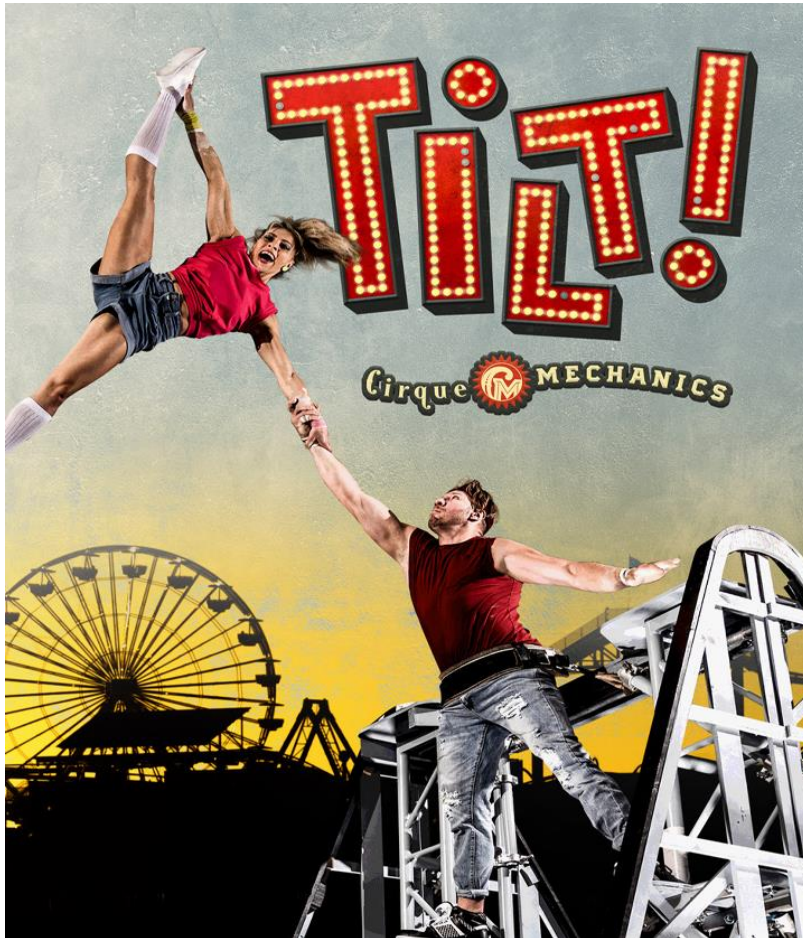


# Cirque Mechanics: *Tilt*

## Flynn Student Matinee Series Study Guide



### Table of Contents:

About Cirque Mechanics
About the Show
Inspiration: Theme Parks
What is Contemporary Circus?
Reflection Questions
Resources

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## About Cirque Mechanics

Inspired by contemporary circus, Cirque Mechanics creates shows that incorporate original contraptions, storytelling, and high-level acrobatics, showcasing the relationships between the acrobatic and mechanical worlds.



*The Cirque Mechanics team!*

The founders, Chris Lashua and Aloysia Gavre, met in 1999 while they were both working at Cirque du Soleil, and began experimenting with ways to use machinery to create acrobatics they had never seen before. In 2004 they joined with other collaborators to create their first show, *Birdhouse Factory*. This show toured for ten years, visiting over 10 countries on 5 continents. The New York Times called it “exceptional, evocative... and engrossingly entertaining.” This led the artists to continue inventing new devices that would become the heart of their touring theatrical shows. Since then, they have created six touring shows, including *Tilt*, which you’ll be seeing at The Flynn!

To create their shows, they begin by thinking about a machine they want to build and engage with that they’ve never seen used in circus before. From there, they figure out a story based on that device. You can hear one of the Cirque Mechanics founders, Chris Lashua, talk about the evolution of some of their contraptions [in this interview!](#)

In addition to their original performances, Cirque Mechanics also rents out their [contraptions](#) for events! These include the Tall Walker puppet, a 13.5 foot tall backpack puppet; the Gantry bike, a pedal driven circus platform; the Spin Cycle, a circular roving stage powered by bike pedals... and many more!

### About the Show

Cirque Mechanics describes their brand new show *Tilt* as a circus thrill ride. In this show, you’ll go on a journey to the back-lot of the Cirque Mechanics theme park. In the shadows of the roller coasters and under the lights of the Ferris wheel, you’ll meet the carnies, characters and operators that keep the thrills coming and the rides running.



