

# INNOVATION IN ENTERTAINMENT

A conversation with Dru Pavlov,  
Cruise Director on Celebrity Solstice

by

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**D**ru Pavlov is the Cruise Director on Celebrity Solstice, the lead ship in Celebrity Cruises latest class of ships. To many passengers, the cruise director is the master of ceremonies who introduces the shows in the theater, makes announcements over the public address system and acts as talk show host of the morning program on the in-cabin television. However, beyond being the public face of the ship, the cruise director is a senior manager whose responsibilities include managing the activities staff and scheduling the onboard activities and entertainment.

The cruise line gives the cruise director the component parts for the entertainment that will take place during the cruise. Of course, it provides the venues and the technology but it also gives him or her, the staff, the guest entertainers and the production shows. It also establishes an overall style consistent with its brand image. However, within this framework, the cruise director has a great deal of discretion in designing the entertainment experience during a given cruise.

"I take all of those things and I try and schedule them in a way that makes some kind of

sense in terms of the entertainment arc of the cruise - - taking guests on a voyage from the start to where I want them to end up. There is no right or wrong way to do things. The way [my predecessor] would do something, the way I would do something and the way whoever takes over from me is not necessarily going to be the same. You have to gear it toward your own personality. One comedian can't do another comedian's routine. We are very much the same way in that respect."

The cruise director acts as an unofficial guide to the voyage. "I am one pair of glasses through which to look at the ship. Being cruise director, I focus on the entertainment. I get to show the ship's fun side, artistic side and creative side. There are many crew members who have a much longer personal contact with guests like the waiters, the stateroom attendants. Everybody sees their waiter every day; they see their stateroom attendant every day. I may not get that one-on-one contact with the guests but there are few people who by the end of the cruise who will be as recognizable. Everybody has at least seen me: they have seen me on stage; they have seen me on TV. So, I have a bit of a unique opportunity to hold the guest's hand a little bit and say these are some of

the highlights, this is what I would do if I were you, these are some of the things that we have going on and of course, it is all there for you."

During cruises in the Caribbean, "it is very much about doing that onboard the ship. I don't feel too much of a responsibility to help guests feel comfortable going out in San Juan or St. Maarten - - most people have been to these ports before. In Europe, it is a different story. When we go across to Europe, my role shifts somewhat. People have come along way and for many of them this is their one and only chance to see Rome or Athens or wherever we are stopping that day. So, they rely very much on my advice and my insight in terms of what to do."

Adjustments have to be made in other ways when Solstice crosses the pond. "It is always easier to cater to a more homogenous mix of nationalities or even age. But we have the ability to kind of expand our offering a little bit and make some alterations if we get a more diverse clientele. In Europe, our percentage of American guests drops from in the 90s to anywhere from the mid-40s to the 60s but usually not too far above that. So, we have a lot of offerings in other languages and things going on. The show's attendance, for example, is cut in half. People go ashore all day and they are on tour and they are exhausted when they get back and they have dinner and go to bed. Next morning, they are on tour again. Instead of having 100 guests go out on excursion, you have 1,400 guests on tour so the activities staff is down on the gangways helping to direct people and assisting the shore excursions staff. But, there are still are regular core cruising guests who love the activities, love the shows and want to come to all that stuff as well. So, the world is definitely very different."

**C**elebrity Solstice has an innovative design. In addition to the normal array of bars and lounges the ship has additional public areas that lend themselves to being entertainment venues and which have been so equipped. "They have done some very interesting things with the design that allow me to explore some new ideas on how we program entertainment. For example, we have Celebrity Central, which is our cinema/comedy club. The stage actually rotates out to face into the Entertainment Court, which allows us to do live music, fully produced and amplified right there as people are coming into and out of the theater."

"The impact of that has been tremendous. It used to be if I was going to use the a cappella



*Cruise Director Dru Pavlov.*

quartet in an effort to provide some ongoing entertainment after a late night show [in the theater], I would typically put them in a [bar or lounge]. The Kova Cafes on the Millennium-class ships are about the closest venue that I could catch people coming out of the theater. It is not really set up to be an amplified performance space. For that, I have to go all the way back to the Rendezvous but that is even further toward the aft [and thus away from the theater]. The people go up the forward elevators or to the nightclub. Here, everybody coming out of the theater will hear that there is an a cappella show going on and they can stick around and watch or go do their own thing but at least they don't think there is nothing going on. They can hear that there is something going. It is right there, it is timed for when they come out of the show."

"The same for the live music going into the show. You may not even realize that we have a guitarist onboard. But when he is playing when you are going to the theater, you cannot help but be exposed to him. This way, the musicians get exposed to a majority of the guests rather than just a few. When you see him there, you realize that he is around and if you really enjoy what he is doing, you can start following the program and catch him again other places."

"We have what we call interactive productions - - a little quick fun. They are not so much a theme party as a quick mini-show. Rather than hav-

ing music and having activities personnel running around trying to manage a party, we have a choreographed performance produced with some of our cast members. The activities staff is still around because some times people really want to participate but they need a little bit of a welcome. But they get to see a performance by the cast which gets them in the mood for whatever the party is."

"One of those interactive productions is called "Groove". It is directly following both shows, again, in the Entertainment Court outside the theater. It is like a 10 or 15 minute little, produced Sixties tribute and then the party moves into the Quasar Club, which can also open out onto the Entertainment Court, and everybody flows in there. Then, they close the doors on Quasar and party in there. It is not just that we are playing the music, we have actually put some of the dancers there in costume and they are dancing around with the guests in sort of a go-go style. It always makes me think of Austin Powers. I think if Austin were onboard he would definitely be enjoying Groove."

