

THE ST. LOUIS AMERICAN

North St. Louis youth turn street lessons into circus art

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“It got to a point where it was like, y’know, I’ll die young. I don’t care. You’re just waiting. I feel like being in St. Louis, you’re constantly waiting just sitting there waiting to see when am I gonna get shot? When am I going to go to jail?”

Those are the words of Melvin Diggs in the soundtrack to an acrobatic act he does with fellow St. Louisan, Sidney Iking Bateman, in a show called “Cuisine and Confessions.”

“Cuisine and Confessions” is a contemporary circus show, a theatrical piece that uses circus elements. It is the newest creation from a world-renowned Canadian company known as Les 7 Doigts de la Main (7 Fingers of the Hand). The show opened in Montreal in October and is about to start a two-year

international tour.

“Cuisine and Confessions” is a deeply personal show that explores the blood memories that come from our associations with food. Performers share their stories by speaking directly into a microphone or through recorded interviews.

The act that Sidney and Melvin do together is based on the ancient Chinese skill of hoop diving. Their act was created as their graduation performance from the prestigious Ecole Nationale de Cirque, the National Circus School of Montreal.

The story behind the act is the two of them helping each other through doorways (square hoops) and ultimately escaping the lives they had known. It is about getting out of St. Louis.

Sidney and Melvin first learned circus arts through Circus Harmony, the circus school located on the third floor of City Museum. Sidney was brought there by a mentor; Melvin had an internship that placed him in the circus snack bar. Neither boy had planned to join the circus. Sidney loved basketball and had NBA aspirations; Melvin was already working on becoming a rap artist.

Sidney was raised by his grandmother, Melvin by his single mom. Sidney attended Beaumont High School until a school fight got him sent to Innovative Concept Academy. Melvin went to Construction Career Center. At Circus Harmony, both learned a variety of circus skills but excelled in acrobatics. In fact, Sidney was the first student at the school to ever do a double back somersault on the ground. Melvin served as the base of just about every acrobatic trick and pyramid the students presented.

"You're going to cry." That is what everyone told me when I went to Montreal for the opening of “Cuisine and Confessions.” I am the director of Circus Harmony. Sidney and Melvin were my long-time students, and we went through a lot over the many years we worked together.

They were hired by 7 Fingers to be part of the company's new show, right after finishing at the National Circus School. The creation process included in-depth interviews with the performers starting in early summer. This was before the fatal shooting of Michael Brown Jr. and its aftermath revealed to the world a hard fact in the life a young black male in St. Louis: the probability of getting shot.

Prophetically, perhaps, Melvin's interview – which became the beginning soundtrack of the hoop diving act – was about how growing up in North St. Louis meant waiting for when it would be your turn to get shot.

It's echoed at the end by his acrobatic partner. Near the end of their acrobatic act soundtrack, Sidney says, “These things are normal, and I was just next in line to be like my brother or my uncle – and I got out of that.”