



«15 Ans Après le Soleil »  
1999-2014



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**RICHARD G RUSSO**

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«Live to Cirque: 15 Ans Après le Soleil (1999-2014)» is an article collection depicting real-life events. Names, places, and events are real and have not been fabricated.



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**Editions:**

**1.0: June 16, 2009**

**2.0: July 7, 2014**

**Version: 2.0**

# Live to Cirque

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*« Behind each perilous leap there is a purpose, an intention, an individual, an emotion... The Range of Possibilities is always open.*

*Today, the dream is the same: I still want to travel, I still want to entertain, and I most certainly still want to have fun...*

*The journey is about to begin... »*

« CIRQUE DU SØLEIL



# Live to Cirque



## TABLE OF CONTENTS



PROLOGUE: 15 Years of Living to Cirque	006
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### First Tour | 1999 – 2004 (15<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup>)

• (OCT 2000) « Scream. Run. Invent. - Alegría at Beau Rivage »	012
• (JUL 2001) « The Longest Walk - Las Vegas, Part I »	021
• (JUL 2001) « The South End - Las Vegas, Part II »	033
• (FEB 2002) « The Headless Man: Quidam in Miami »	047
• (AUG 2003) « Acoustic Alegría: Seattle In-store Encounter »	054
• (NOV 2003) « Cirque at the Masters: a La Nouba Q&A »	061
• (APR 2004) « Off and Running! - The Inaugural CirqueCon »	066
• (MAY 2004) « ZUMANITY: Caged Within the Human Zoo »	079
• (JUN 2004) « Faire La Nouba: La Nouba 5th Anniversary »	092
• (JUL 2004) « The Ephra Epiphany: A Cosmic Disturbance »	100



# Live to Cirque



## TABLE OF CONTENTS



### Second Tour | 2004 – 2009 (20<sup>th</sup> – 25<sup>th</sup>)

• (APR 2005) « The Journey Continues... - CirqueCon 2005 »	104
• (AUG 2006) « A Cortège in Chicago - Corteo, a Year Later »	119
• (SEP 2006) « A Kaleidoscope of Imagination - CirqueCon 2006 »	130
• (APR 2007) « Koozâ Unveiled on the Quays of Montréal »	142
• (AUG 2007) « Once Upon a Time... - CirqueCon 2007 »	150
• (SEP 2007) « East meets West, meets East - ドラリオンの大阪 »	163
• (DEC 2007) « A Coming Together - Celebri NYC & SFO »	172
• (FEB 2008) « Bienvenidos a Mexico - Quidam in Monterrey »	181
• (SEP 2008) « No Limits on Adventure! - Celebri SEA & LAS »	194
• (SEP 2008) « Now a Member of the Poppa Club! »	204
• (NOV 2008) « ZED: A Timeless Evocation - CirqueCon 2008 »	209
• (NOV 2008) « Land of Morning Calm - Cirque in South Korea »	226
• (APR 2009) « The Birth of OVO, a Teeming World »	238
• (MAY 2009) « Kumbalawé - Saltimbanco in Lakeland »	248

# Live to Cirque



## TABLE OF CONTENTS



### Third Tour | 2009 – 2014 (25<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup>)

• (JUN 2009) « Cirque 25: Le Rêve Continue »	255
• (SEP 2009) « Viva Apasionadamente! - CirqueCon 2009 »	263
• (APR 2010) « A New Twist on CirqueCon - CirqueCon 2010 »	279
• (MAY 2010) « TOTEM: Odyssey of the Human Species »	291
• (MAY 2010) « VIVA ELVIS: A Blue Suede Disaster »	300
• (MAY 2010) « ZARKANA: A Really Odd Escape »	311
• (NOV 2011) « IRIS, the World of Cinema - CirqueCon 2011 »	326
• (DEC 2011) « CirqueWeek 2011, Part 1: Mystère »	344
• (DEC 2011) « CirqueWeek 2011, Part 2: Zumanity »	357
• (APR 2012) « AMALUNA: 'O Brave New World...' »	364
• (APR 2014) « KURIOS: Cirque du Soleil Meets Steampunk »	381

# *Live to Cirque*



## PRØLØGUE

You never know when a “Live to Cirque” moment is going occur, or in what form it may come. The very first happened on a rather tiresome evening in May 1999, after spending the day at Walt Disney World's Magic Kingdom Park. I was soaked to the bone (as it had rained off and on that day), my head throbbing with a pounding headache, and here I was about to embark on a theatrical journey inside the Cirque Theater at Downtown Disney West Side for the very first time. I feared I would find the experience tedious and tiresome (as I was not into theatrical arts like my friends were), but I'd been assured Cirque would be worth the price of admission. I needn't have fussed.

From the very first moment the show began I sat enthralled. It was of little consequence that we were as far away from the stage as one could get. All that became relevant in those ninety minutes was the artistry and pageantry of the performers that danced about the stage before me, and the skills of the musicians who played above me. For it was truly once upon a time... a door opened; two worlds collided. Dreams clashed with reality. The mundane mixed with the marvelous. It was no longer possible for me to tell where one world began and the other ended. I had truly entered the dominion of Cirque du Soleil, glowing with spellbinding intensity... a vibrant kaleidoscope of artistry and daring... a splash of iridescent genius. I now knew the color of imagination and never looked back!

Thanks to a free-spirited nature, I have journeyed all across the United States, visiting cities in my country for the very first time (such as Seattle, New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles and Denver); to Canada, reaching out to my brothers and sisters on my northern border (in Vancouver and Montréal); to Europe, crossing oceans for the very first time to see, with my own eyes, what I had previously only seen in history books (Royal London, Parisian France, Renaissance Italy and Medieval Czech); to Asia, exploring Japan in all its historical glory (not to mention Seoul, South Korea); and to Mexico, visiting friends south of the border.

The collection of articles you are about to read are a chronicle of my adventures undertaken in concordance with Cirque du Soleil and the experiences found therein over the past 15 years. Cirque is but one part of the overall adventure, however, as the discovery of a new location is just as exciting and rewarding as the show itself. So what you'll find here are tales that blend the experiences of a Cirque du Soleil spectacle with the thrill of exploring a new city, state, province or country. But it's even less complicated than that. A moment can happen at any time, any place. It doesn't have to be a large adventure for it to have meaning. You'll discover that here as well.

