

# One Singular Sensation: Michael Jackson ONE, Part 5: Set Design

By Natalie Robin

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(Cirque du Soleil: Thriller)

[Michael Jackson ONE](#) is the second collaboration between Canadian set designer Francois Séguin and [Cirque du Soleil](#). At the outset of the project, Séguin began working with theatre consultants Auerbach Pollack Friedlander as they approached the renovation of the theatre, following the closing of Disney's [The Lion King](#). Unfortunately, not long after the conversations began, the project was halted for budgetary reasons for approximately six months.

"When I came back, it was more like a road show," Séguin says. Unlike other Cirque du Soleil shows housed in their own custom-built theatres, *ONE* harkens back to touring Cirque projects like [Alegria](#), [Totem](#), or [Varekai](#), and the theatre at the [Mandalay Bay](#) is smaller than most Cirque venues.

The biggest difference between *ONE* and Séguin's other Cirque collaboration (*Zed* in Tokyo) was beginning with the subject matter. Usually, Séguin explains, "a circus is about a boy and girl who meet, get separated, travel on a journey, and find a happy ending. But *ONE* follows the journey of four misfits who discover and are transformed by Michael Jackson's music."

Séguin's first collaboration with King was a fruitful one. The entire team listened to a lot of Michael Jackson to really delve into the material and "find the spirit of the show." King came with a list of songs he wanted to include and from which the team created a musical structure. Each song had a theme, goal, or reference to famous video, and sometimes that meant that the scenic setup might determine the song order. According to Séguin, this created a kind of in-one structure to the puzzle of figuring out the show. "One of the defining principles of the design is to support fast changes without being literal. The proposed solutions were more like a Broadway show with traditional scene changes than some other Cirque projects," he says.

The largest evolution of the piece came in the increasing introduction of Michael Jackson's image. Originally, the show was meant to evoke Michael's spirit, but as the show evolved, his physical image became more and more central to the design. This drastically shifted the video design, which, of course, had ramifications on the scenery, but the essential set design was already complete by the time these changes occurred.

The system of four moving towers in the set came quite early. The towers move, twist, and transform from a street or into a structure for acrobatics. Performers jump from the towers and walk a slack line slung between them. There are three levels for the dancers, and, as Séguin points out, the structures are a "big support for lighting." Originally intended to be motorized, the towers are moved by performers, a change motivated by budget but seamlessly incorporated into the flow of the show.

Because so much of circus performance depends on the safety and usability of structures like Séguin's towers, it was necessary to have the towers finished as early as possible in the development of the piece. Built by Montreal shop [Scène Éthique](#), the towers, as well as at least 60% of the show's elements, were used in the rehearsal studio in Montreal. Scène Éthique is probably best known for building the "machine" for Robert Lepage's monumental [Ring Cycle](#) at the [Metropolitan Opera](#) in New York City (additional scenery was built by [Hudson Scenic](#), as well as a number of other shops).

*Michael Jackson ONE* puts the pop idol back on stage in a blaze of lights, sound, and imagery that [The Chicago Tribune](#) calls "a strikingly beautiful and emotional show," a fitting tribute to a star whose album *Thriller* remains the best-selling album of all time, selling over 50 million copies.