"The dancers love it too. It used to be that part of their contracted duty was that they would assist our activities staff on the theme nights. We have four or five activities staff so with the dancers around you can have more of an impact on the event. But now, we actually put them in a costume, give them choreography and allow them to perform as professional dancers. It really increases their enthusiasm to participate. The activities staff love it because they get to feel that they are part of a show with a little more production value and a little more 'Wow' factor."

"A lot of times, we would put a little theme party on and guests would attend but would sit down and wait for something to happen. We have always tried to convince them before: 'Don't just sit and watch, come participate.' Some people want to do that but others just want to see something. So, now we are showing them something. They can either watch for 10 or 15 minutes and then go check something else out or if they get inspired enough or get in the mood because of that, the participation takes care of itself. We are going to have more of these as well."

"Our theater and the shows [performed there] are something that is not only a new standard for us but I think at sea, quite frankly. No longer do we have a cast of singers and dancers and maybe a



*Celebrity dancers performing the interactive production show "Groove" in Solstice's Entertainment Court*

duo that does aerial work. The cast are all cross-trained and all do some aerial [work]. Yes, we have the aerial duo but we have various other specialty acts as well. The theater itself is almost an act onto itself - - the capabilities it has in terms of what you can do from a technological point of view. Anyone who is used to the shows that we have done before is going to see some new tricks and some new directions."

Solstice's technological capabilities do not just increase the entertainment possibilities in the public spaces but also reach into the staterooms. "The TV system here is amazing. What we are able to do in terms of the amount of content that we have, how much is available on demand is totally new. We have always had our pay movie system just like other ships and hotels have but now a lot of our own content can be coded to be free on demand. Thus, for example, we have a lot of documentaries that were made when the ship first came out - - great stuff. Nick Weir, who was the start-up cruise director, went to the shipyard and took the camera around when we were in the dry dock, went to the bridge with the captain and he was there for the naming ceremony - - all of these landmark moments in the early part of the ship's life. We are able to have those [amongst the free on-demand content on the in-cabin television]."

"It used to be that people would ask is there an engine room or bridge tour and do you have something on TV. You'd say, 'oh yeah, it is on chan-

nel 20' and they'd say 'when?' 'Oh, it comes up - - just keep watching.' Now, we have that program playing [from time-to-time on the regular channels] but if you want to see it at a time that is convenient for you, you can scroll through and select it [from the on-demand content]. So, the free content on-demand is a great new tool for us."

"As I continue what Nick was doing, I'll be taking the camera backstage and behind the scenes in various other locations, we will meet the spa, we will meet the cast, will meet the galley teams and this stuff will all be built into the on-demand content. A lot of guests love to get a look at what goes on behind the scenes."

Another innovative feature of Solstice is that she has several specialty restaurants in addition to a traditional two-seating main dining room. Typically, the schedule of the evening entertainment on a cruise ship is built around the two seatings in the ship's main restaurant. For example, the times for the shows in the theater are geared to when each seating will be finished. Due to the large number of alternative dining venues on Solstice, a substantial number of guests will not be dining in the main restaurant. However, this fact has not made scheduling the entertainment more difficult. "The other restaurants have their own seatings as well in a way. There isn't enough time in the evening to turn a table over more than once. Most guests end up dining at pretty similar times anyway, around six o'clock-ish or between eight and nine. So, the guests in the main dining room with the two seatings and in the other restaurants have similar schedules."

Celebrity plans to add a total of five Solstice-class ships to its fleet. These ships are large ships not only in comparison to Celebrity's existing ships but in absolute terms. Thus, the company both anticipates and requires growth. Innovation in the onboard entertainment is part of that growth strategy. "The idea is to try and get away from some of the things that we have been doing, some of the things that we have been doing the same way for a long time. As we get more and more frequent cruisers we must offer things that are new and that they have not seen before. It is a bit of a balancing act because at the same time you don't want to abandon what your people have come to love about you and what you do. I think it is fair to say that we are trying to do things in a new fresh way where possible, not necessarily sticking with

all the old paradigms."

"What is important to me is the production value as well. For example, The Liar's Club - - that is not a new activity. In fact, other lines do a similar activity to that. We have done it before in an open lounge where musicians are waiting to play. Some people are there to dance and some people are there for the game show. Our staff is walking around with the words printed on a piece of paper that they show to the audience. Now that we have Celebrity Central, we have a venue where we can make it a little bit slicker. It is very simple things - having the words appear on screen and have it be a venue where everyone can see and is ready for a comedy type show. So, we definitely want to do things a little bit differently."

"Being our first new build since Constellation in 2002, why would we just do things the way that we have always done them? Just because things have always been done a certain way, is that always the best way to do them or do you just fall into some comfortable habits? The demographics change, more and more people are cruising all the time and what might have entertained people ten years ago, five years ago, may not now."

"You also see the same thing with the specialty dining. You have far more dining options [on Solstice] than ever before. I don't think it is a reflection the size of the ship so much, we could have easily just made the restaurant a little bit bigger and designed it to accommodate all of the guests. But we are finding that the specialty restaurants on the other ships are such a popular offering why would we only have the main restaurant and one specialty restaurant here? Why could not there be four or five specialty restaurants? It is really neat to see how they built the ship with these new concepts in mind and how the guests really seem to be responding to them."