*Ricky "Richasi" Russo*



# **TOUR 1**

***1999-2004***

# Live to Cirque



## FIRST TOUR: 1999-2004

To say I fell in love with Cirque du Soleil immediately following my first experience would be an understatement to be sure. Although I would go on to build web pages (after searching for days for knowledge about Cirque, and finding little), managing chat groups, starting newsletters, and traversing the countryside in search of new and exciting experiences motivated by Cirque du Soleil.

But the first steps were tenuous to be sure.

Giddiness drew me back to La Nouba just twenty-one days later (it was even better the second time!) and again on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July (yep, I was hooked!), but it would be what I would launch on June 16, 1999 – Cirque du Soleil’s 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary (although I did not know that at the time) – that would come to define this early period for me, and go on to inform my interaction with Cirque du Soleil fandom for years to come. On that date I launched “L’Information de Cirque”, which you know today as “Richasi’s Le Grand Chapiteau”. I also found myself intrigued with an email mailing list from onelist.com called “CirqueduSoleil” (Onelist would become eGroups and later Yahoo! Groups), settling right into the Cirque du Soleil online community.

It was the beginning of something far wider than I could comprehend at the time.

Much of this first five-year period was spent learning all I could about Cirque du Soleil, and sharing that knowledge through *Le Grand Chapiteau*. But though I had discovered quite a bit about Cirque in the prevailing weeks, one evening’s discovery proved I still had much yet to learn. That night, as I flipped through the various television channels in search of entertainment, something caught my eye and I clicked back, discovering some kind of circus performance. I watched for a moment, and then laughed out loud – this was cheesy! I bragged to my roommate, who had sauntered in by that time, that this was NOT Cirque du Soleil. But then I thought, and added “unless it’s one of their earliest shows.”

Turns out it was a broadcast of *Le Cirque Réinventé* on BRAVO.

Color me surprised to know that Cirque du Soleil was broadcasted on television; I quickly looked through the schedule to find out if and when the performance would repeat. I was elated to discover the performance would indeed repeat later that night, following the broadcast of two other Cirque du Soleil creations: Saltimbanco and Nouvelle Expérience. I had inadvertently hit upon “Cirque Weekend” on BRAVO; I queued up the VCR immediately. Those broadcasts that night allowed me to expand my knowledge of the Cirque ten-fold (realizing I had seen Nouvelle Expérience years before on HBO as “Circus of the Sun II”). And I watched those recordings many times over... learning, sharing, wanting more.



I would go get more.

I journeyed to Las Vegas to see *Mystère* and “O” that October (1999); jumped to Biloxi, Mississippi for *Alegría* in September 2000; and drove to Miami, Florida to take in *Dralion* – my first touring show – and *Journey of Man* (Cirque’s first IMAX Film) in February 2001, all in the quest to experience and grasp this phenomenon called Cirque du Soleil. By that July, my efforts in sharing the knowledge I’d gained would expand beyond *Le Grand Chapiteau* through the creation of “CirqueFAQ” – a text-based frequently asked questions document that presented information about the company, its shows and disciplines it employed, in a more concise manner. Life under the big top was good, but I was still not quite finished expanding these distribution channels.

The *Fascination! Newsletter*, which as of this writing celebrates its 125<sup>th</sup> issue, was born that August.

As originally conceived, the newsletter was intended to be one component of a much larger fannish endeavor: a fan club for fans by fans. The hope was by forging together the many facets of the Cirque fandom already found online: the Cirque du Soleil Discussion Group (on Yahoo! Groups), *Le Grand Chapiteau* (still called *L’Information de Cirque*), the Cirque Webring (a network of like web-pages), and by providing our own club page and newsletter, the ultimate fan experience could be created! The suggestion of a Cirque fan club was not an original idea. There was an official club of sorts at the time – “*Dralion Internet Club*”, which Cirque had formed when *Dralion* began touring the United States in late 1999 – however, it was filled with information, music clips, and other items related to *Dralion* only, not for all of Cirque’s creations. That’s where this club, *Fascination!*, would come into play.

And how it got started was actually quite by accident.

By this time there were two self-described “super-fans” of Cirque du Soleil – myself and Yuki (she ran [seisouso.net](http://seisouso.net)) – and as we discussed some Cirque-related topics through AOL’s Instant Messenger (AIM) one night, Yuki mentioned off-hand that it would be cool to have an online fan club dedicated to Cirque du Soleil. I quickly agreed, having harbored a similar desire myself. In the subsequent minutes we discussed some potentialities – Yuki would create and host the official fan club pages while I would go on to create and publish a newsletter – we agreed to go forward. But creating such a fan club would require the backing of the entire Cirque fan community as well, and that’s where Jen Cassity (who owned and moderated the Yahoo Group) and Jon Lewis (owner / moderator of the Cirque Webring) came into view. They readily threw their support behind the project and by August 3, 2001, the *Fascination! Fan Club* was born.

For my part I quickly dove into the crafting of the newsletter. I already had a number of ideas for its look and feel, what kind of content I wanted to provide, and even the overall theme of the issue (early on each issue focused on a particular show, reviewing it for the masses), but before long I knew I needed help.

How could one person correlate all the news, monitor itinerary changes, look into facts and figures, and find the time to write about all the different facets of a particular show? One person couldn't, so I turned to the Discussion Group to plumb Keith Johnson and Paul Roberts to assist me. Each had differing points of view – Keith more into the business side of the company, while Paul was more musically inclined – complimenting my desire to discover and flesh out each show's thematical elements and history. Work began in earnest for our first ever issue then – September 2001 – which debuted later online August 31, 2001.

With the newsletter coming together and the website up and running, I then turned my attention to one of the club's future endeavors: facilitating a group gathering. But much of that thunder was stolen by Cirque itself through the creation of Cirque Club, which launched just two weeks after *Fascination's* first issue hit the stands. With an official fan outreach source primed for special gatherings, I wondered: was there really a need for a fannish one too? Turns out, the answer was yes, but we wouldn't know that until much later (and it's a story for a little later on...).

