumes. Insects were here before we humans were, and they will probably be here after we are gone, and we would die without them.

*Ovo* means "egg" in Portuguese and represents the underlying thread through the show. Graphically, inside the logo of *Ovo*, is an insect. The two O's represent the eyes and the V forms the nose and antennas

It became a quest to find the approach for the design. These costumes required a very abstract angle for me at first. I had to think of what I was feeling toward the spider, for example. I had to close my eyes and think, oh, a spider—it's an elegant, sexy, long-limbed woman. I had to think in these terms. Dragonfly's wings were evoked by pants made of veined lace, and a mosquito's stinger by a 'Mohawk' of fine red stems. The idea of the shell also became a metaphor, since the word 'insect' refers to 'sections'. This revelation consolidated my approach. It was inspiring in that way.

My approach came from French fashion designer Pierre Cardin's graphic lines and geometric shapes, Renaissance garments' slashed sleeves, and the pleating techniques of Japanese fashion designer Issey Miyake.

I looked at insects for some colors, and textures of the shells, but I looked more for textures in nature, for infinitely small pictures of a leaf or the scales of a fish. And all of this research made me realize that there are universal textures that we find everywhere in the world of nature. They repeat. It's more like philosophical research. For example, cockroaches are ugly, and I don't want to be next to them. There is something repulsive about them. So I had to trade a beautiful costume for something else.

I worked with the *Ovo* team from early 2008 to the spring of 2009 to create 17 different insect costumes including

- 12 scarabs
- 10 crickets
- 6 ants
- 6 fleas
- 3 female spiders
- 2 butterflies
- 2 wood insects
- 1 mosquito
- 1 dragonfly
- 1 fly
- 1 ladybug
- 1 male spider



Liz Vandal's designs for *Ovo*. Photo: Cirque du Soleil.

The first insect costume I envisioned was the spider, for which I drew a real spider and turned it into a woman's body.

My work methods are similar to that of French designer Coco Chanel. I don't really draw a lot. I make a quick sketch to see where we're going. And then, right away, I go to the manikin and build the costume in 3D. When I first presented my work, it was a challenge for everybody to understand. Some on the *Ovo* team were a bit confused by my methods at first, but we made it work and they liked it.

Together we developed techniques of pleating fabrics to provide three-dimensional muscle, volumes and shells. The result was a sort of organic origami. The most obvious example of that is the crickets' costumes. We also explored the textures of wings and shells using the sublimation technique to poeticize them and give them an evocative texture.



Ants in *Ovi* juggle pieces of kiwi with their feet. Photo: Cirque du Soleil.

Designing for different types of the performers, from acrobats to trampoline artists, turned out to be a sort of logical process. The body needs to be able to move naturally. If I'm wearing a very tight black dress that doesn't have any stretch, I would feel uncomfortable! In the same way, a costume is like the skin: it needs to stretch and adapt.

I'm a specialist of the body in extreme movement. I will always stay with extreme movement because that's where my interest lies. My research in this area permitted us to build some fabrics from scratch so that some of the fabrics, like that for crickets, have pleats. It looks like a muscle in a way. It just has to move with the body in the extreme purposes.

I based my costumes for *Ovo* on the stretchiness of the fabric. At first, I

considered biodegradable materials, but eventually I opted for the usual polyester and Lycra because their longevity made them more 'green' in the long run. I combined fabric that's used to make bathing suits with other fabric – layers of fabric that all stretch.

Designing for Cirque du Soleil was somewhat different than my past work. I have a lot of experience in the world of dance, and my designs in that field actually



Crickets carrying mysterious egg as the Ladybug and The Foreigner stand by. Photo: Cirque du Soleil.

used to be quite minimalist. So this time, for the first time, I was allowed to sort of let it all out. I was allowed to use colors, shapes, transformative textures. It was a pleasure.

Because we are in the circus, we have the opportunity to use very bright, strong colors. Right there, we have the public's attention. At first the crickets were all green, but then we decided that we had to use a little bit more color with them. Nothing should distract you from the body. The idea is using just enough tone not to distract—that is the challenge.

They used various dying techniques to get the colors and the patterns. This included silk-screening with stencils and hand painting them. For example, costumes for the acrobats who play kiwi-juggling ants are primarily made of Lycra, which is stretchy and almost airtight, which acts as a second skin for the performer. It retains its form and lasts a long time before its color fades.

The ants' antennas are made out of heavy-duty foam that's covered with Lycra. Unlike most Cirque headdresses, which are separate costume elements, this headgear attaches directly to the costume. The sides of each ant costume feature Issey Miyake's pleating technique. It creates rigid ripples that give each costume an organic look.

