

# Canada's Cirque du Soleil chief heads for the stars

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The Canadian founder of Cirque du Soleil Guy Laliberte attends a press conference outside Moscow in Star City. Laliberte, 49, will voyage to the International Space Station in September 2009 aboard a Russian Soyuz rocket becoming the first private Canadian space explorer to voyage into space on a philanthropic mission.

Guy Laliberte, the larger-than-life Canadian entrepreneur behind the Cirque du Soleil phenomenon, announced Thursday he would fulfil a childhood dream by becoming the seventh space tourist.

Laliberte, 49, whose dramatic reinvention of the circus has netted him a 2.5-billion-dollar (1,76 billion-euro) fortune, described his journey into

space, planned for September 30, as a "poetic, social mission."

Speaking from Star City, in Russia, he said the social dimension would be represented by his One Drop foundation, which works to improve access to water resources and to raise awareness of water-related issues.

As for the poetry -- apart from the simple fact of fulfilling his childhood dream -- he would be composing a poem in collaboration with Canadian poet Claude Pelouin, on the theme "a drop, a planet, a message."

"It is an artistic project with the poet," he said. "We will have to look at ways of broadcasting it," he added.

Laliberte is to join the crew of a Soyuz space ship for a September launch to the [International Space Station](#), becoming the seventh [space tourist](#) to rocket into orbit. He will spend 12 days at the station.

While Laliberte did not want to tell reporters how much his [space mission](#) would cost him, he conceded it was not a million light years away from the 35 million dollars (25 million euros) paid by the last space tourist, US software pioneer Charles Simonyi.

Private citizens are charged 20 million dollars for such space trips, plus another 15 million dollars if they wish to step outside their capsule for a brisk space walk, according to Canadian media.

He will also have the right to perform certain experiments while up there, but for the moment, he said, he had not decided what they would be.

Laliberte will travel up to the station in a Russian spacecraft, accompanied by Russian cosmonaut Maxime Surayev and US astronaut Jeffery Williams.

Since May 10 he has been following the obligatory pre-flight training for cosmonauts at Star City and has passed all his medicals. "They told me I had a heart of a cosmonaut," he said smiling.

Laliberte said he was first inspired by the idea of travelling in space by the 1967 Universal Exhibition in Montreal: it was the Soviet space pavilion that captured his imagination, he said.

Like his predecessors, Laliberte's space mission was organised by US-based space tour operator Space Adventures.

The company had suggested at the beginning of 2009 that Simonyi might be the last space tourist for some time.

The ISS staff doubled at the end of May to six and the United States is preparing to take its space shuttles out of service, all of which left space on board the Soyuz rockets.

But Laliberte has booked his place, and according to Space Adventures, Google billionaire Sergey Brin has lodged his own request for a flight.

A former street performer, Laliberte in 1984 turned a small acrobatic troupe into a global entertainment empire that now employs 4,000 people and generates 800 million dollars in ticket and merchandise sales annually.

Born in Quebec, he is now ranked the 261st richest man in the world by Forbes magazine.

## **Guy Laliberte: from Cirque du Soleil to the stars**

Cirque du Soleil's founder, who will rocket into space in September, went from pauper to circus mogul by turning a troupe of ragtag street

performers in 1984 into a global entertainment empire.

Canadian Guy Laliberte, 49, an eternal dreamer with a keen business sense, an impish smile and a shaved scalp is said to be as much at ease walking on stilts as steering his circus dynasty, valued by Forbes magazine at three billion dollars.

From Auckland to Zurich, the Cirque du Soleil has traveled the world over, setting up its big tops in vacant city lots for weeks at a time, as well as permanent installations in Las Vegas, Walt Disney World in Florida, and next year in Dubai.

Its bold acrobatics set in mystical and colorful scenes have thrilled more than 80 million people to date. Nineteen shows, including "Alegria," "O," "The Beatles' Love" and "Zumanity" are currently touring.

The key to the Cirque's success is arguably its mutation of circus feats into plot-driven theater, coupled with haunting music.

This simple idea gave rise to a new form of entertainment and made Laliberte its dominant force. Whether under roving big tops or specially-built odeums, every show has his special stamp.

Laliberte's winged rise to 261st richest man in the world, with a personal fortune valued at 2.5 billion dollars, had not been foreseen in his early life.

At 14 years, he left home.

Four years later, with only 50 dollars in his pocket he headed for France, where he learned to busk, doing stilt-walking and fire-breathing for tips on the streets of European cities.

"One day, I was hitchhiking in France, a car stopped. The driver was a doctor. Not only did he give me a ride all the way to Rennes, he also invited me to stay with him so that I didn't have to sleep outdoors overnight," Laliberte told the Figaro newspaper last year.

It was a pivotal moment in his life, he explained.

He stayed there two weeks and took in what would form the foundation of all he has built: "If you nourish the circle of life, life gives back," he said.

Back in Canada, Laliberte joined a band of street performers in Baie-Saint-Paul, Quebec, known as le Club des Talons Hauts (the High Heels Club).

Two years later, in 1984, he obtained a government grant to organize a show for the 450th anniversary of French explorer Jacques Cartier's discovery of Canada.

The Cirque du Soleil was born.

It was an instant success, and Cirque caravans set out for cities throughout Canada and the United States, its performers drawing ovations night after night.

In the early 1990s its iconic striped big tops were erected in Paris, London and Tokyo, while the company built its first semi-permanent installation at the Mirage Hotel on the Las Vegas strip.

It was in this desert oasis in 2006, that Laliberte, by now an influential entertainment tycoon and jet-setter, introduced "Love" -- a tribute to the Beatles.

Its launch brought together for the first time in decades former Beatles Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, John Lennon's widow Yoko Ono and George Harrison's widow Olivia.

Now, Laliberte is looking to breach a new frontier -- space.

In September, he will fly aboard a Soyuz rocket to the International Space Station, as a tourist.

"I've been introduced in a number of different ways in the past as a fire-eater, an artist, an entrepreneur, an entertainer, and I have to admit that today being introduced as a space explorer is quite something for me," he told a news conference Thursday.

"I am profoundly touched by this," he said, recalling a television interview during the Cirque's early years in which he quipped: "One day I hope I can take the Cirque du Soleil into [space](#)."

"Twenty-five years on, I am realizing that that dream can become a reality."

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