I would eventually assume moderation duties over the Webring by October 2001; Yuki would back out of the fan club idea by that December (which quashed expansion into hosting gatherings, as I needed to focus on the newsletter); and in another two years I would come to take possession of and moderate the Cirque du Soleil Yahoo Discussion Group. Through the bumps and changes *Le Grand Chapiteau* and *Fascination* endured, grew, and served the Cirque fan community well. And during that time my association with Cirque as a self-described super-fan would reach even bigger heights: through a year-long adventure I fondly refer to as “Le Grand Tour” – a series of events set in motion that took me on a whirlwind tour of Cirque du Soleil shows, from their most recent (Varekai) to the eldest show (Saltimbanco). The goal: to see all eight Cirque shows running at the time within the span of one year.

But *Le Grand Tour* would only be the beginning of the adventure, however.

Less than a year later a brand new idea would eclipse all those that had come before it. Its name was *CirqueCon*, and it would forever change the way I looked at and participated in the Cirque fandom. But we'll get into that in a little bit. As part of this first five-year tour, I'm honored to share with you those experiences that occurred from 2000 to 2004, sans those from the Grand Tour, which are part of their own collection.

# Live to Cirque



SEPTEMBER 2000

## «Scream. Run. Invent.»

Alegria at Beau Rivage



*Thank you. Thank you to the Makers of Rules. To the Breakers of Backs.  
To the sincere Autocrats. To the false Democrats. To the Builders of  
Walls. To the Painters of Lines. Thank You. Thank you again. To those  
who Tattoo Numbers. To those who point fingers. To those who count  
their greed. To those who split by colour. To those who smile their  
lies. Thank you. Thank you so very much. Please, step into the  
Spotlight. Let us take your picture. To immortalize you. To thank you.  
Let us engrave your faces into our album of infamy. So that  
we may never forget. So that we may never accept.*

"Come to a place where genuine Southern hospitality and charm go hand in hand with meticulous service," touts a line from an advertisement for Beau Rivage, a casino-resort situated on the salty shores of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, containing a 78,000 square foot casino, twelve restaurants, a full spa, a salon, a shopping promenade, a marina, a pool, and a sandy white beach -- all for your pleasure.



Conceived by Steve Wynn - the designer of the Mirage, Treasure Island and the Bellagio in Las Vegas (now owned and operated by the MGM/Mirage gaming corporation) - and sporting 1,780 "elegantly appointed" guest rooms and 66 luxurious suites within its 32 storied winged-tower, its opening provided another collaborative effort between him and Cirque du Soleil. For contained within this \$685 Million (USD) resort, a 1,552 seat theater reflecting the "warm welcome inspired by the climate of southern France," waited.

And after much deliberation, on May 20, 1999, Cirque du Soleil left the trappings and lights of Las Vegas to find a "permanent" home at Beau Rivage and set up stakes with Alegria, a show considered their most signature.

For this "special engagement", the show would be trimmed to a scant 90 minutes, a far cry from its 2-plus hour touring presentation, but still inline with Cirque's many other resident shows. And while this fact bewildered most who followed Cirque du Soleil around the world - how would the show translate? - having just been introduced to Cirque du Soleil via "La Nouba" at the beautiful freestanding Cirque Theater at Downtown Disney in Orlando (May 8, 1999) - it in no way detracted my desire to experience the show first hand. But unfortunately, while I would quench that thirst in Las Vegas that October, experiencing "Mystère" and "O" for the very first time, repeated attempts to visit Biloxi over various holiday periods throughout 1999 and 2000 failed.

But something was going to happen that would change all that.

In autumn 2000, Cirque du Soleil shocked the fandom by announcing Alegria would leave the Beau Rivage and re-stage a tour in the Asia-Pacific region of the world. This surprising news meant any chance to see the show in Biloxi (and possibly the foreseeable future) was quickly slipping away. In a last ditch effort to make the improbable happen, I called upon Cedric, a friend from Denver (who introduced me to Cirque du Soleil), and struck a deal: I'd get the tickets if he'd get the room. He heartily agreed and thus everything fell into place: our room at the Beau Rivage (16078), the show tickets (205-R-1/2), and my transportation from the airport to the hotel (via CoachUSA). So, on September 29, 2000, I boarded a Canadair Regional Jet out of Orlando International and flew to Biloxi to see Alegria.

This is the tale of that adventure...

## **/// IF YOU HAVE NO VOICE: SCREAM**



The moment I arrived in Atlanta I began to get a bit apprehensive. Sure I had taken great care to finalize the details of my flight, as I always did; it's what was waiting for me upon arrival in Biloxi that had me worried. For what was awaiting me, which became the source of my

trepidation, was a Coach USA bus paid to take me directly to the Beau Rivage. While this may not sound like something extraordinary to get one's self into a twist about, usually I had my own form of transportation to rely upon - a friend to meet me at the airport or a rental car - but this would be the first time I'd have to place my faith in a third party to get me from Point A to B in the middle of nowhere.

I also worried about the flight. Normally I wouldn't be so hesitant about stepping onto a plane, as I'd done it many times before (and many times since) and love to fly; however, I was used to flying huge jets, and while the flight from Orlando to Atlanta was on a regular jet, the second leg was to be on a smallish regional airliner. My jaw hung open wide when I looked out of the terminal window and saw the plane out on the tarmac: it had propellers! It was a dinky little plane too, this ATR Regional turboprop craft, and I was really, really beginning to get second (and third) thoughts!

And stepping out onto the runway at Atlanta's Hartsfield Airport didn't help quell my fears either.

I settled into my window seat in 4C though, up front, and awaited my fate. Naturally my worries were unfounded and even though the plane was small and the vibrations plenty, the flight went very smoothly and I really enjoyed the experience of riding in a turboprop. It really isn't everyday these days that one can ride in a turboprop in this country. While the only way to go in a by-gone era, today they're just not as prevalent in commercial air-service.

But when I landed at the Biloxi/Gulfport Regional Airport (which is a very, very small facility by the way), the uneventful turned a dreadful shade of lively, as my transportation alternative of choice turned out not to go as planned.

Wouldn't you know they stranded me there?

After waiting out in the cool evening air for uncounted minutes (okay, who am I kidding, I was looking at my watch every minute!), I decided to call Coach USA; after all, I did pay to be shuttled from the airport to the hotel and I aimed to be shuttled! Unfortunately I didn't have a cell phone with me so I had to use an airport phone to make the call. And Coach USA was not very helpful or sympathetic to my situation.

"That was the last bus," the operator over the phone advised.

"Great," I sighed, "And what am I supposed to do now?"