*Images of the Gantry Bike being used for events*



## Inspiration: Theme Parks

*Tilt* is set in the world of a theme park. Also called amusement parks, they've been around since the year 1550! In Europe at that time, the first permanent areas set aside specifically for outdoor entertainment began to appear. Called Pleasure Gardens, the attractions would include flower gardens, bowling, games, music, dancing, staged spectacles, and even a few primitive rides.

In 1767 the Pleasure Garden concept moved to the U.S., with the opening of the Vauxhall Gardens in New York City. The first example of an upside-down rollercoaster opened in 1842 in



*The first upside-down rollercoaster, the Chemin du Centrifuge*

Paris, France. Called the Chemin du Centrifuge, this ride was not intended for the general public (there definitely weren't any of the safety regulations that exist today!). Instead, one daredevil rode a wicker basket through a 13-foot diameter loop while someone else passed the hat around for tips from the astounded onlookers.

The first amusement park in the U.S. opened in Chicago in 1890. It was called Paul Boyton's Water Chutes and was the first amusement park to focus on rides

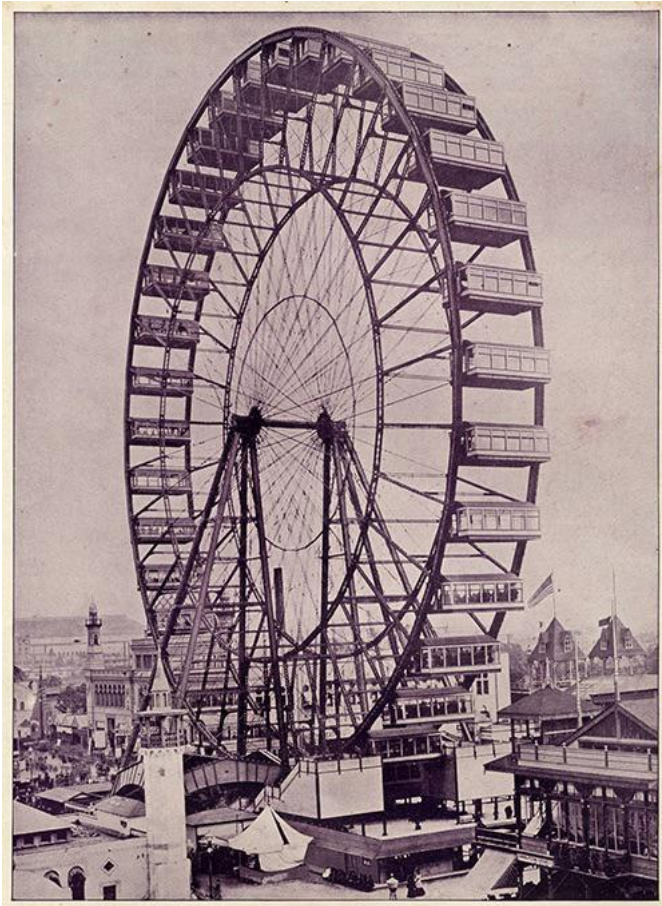
and to charge admission. The rides included merry-go-rounds, a miniature railroad, and early roller coasters. Its signature ride was called Shoot the Chutes, similar to a log flume you'd see in a theme park today.

While other amusement parks had begun converting rail lines into roller coasters already, Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York is credited as the site of the first roller coaster built specifically for the purpose of theme park amusement. It was built in 1884 and was called the Switchback Railway, consisting of two sets of parallel tracks descending in opposite directions from elevated towers. Riders had to get out of their cars at one end, climb a fifty-foot tower, and board another car in order to get back to where they started. The rollercoaster moved at six miles an hour, lasted one minute, and cost five cents. And people loved it!



*The Switchback Railway, the first rollercoaster built for entertainment*

The Ferris Wheel, another common theme park attraction, was invented in Chicago in 1892. The Eiffel Tower had just been built in 1890, and as Chicago prepared to host the World's Fair, architects and engineers tried to come up with an idea that would be as massive and jaw-



*The first Ferris Wheel, built for the Chicago World's Fair in 1892*

dropping as the Eiffel Tower was. A 33-year-old engineer named George Washington Gale Ferris Jr. came up with the idea of a huge revolving steel wheel in which passengers could ride. The first Ferris Wheel had 36 cars, each of which could hold 60 people! It cost 50 cents to ride (the equivalent of about \$17 today) and lasted 20 minutes.