I implemented variations on a theme by incorporating thin lines on the ants and crickets, and pleated abstract transparent outfits for the dragonflies. I also used materials to suggest insects' shells, and lacy fabrics for the wings and soft sections of



Ant for Ovo. Photo: Cirque du Soleil.

their bodies. To enable certain characters such as the mosquito to move, I placed sections of shell within other sections, which open and close to reveal the soft body inside. The lines and an elongated, corseted look are a nod to the world of super heroes while the segmented shells on many of the garments alternate between hard and soft, much like the armour and the bodies of knights in the Renaissance.



The crickets are the key insect in the show. Photo: Cirque du Soleil.



The Foreigner is a fly who brings a mysterious egg to the insect community.

Ten crickets are the key insects in the show. At times, they have detachable legs that break away from their bodies, which the impression that there is an insect invasion going on. I have a particular soft spot for these characters because their costumes are so sexy, graphic and vibrant.

The Foreigner, a character, who lands in the middle of *Ovo*, is a fly in a vintage suit who only reveals his true nature when he falls for the Ladybug. After he transforms, he wears a costume of bristling spines. His

lanky, angular form contrasts with the roundness of The Ladybug.

Each performer has two identical costumes available for days when there are multiple performances. A third copy is kept in the costume department on tour in case one gets damaged. Costumes are washed by machine and dried by fans after every performance.

Because the ant characters are so active, their costumes don't last as long as others. The costumes for the show's musicians, for example,



The musician costumes last longer than those for most of the other performers. Photo: Cirque du Soleil.

might last a year or more. Acrobat costumes often have to be replaced with every tour stop. How long it takes to replace the costumes in *Ovo* varies based on their complexity. A tailor in Montreal may be able to sew an ant costume in a day or two, but the much more complicated cricket costumes require 75 hours of work each because of their complexity and the need to give them rigidity while maintaining flexibility and expandability of the material

Cirque costumes are not "one size fits all." Exact measurements are taken of each performer's body, and replacement costumes



The Ladybug is the love interest of The Foreigner. Photo: Cirque du Soleil.

are sewn to those specifications -- extra incentive for performers to not gain weight.

How much does an ant costume cost? Cirque says it's hard to calculate, and has a policy of not revealing costumes' dollar value. I suspect that might be related to the \$11,000 worth of costumes and props that were stolen during an earlier show.

In designing the costumes, I also had to keep in mind the kinds of extreme motions required of performers on the set, designed by Gringo Cardia. The setting of *Ovo* is a stylized habitat that is home to the insects. At times it is a forest, at other times a cave, or even a house. Gringo created an organic environment that could lead to many other places.

The show starts with a gigantic Egg on stage, obscuring much of the performance space from view. The object from the outside world is an inexplicable enigma in the eyes of the insects (and a nod to the monolith from the Kubrick film 2001). This



The set for *Ovo* is a stylized habitat that is home to the insects. Photo: Cirque du Soleil.



The set features artists running, jumping, and walking across -- and straight up a vertical wall without artificial support . Photo: Cirque du Soleil.

symbol of fertility and regeneration reappears in other forms later in the show, laid by the insects.

The largest set element is the Wall, which is set against the rear of the stage. The performers climb on it, disappear into it and use it as a stage, a platform and a launching pad. There are almost no straight lines to be found anywhere in the set – the Wall is curved, and so is the stage. One exception is the Spider's Web. Real spiders' webs are made up of straight lines, so this is a case where art imitates life with a nod towards geometry. It is made of strong woven synthetic straps. Another are the tall Poles

rising high above the insect world representing the strands of flowers. The performing artists climb them and appear at various levels above the stage.

Cirque du Soleil also integrated projections throughout the show. It took over 40 days of shooting of a miniature forest that was built from real plants. Only 1 minute of the show doesn't have content.

This project was a new kind of challenge for me, and one that I will always remember, especially because it allowed me to re-explore my childhood passion for the insect world.

*Liz Vandal is a French Canadian fashion and costume designer. She began her career as a fashion designer in 1988, designing costumes for several companies and organizations such as the National Ballet of Canada and The Washington Ballet. She began designing costumes for Édouard Lock, founder of the Montreal dance company La La La Human Steps in 1990. In 1992, she co-founded Vandal Costumes, which creates costumes in the fields of fashion, theatre, opera, music and film, specializing in dance. Her early fascination with insects, futuristic super heroes, and medieval armor was useful in creating the costumes for Ovo,*

*Learn more about Liz Vandal and the costumes she created for Ovd and other shows at her [website](#).*

*View a trailer of *Ovo*, showing many of the productions's costumes, at the [Cirque du Soleil website](#).*



Creatura dances to a tune.



Dragonfly balances on tender stalks.



Firefly juggles spinning spoons.



Funny spider reveals her sensuous side.



**CIRQUE DU SOLEIL.**  
Costumes designed by Liz Vandal



Yellow and red fleas.



Spider defies gravity.



Soon-to-be butterfly.



Group of scarabs.