"Do you want us to call you a cab?"

"How else am I going to get there?!"

I slammed the phone down I was so angry - mostly at the person on the other end of the phone who could care less about my situation than actually being stranded at the airport with no means of communicating with anyone (other than the pay phone) and no way to get to the hotel without waiting for a taxi.

Of course it takes the world for this cab to come too; in the meantime I struck up a conversation with some Navy guys in their whites who were also waiting around to be taken back to base. And since we were both stranded without any relief in sight, I let be known a cab was on the way and that they were more than welcome to join my party. But when the cab finally did pull up, I became embroiled in a mix-up of (apparently) epic proportions - the airport security guard went ballistic and forbade what he called "double loading".



Okay, sure, it protects people like me from being overcharged but the base was right on the way to the hotel and I had absolutely no problem with taking them on; we had it all worked out! The swabbies would pay from the airport to the base, and I would pick up the rest to the hotel. It was a win-win situation for all that quickly turned into a loosing proposition.

Thankfully I had just enough cash on my person to pay the driver his full fare, and by midnight, I arrived at the Beau Rivage. I was anxious as all get out to actually see the show, but would have to wait until the next day to get even a small glimpse of Alegría.

### **/// IF YOU HAVE NO LEGS: RUN**

Come morning I received more than a glimpse.

The lobby had costumed mannequins adorned as Old Birds and a preview of the show filled an LCD screen in the shopping avenue, down in the Alegría boutique - itself just an off-shoot of the Beau Rivage casino floor - a surprise awaited us that even we didn't know about: special personal appearances by the very same Cirque du Soleil artists performing in the show!



And while I had no foreshadowing of who I might meet, being given the chance to meet with them and to express my gratitude for the hard work they undertake each and every day filled me with such joy.

And, of course, to be able to say: "Yes, I met that person who performs in the show!"



So when the appropriate time came, my friend and I were on the scene. As promised, two performers made their way from the theater and into the boutique. And at a different time, a different pair!

During this time my friend and I was fortunate enough to meet Andréé Simard, one of the singers, and Gaston Elie, half of the Synchro Trapeze. The next hour, I met the two Contortionists: Tseveendorj

Nomin and Chimed Ulziibayar, as well as Batmunkh, the young boy who plays Little Tamir. They were all gracious and very talkative - especially Andréé and Gaston, who were also very friendly.

And through all the chaos were the Old Birds, fumbling around, enticing the casino patrons, and those who came to gab with the performers. It was a Cirque fest if I ever saw one!

By 6:45pm that evening, the festivities had to end outside the theater so they could begin inside; thus my friend and I retired to the Alegría Theater and waited for the show to begin. For those who bore its splendor, the design of the venue was simple and elegant, featuring a wonderful splash of color. And, unlike the "O" Theater, the Alegría Theater was ornamented with an elegant display of the show's name - right above the door. Inside, the ceiling was a vibrant shade of blue, representing the skies of the village Alegría played upon. Here, Sky Art also provided designs for a 15,000 square-foot mural "reminiscent of Claude Monet's water paintings." Below the skies were the theater seats, bright yellow, creating an allegory of the beaches where the Beau Rivage was founded. And then there were the walls, adorned in oranges and reds, bringing meaning to the rising and setting sun.



sign of imposing power," which reflects the theme of the show - an allegory about power; who has it and who does not.

But all colors turned dark once the lights dimmed... and Monsignor Fleur strutted on stage.

An interesting character is he, adorned in reds and blacks. And his stick - streaming of light "Alegría!" he announced moments later and the music began to play. And play it did through seven amazing acts:





The Syncro Trapeze featuring Gaston Elie, the nice young man I met just a couple of hours earlier. I sat on the edge of my seat throughout his act, hoping he wouldn't fall. Hoops, by Elena Lev, an amazing young lady wrapped in gold, is capable of bending her body to-and-fro. Her amazing performance astounded me; I hadn't seen anything quite like it -- ever! Fire/Knife Dance by Isaac Samuela, an

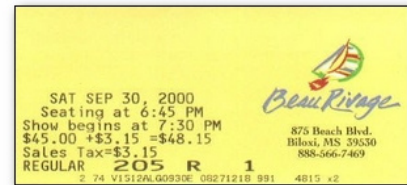
amazing blur of flame and dance. Russian Bars, featuring Big and Little Tamir as well as a host of talented artists. It was amazing to see little Bachka holding on for dear life as his alter ego flipped into the air. Fast Track, featuring creatures spun in gold. Slots on the stage opened up to reveal a fantastic display of athleticism and gymnastic capability as the artists tumbled about. Contortion, by Chimed Ulziibayar and Tseveendorj Nomin, the two lovely Mongolian girls I had also met earlier in the day; their bodies conditioned to bend in ways almost unheard of. Aerial High Bars - clinching the show.

### /// IF YOU HAVE NO HOPE: INVENT

Like a bolt out of life, Alegría thunders into being with an unsociable need to tell its story. It is a story born of the desire for a better world. A stage is set where old age and youth collide, where fantasy and magic are integral parts of everyday life. Alegría, the Spanish word for "joy", "elation", "jubilation", and "happiness", is a celebration of life in its most primitive form: survival. Uncertainty surrounds us all in everyday life. It's a "world of contrasts - power and powerlessness, cruelty and kindness." In our world evil and hardship remain a constant force, but through this uncertainty is the glow of the human spirit. It is unconquerable, resolute in its strength. Alegría celebrates this strength by crying out for change, to shake the foundations of society and force those who control to see the error in their ways -- to change. So that together we, as a unified people, can build a better tomorrow.

Alegría gives us the power to transform society. This is the underlining theme to the show created by Franco Dragone and Gilles Ste-Croix in 1994 for Cirque du Soleil's 10th Anniversary.

Many characters exist in this world - court jesters, minstrels, beggars, old aristocrats and children. They are joined by clowns who alone have been able to resist the political upheavals and social transformations of the day. They are witnesses to the passing of centuries and serve as the social commentators for Alegría. 50 plus performers set the stage for us, old and young alike. Together, they weave a tapestry of life that has been described as Cirque's signature show.



#### **DUO TRAPEZE**

Perched 40 feet above the set on their individual trapezes, two graceful aerialists perform an awe-inspiring routine. In this breathtaking display of harmony and beauty, the performers execute increasingly difficult acrobatic maneuvers.