After the Chicago World's Fair in 1892, traveling circuses and amusement parks began springing up across the country – and they needed people to make these places function. Carnival workers, or “carnies” are people employed by circuses and carnivals to do everything from running rides to caring for animals to making sure the electricity is set up. This work is seasonal from spring to fall, and historically has been known to be exploitative of its workers, often paying less than minimum wage for long days of work. In 2010, a reporter from Wisconsin traveled and worked with a group of carnies for eight weeks, documenting the experience and the unique community of carnival workers. You can read all about it [here!](#)



## What is Contemporary Circus?

When you hear the word circus, what do you think of? Maybe it's a big striped tent, a ringleader, trained animals, even a human cannonball. In 1768, a British man named Philip Astley created the first circus when he combined many pre-existing performance elements, including trick-riding, clowning, and juggling, into one large performance all done within a circular area he called a ring. Many other circus owners followed his lead and it quickly became a popular form of entertainment. And circus stayed relatively the same for about two hundred years.

But since the 1970s, many companies have moved away from these traditional ideas of circus, experimenting with the ingredients of circus, and developing many different styles, all of which fall under the general umbrella of contemporary circus.

Contemporary circus is a genre of performing arts in which a story or theme is conveyed through circus skills, such as acrobatics, juggling, physical comedy, clowning, trapeze, and more. Many contemporary circus companies explore complex stories, social commentary, and politics in their performances. And unlike traditional circus, contemporary circus rejects the use of animals and (mostly) doesn't perform under a big top tent. One of the earliest contemporary circus companies credited with incorporating theater into their routines is the Royal Lichtenstein Circus, founded in 1971. [Check out this video](#) from 1988 of another early contemporary circus, the Pickle Family Circus. You'll see how the troupe blended their circus skills with elements of theater.



*One of the first contemporary circus companies, the Royal Lichtenstein Circus, in 1975*

As the circus educator [Shana Kennedy says in a Ted Talk](#), “unlike classical circus, which puts entertainment and spectacle first, contemporary circus is more interested in creating meaning. It presents a vision that is personal to each artist, and it develops this idea... the artists have relationships onstage and the very notion of an ‘act’ tends to disappear.”

For more on the history and artistry of contemporary circus, check out [this resource](#) from the Philadelphia Fringe Festival!



*The present-day contemporary circus company, Compagnia Bacallá*

## **Reflection Questions**

*Here are some example questions to prompt deeper engagement from your students, both before and after the show:*

### **Before the Show:**

- Have you ever been to a theater before? What are some ways an audience is expected to behave in a theater that are different from how you behave in other places you go for entertainment, like a movie theater?
- When you think about circus, what comes to mind?
- Have you ever been to an amusement park before? What happens there? What rides do you expect to see? What might you see, smell, or hear?

### **After the Show:**

- How did the show meet or break your expectations of circus?
- What mechanisms did you notice in the show? How do you think some of them worked?
- How did the show make you feel? Was there a specific moment when it caused an emotional reaction in you? How did it do that? What did the show make you think about?
- If you were to write a review of the show, what would you say? What stood out to you? Would you recommend it to other people? Why?
- What theme park contraptions were surprising to you?
- What did you learn about how a theme park functions?

## **Resources**

- [Cirque Mechanics Company Website](#)
- [Interview with Cirque Mechanics founder, Chris Lashua](#)
- [Shana Kennedy's TedX talk "What is Contemporary Circus?"](#)
- [America's First Modern Amusement Park Was on Chicago's South Side](#)
- [Great Moments in Amusement Park History](#)
- [In the Loop – a brief history of upside-down coasters](#)
- [First Roller Coaster in America opens \(History.com\)](#)
- [Brief History of the Ferris Wheel \(Smithsonian\)](#)
- [My Life as a Carny \(Isthmus News\)](#)
- [Big Top Labor: Life and Labor in the Circus World](#)
- [Pickle Family Circus "Café des Artistes" Highlights](#)
- [A Look Back at the History of Contemporary Circus](#)