Photo : Al Seib

#### **FAST TRACK**

In glittering costumes spun of gold, an ethereal group of performers soar across the set executing lively gymnastic and tumbling displays in unison and in counterpoint, reaching astounding heights and speeds on an elongated overlapping trampoline that magically appears from within the stage.



Photo : Al Seib

#### **FIRE DANCE**

Tribal and magical, this authentic ritual dance is performed against the pulsing rhythms of drums by an artist who weaves his baton-like fire knives around his entire body, from his feet to his palms to his mouth, in a seductively dangerous dance.



Photo : Al Seib

#### **HOOPS**

This enchanting performer combines the agility and skill of a gymnast with the flexibility of a contortionist, the dexterity of a juggler and the grace of a ballerina. A countless number of silver hoops spin endlessly around her body, as she dances and tumbles across the stage.



Photo : Al Seib

#### **RUSSIAN BARS**

Amazing acrobatic flyers are thrust into the air from a single, double or triple bar that is perched on the sturdy shoulders of powerful catchers. The sure-footed flyers perform multiple synchronized somersaults and mid-air twists at an unbelievable pace. The Russian bar requires a high level of concentration and mutual trust between the performers. Each flexible bar measures two to six inches in width.



Photo : Al Seib

#### **CONTORTION**

These two young but experienced performers bring the refined Mongolian art of contortion to life. While perched on a seemingly weightless table which rotates slowly as they perform, the duo executes impressive and imaginative feats of flexibility and balance.



Photo : Al Seib

#### **AERIAL HIGH BARS**

Three high bars set more than 40 feet above the stage form the aerial playground for daring acrobats to fly to and from the arms of mighty catchers, suspended by their knees on a cradle swing. The astounding act, performed by eight national champions from Russia who are masters of the discipline, culminates in a death-defying plunge into the net.



Photo : Al Seib



Through all the laughs, gasps and tears, Alegría came to a close 90 minutes later with its signature song. And thus, the journey that I had tried to undertake in 1999 came to a close. I must thank the clowns for all the laughs, Andréé Simard and Gason Elie for being so gracious, and Tseveendorj Nomin, Chimed Ulziibayar, and Batmunkh for taking time out of their busy schedules to talk briefly with me. Oh, and I cannot forget the wonderful Old Birds who bore all of us crazed Cirque fans and provided us a chance to get into the act - with a picture! Your efforts and your time will not be forgotten.

And what will I take away from this journey, besides experiencing Alegria? There's my first ever turboprop airplane ride, being stranded at the airport, the lack of a skyline in Biloxi and, oh yeah, the trio of scantily clad, young nubile girls Cedric and I walked in on, clinging to and kissing on each other in the elevator that first night!

But that's a story for another time...

Viva L'Alegría!





### **/// BONUS: THE BEAU RIVAGE**





JULY 2001

## « The Longest Walk »

Las Vegas 2001, Part 1

Have you ever been to a place that you loved so much you couldn't wait to return to it? And once you had, did it take a while for the realization you were actually there to set in? I found myself in this very situation as I walked across the pedestrian footbridge between the Mirage Resorts parking garage and the Treasure Island resort and casino - the funny patterns on the carpet below my feet; a hint of smoke and filtered air; upbeat songs playing on the radio aloud; the flashing lights and exciting sounds of people winning lots and lots of money. It took a moment for it to sink in, but by the time I stepped onto the escalator and descended down to casino level, with the familiar beats of a taiko drum resonating off the walls from the speakers overhead, I knew I was there. I was in the humongous adult playground of Las Vegas again and I was there to see two of Cirque du Soleil's finest productions: *Mystère* and «O».



fancy mansion round the cove, we'll see these fair-weathered boys do battle here in Buccaneer Bay. We better, or shiver me timbers...

Currently you'll find me on the wooden docks in front of the Treasure Island casino-resort hoping beyond hope that the infamous Pirate Battle isn't called off due to high wind squalls (The Fountains at Bellagio were called off earlier because of them). I'm keeping a weather eye out and so far while the high seas are disturbed, they're not distressed so I feel it in me bones that unlike that

Ahem. Right. Well.

Every 90 minutes or so each afternoon and evening, the sound of cannon and musket burst in a cacophony of fire and shot in this dramatic pyrotechnic battle between the *Hispañiola*, a pirate ship of the high seas, and the HMS *Britannia*, a frigate of the British crown. Sounds of a bustling pirate village fill the air; waves crash against the pier, seagulls chatter and pirates caw as they unload booty from the day's take from their hulls. But suddenly the HMS *Britannia* steals round Skull Point, and men-at-war of the Royal Navy rise to challenge and force these scallywags to surrender their valuables and their vessel.



That's what I'm waiting for.

The weather here in Las Vegas has been grand (when is it not sunny and blue skies?) and I've had a good time since my arrival. Besides the wind there's not much else for me to complain about - other than the fact I made a total fool of myself over at Bellagio a few minutes ago. Do you know I fell right on my ass? But while I'm sitting here either waiting for the inevitable wind warning, or the raucous start of the show, I might as well fill you in on my adventures in Las Vegas today. I've really enjoyed exploring the casinos for their little attractions; while Cirque is the draw, it's these attractions that make it fun!

### **Hoover Dam:**

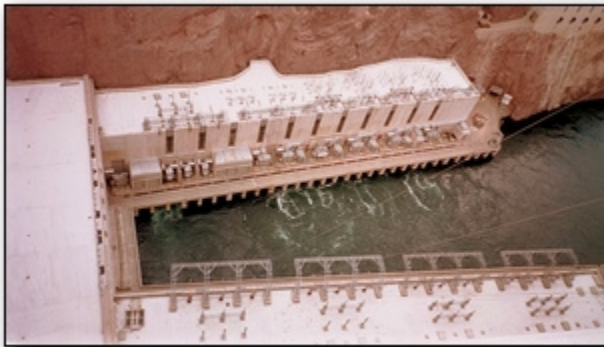


One of the first things I did (other than pick up the rental car - it's a little red GEO Metro!) was to take a ride 30 miles southeast of Las Vegas to a place situated along the Nevada-Arizona Border in what is called Black Canyon - the Hoover Dam. When the Dam was completed in 1936, it was both the world's largest electric-power generating station and the world's largest concrete structure. It has since been surpassed but that does not take away from how enormous the structure is. It is 726.4 feet tall (from foundation rock to the roadway at the top) and weighs more than 6.6 million tons. Behind it is Lake Meade, which has a high-water line at 1,229 feet above sea level. The reservoir covers about 1,579,000 acres or 247 square miles and extends about 110 miles upstream toward the Grand Canyon.



So, it is a pretty impressive place to visit if I do say so myself. And one neat fact: they say there's enough concrete in it to build a two-lane highway from San Francisco all the way to New York City!

The Dam operates constantly, but visitors can take a tour from 9:00am to 5:00pm to various costs, depending on which you take. I decided upon the basic tour and even then I got to see a lot of the Dam - places many have just seen on TV! On the tour you'll learn the complexities of the dam's construction and how it presently operates. Take the 530-foot plunge down through the rock wall of Black Canyon and begin your tour at the Penstock Viewing Platform. The ride takes just 70-seconds via elevator; you'll exit into a tunnel drilled in the 1930s just for the dam's construction.



At the Penstock, you're located atop one (of four) of the huge 30-foot-diameter pipes that transports nearly 90,000 gallons of water each second from Lake Mead to the dam's hydroelectric generators. A quick elevator ride up to the Nevada power-plant balcony takes you to a panoramic view of the 650-foot-long Nevada wing of the power-plant and eight of the dam's 17 huge generators. Lastly, an

Observation Deck provides panoramic views of Lake Mead, the Colorado River, the Hoover Dam and its features. You'll really want to take your camera for these shots! Did you know? On each side of the dam are huge tunnels that are designed to direct high waters around it? Called spillways, these tunnels were first dug to move water around the dam site during construction; they are so large that a WWII Battleship can float through. That's huge! Of course, don't forget to walk across the top of the dam for awe-inspiring views of the dam face and see just how much of a huge colossus the Hoover Dam really is.

What a thrill!



### *Tiger Habitat at the Mirage:*



Built on the former grounds of the Castaways hotel, this first-of-its-kind casino sparked a renaissance in 1989 by setting a new standard in amenities, style and sophistication of Las Vegas casinos. As such the resort is considered the grandfather of today's Vegas and the blueprint of all that has followed – and a lot have followed since! Set amidst a lush, tropical décor, you'll find a number of interesting attractions at The Mirage besides its casino, the restaurants and its spa, such

as: the Rainforest Oasis, the Aquarium, the Tiger Habitat, the Secret Garden & Dolphin Habitat and, of course, the fire-breathing volcano right outside.

One of the things you will notice as you step into this desert oasis is that it doesn't quite smell like a desert, it has an aroma more like a tropical paradise with a hint of rum, coconut and pineapple. And it's one of the most invigorating and intoxicating scents I find in any of the Las Vegas casinos. You're breathing "Pina Colada", a scent by ASI, and it's quite alluring – I've waited two years to get a waft of that scent again and it was well worth the wait! So, if you entered The Mirage this morning and saw a funny looking guy stand there with his eyes closed, breathing deeply... that was me.

At the front desk is you'll find The Mirage's 20,000-gallon saltwater aquarium home to many angelfish, puffers, tangs and other exotic reef-dwelling sea creatures. They swim amidst is an intricate coral reef system installed within the 53-foot long by 8-foot high by 6-foot wide acrylic tank. Even if you don't have a room to check into, stop by the concierge desk and take a peek – finding sea life in the lobby of a hotel in the middle of the desert is a sight to see.



Backtrack a little and you'll stumble upon the Mirage's lush tropical rainforest. Housed under a 100-foot-high dome is a small, flourishing garden of specialty trees and plants cultured to provide a more tropical setting that the Mirage commands. Wander about this meandering path through lagoons and cascading waterfalls, and take in the beautiful flora and fauna including bird of paradise trees, orchids, bromelids, and palm trees. Oh, and yes, those palm trees are quite high at 60-feet!





Not far from the front entrance, down near the sports book (and the California Pizza Kitchen, yum!) rests the White Tiger Habitat, a marvelous place to view Siegfried & Roy's infamous Royal White Tigers. Unlike conventional tigers, which have black and gold stripes, the purist of white tigers are completely snow white without markings (aka Stripes), pink paws (instead of brown or black), and eyes as blue as ice. Some of the White Tigers you'll find here are a mixture

of conventional and pure white, as you'll see some with black stripes! Both varieties are just as beautiful and just as rare: there are only about a few dozen or so white tigers in entire world! And the ones here come from a progeny established by Siegfried & Roy after securing perfectly matched offspring as a pair, bequeathed in 1958 by the Maharaja of Rewa, India. Watching the Tigers frolic and play is a great experience. Unfortunately the habitat is usually very crowded, as it was when I visited today, but I was still able to see these wonderful creatures at play!

Out back, near the pool, you'll find last two of The Mirage's attractions: The Dolphin Habitat & Secret Garden. Unfortunately the time of my arrival this morning was early so these attractions were still closed for the night, but I would be back later in the day to see them.



### **Fall & Rise of Atlantis:**



When I left the Mirage, I had but two purposes for coming over to Caesars: first was to see the Forum Shops and its fountain shows, and second to experience the IMAX film ride "Journey to Atlantis." The hotel itself has a rich history reaching as far back as 1962. It took four years to construct and comes complete with all the trappings of Rome: cypress-lined landscapes, fountains, streetscapes, statuary and even roaming Centurions. And, if you're lucky, you'll even get a chance to have your photograph with Caesar and/or Cleopatra themselves! Although the property continues to reinvent itself year after year, many of Caesars Palace's attractions have remained the same.

One of the highlights of my last visit was the Forum Shops and the talking statues that reside there; I endeared myself to them.

First of all I suppose this happened because I love fountains (water or otherwise) and secondly, the show was so cheesy, who could look down upon it? I mean, come on, with a final line of "I raise my cup to thee!" While most patrons refer to this particular fountain as "the talking one", it's more officially referred to as "Bacchus' Fountain" or "Festival Fountain" and you can catch this show while eating a little something sweet at Cheesecake Factory (which is exactly what I did! Pick up a slice down by the Atlantis Fountain first). While sitting there enjoying my wonderful little slice of heaven, Bacchus and his entourage - Venus, Apollo and Pluto - had a comical discussion filled with mock theatrics and laser-lights. In case you're wondering, Bacchus is the fat one in the middle (who used to rise out of his chair and raise his chalice in a toast but apparently is too fat to move now).



After tucking in that wonderful cheesecake, I trekked down to the other end of the Forum Shops (passing all sorts of booths and boutiques too numerous to mention), to partake in the Lost City of Atlantis shows.

The first, entitled "Fall of Atlantis" takes places within this beautiful hub - called the Roman Great Hall on the west side of the shops - filled with a 50,000-gallon saltwater aquarium stocked with puffers, flounder, sharks and

dozens of other creatures of the salty sea. If the front of the tanks is awash with people, look up and you'll find video screens projecting views from inside the tanks right over your head! In the fountain show (it is a dazzling display of lights, fire, lasers, steam and, of course, animatronic statues); King Atlas is fitfully attempting to determine which of his disagreeable children - brother and sister - will rule over Atlantis. But as the story unfolds, the siblings try everything in their arsenals to destroy one another as each vies for the exclusive right to sit upon the throne. Their squabbling infuriates the gods who settle the dispute by raining their fury upon them all through the "Fall of Atlantis", a 20-foot winged beast that consumes the civilization with fire and water.



While the very climax places a poignant end to Atlantis, all is not lost. We are beckoned to continue the adventure at "Race for Atlantis", where mere mortals have a chance to battle the gods to save the civilization from the depths of despair and return it to its golden age.



In "Race for Atlantis", you are chosen as the Gods' spokesmen for a chariot race in an attempt to raise Atlantis from the depths of despair Atlas' progeny have created. You're racing against Neptune, the reigning champion, and Ghastilus, a diabolical champion of evil, in a no-holds-bared race for supremacy. Take care under the reins of your chariot, as fowl plots are afoot! Who will be victorious? You must experience the Race for Atlantis to find out. Race for Atlantis is a fun way to part with a few dollars, but don't expect to come

away awed and inspired (although where else are you going to see Neptune wrestle with a sea-serpent in IMAX 3D?). Despite the obvious amount of effort it took to create (the fog machine alone must have cost a pretty penny), film, build and layout the attraction, it was less than stellar in my book. So, I picked up and moved on, remembering to give Caesar's finger a good rub on the way out.

Hail Ceasar!

### **A Desert Passage:**

My ventures then took me next door to the Bellagio - continuing the distance already traversed from the front of Treasure Island, the Mirage, in front of Caesars Palace, and beyond. I'm not sure how long of a walk that is but it's quite a hefty slog. Quickly I strode over the walkway and reveled in the first glimpses of the hotel. Reveled might be a strange way to express the emotion I felt upon my first glance, but of all the



structures here in Las Vegas, the Bellagio is the one I most endeared to; therefore, it was also the one I had most wanted to see. Everything about the property's elegance - the lake, the fountains, the lobby, the conservatory, the show - speaks to me!





Via the upscale shopping Promenade is where I entered the Bellagio and like at the Mirage, I came to a screeching halt and inhaled the wonderful scents. Here Mirage Resorts uses "Citrus Garden" (which has somewhat of a vanilla tint) and it is just as intoxicating as the Mirage's. Venturing further in, I promptly found the "O" Boutique and ticket counter. After checking out the newest Cirque du Soleil goodies for purchase, I exited through

the main lobby (which houses the beautiful flower sculpture) and out once again to the Strip. I would say more but later in the week friends of mine and I will actually be staying on site, so I'll reserve speaking about my favorite resort until then. The moving platforms took me down the south exit of the property, dumping me on the Boulevard right in front of the Aladdin, the next stop on the tour.

Over at the Aladdin, an attraction hound like myself has very little to discover. The Casino/Hotel sits on 34 acres of prime Las Vegas real estate with 2600 rooms, a 100,000 sq-foot casino floor, and a 500,000 sq-foot shopping district - "Desert Passage". It is here, within the "outdoor-themed" shopping bazaar (think painted ceilings like the Forum Shops), that you'll find the hotels' one and only gimmick: it rains in the Passage and that I just had to see. Munching on a little cookie, I sat down on a nearby bench to await the torrential downpour - I was ever so curious how they were going to pull it off! When the event finally occurred, thunder clashed and lights flashed; true to form, rain actually fell, but only in certain, corded off areas (near a fountain basin). I expected fire and brimstone - hurricane-force winds and a face-stinging rainfall. Was I disappointed!



### **Everybody Eats at Rick's:**

Paris was to be my next adventure; however, the Eiffel Tower experience was closed due to high winds (but was expected to be open later), so I decided to trek down that side of the strip until I reached the Venetian. The hotel itself sits on the old side of the Sands resort, made famous by Frank Sinatra and the rest of his Rat Pack gang.

Being a casual fan of the "Rat Pack", visiting the Venetian made sense. And while I was there, eating lunch at the hotel's "WB Stage 16" restaurant also made sense - I was famished!

"WB Stage 16" celebrates the legend of Warner Bros' most renowned soundstage. Dine in 'Rick's Cafe Americain' from Casablanca, in 'We're in the Money' from Gold Diggers of 1933, in 'Las Vegas Lounge' from Ocean's Eleven, or 'Gotham City' from Batman movies. With each set painstakingly recreated at the Studio then shipped to Vegas, you're sure to find something unique here. A diverse menu showcases a sophisticated fusion of American, Mediterranean, Asian, and European flavors. Appetizers begin in the \$8 range, and include portabella and zucchini fries, tempura sesame chicken satay, a soup of the day, crisp salads, and unique flatbreads. Main dishes, in the \$13 - \$25 range, include pasta selections and entrees such as red pepper painted swordfish, rotisserie style oven roasted half chicken, prime rib, ancho-cinnamon pork tenderloin, and much more. Save room for scrumptious desserts such as bananas foster, golden apple pizza, and cheesecake! Lunch menus are quite a bit less presumptuous, but equally as tasty. Did you know? Besides the location, ambience is also key at WB Stage 16. In 'Gotham City' the sounds of a bustling city can be heard all around. And if you pay extra close attention, you'll even hear a distress signal or to for Batman!



### **Dolphin Habitat & Secret Garden:**



Join Banjo, and Pablo, and Rascal, and Duchess, and Sigma, and Picabo, and Sage, and Huf'n'Puf and Squirt down at the Dolphin Habitat located within the grounds of the Mirage Casino-Hotel, one of the more unique attractions in all of Las Vegas. The tour, guided by a wonderful Mirage staff-member and costs about \$10.00 also includes the Secret Garden (which I'll elaborate more on in just a bit), and introduces us to the fun, fascinating world of Atlantic bottlenose dolphins. Originally built

for educational and rehabilitation purposes, this cove surrounded by palm trees and lush foliage provides an oasis in the desert for The Mirage's entire family. A 2.5-million-gallon habitat houses them, consisting of four connected pools, a complete artificial reef system and a sandy bottom. So, come watch them swim, jump and play in their habitat; they're just as happy to be in Las Vegas as you are! The dolphins that call the habitat their home were relocated there from other facilities or born right on property. In fact, many of the dolphins that I did see were born on property!

*Lions, Tigers and Bears, oh my?*

- Okay, so two out of three isn't bad... After swimming with the Dolphins, come see a collection of the planet's rarest and most exotic creatures at the palm-shaded Secret Garden of Siegfried & Roy. Within this one-of-a-kind sanctuary you'll find snow-white tigers, heterozygous (possessing both tawny and white genes) Bengal tigers, the rare White Lions of Timbavati, "Asabi" the Asian leopard, "Boghkara" the black panther, "Chico" the cheetah, "Gilda" the Asian elephant, and more! The tour is self-guided, but special portable audio wands (provided at the garden gates) allow you to learn more about each animal exhibit - narrated by the magical duo of course. If you're interested in more than just the White Tigers, come visit the Secret Garden and view some of the most unique creatures on Earth! Did you know? The first dolphin to be born at The Mirage was Squirt! Dutchess, the patriarch of the pod, gave birth to Squirt over thirteen years ago. A video of his birth is displayed at the exhibit.



I love the Mirage, I really do. And it has nothing to do with the gold-tinted windows! (yes, there's real gold in them).

### **Le Tower Eiffel:**



After the Dolphin Habitat/Secret Garden tour at the Mirage I walked back over to Paris, which meant I had to walk back across Caesars Palace's frontage, over to the Bellagio and across to Bally's and... you get the picture. I decided to try once more to ride to the top of the Eiffel Tower there and get a good view of the Las Vegas strip and valley. Thankfully, I was not disappointed! The Eiffel Tower stands tall as Paris' signature landmark, but you don't have to visit Europe to experience Le Tower Eiffel; come to Paris - Paris, Las Vegas that is!

The Eiffel Tower at Paris Las Vegas is a 1:2 ratio (½ scale) reproduction of the original tower in Paris and to ensure its authenticity, the designers actually obtained Gustav Eiffel's original blueprints and drawings he made to help guide them. They followed his design so well that even the riveting is to scale (although it is just for show) and exactly blended the color of the exterior's paint.



The tower is just half of the attraction though, so come replace the hustle-and-bustle of Strip activity with light, quiet breezes and take the express elevator to the towers' observation deck to enjoy the stunning panoramic views of the Las Vegas strip and surrounding valley. But be sure to hold on, you're 460-feet in the air!

The Eiffel Tower at Paris Las Vegas offers a distinctive view of other Las Vegas signature attractions - it's one of the most unique spots to view the Fountains at Bellagio at night.



\* \* \*

So, with a "Captain, British Man-o-war passing Skull Point!" by one of the pirates, a swashbuckling battle of epic proportions begins. Cannons roar. Smoke billows. Munitions explode and mainmasts topple. These pirates refuse and proudly stand guard to defend their ship and fair-weather village.

But the British up the ante. "Mr. Smythe," the British Captain calls. "Fire square into her bow!" With that fateful shot, the British have chalked up another win as the Hispañiola erupts in flames. But she's not done yet.





"I have one for you, you British scum!" the Pirate Captain cries out, spotting a cache of powder and one remaining cannon on board. He takes hold of a fallen sail line and swings across the entire bow of his ship, grabs up the light-stick and fires at will.

"Ha-ha-ha! Pass this on to his royal highness!" he taunts; then BOOM!

With that one mighty broadside at the waterline, the victors -- and you -- watch the once majestic British frigate sink slowly into Buccaneer Bay. After all, this is Las Vegas ... the pirates always win.

"Arrrr, matey's! A job well done. Ahoy you land lovers, 'tis time to enter our fair village and share in our victory celebration... onward to Treasure Island!"

Didyaknow? As of 2001, the Pirate Battle has taken place more than 10,000 times using about one-half million pyrotechnic devices? 16 million people have also seen this show since it began in 1993. That's amazing!

I'm going to take up the invitation and head on in for the ultimate attraction: Mystère awaits!





JULY 2001

## « The South End »

Las Vegas 2001, Part 2

*A crescent moon in a cloudless, black night;  
Alone, amidst the glitz and glitter;  
A flower in the sands between rock and time.  
Electric excitement couples the soft breezes.  
People mill about a path of concrete and brick  
Encircling a lake - an oasis in the desert.  
It's banks well upon a European village,  
Splashed blue, purple, white, yellow and red -  
Bleeding into the waters around it.*



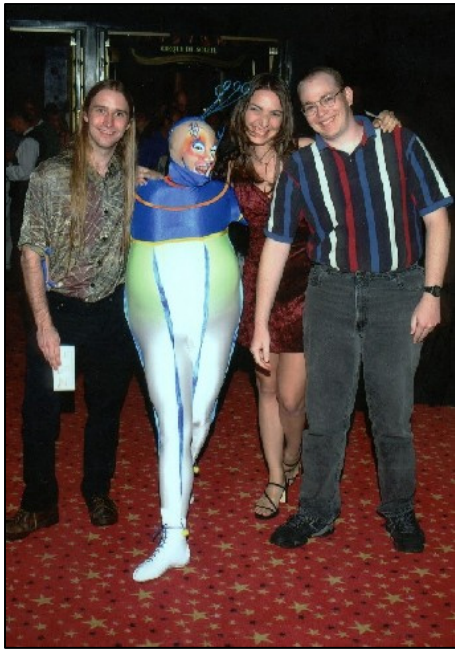
*A wind, barely able to ruffle my hair, nips at the  
Waves concealing a treasure hidden there:  
A Fountain.  
Not of the gods, of youth or of life;  
A simple, inornate, expression of opulence:  
A Fountain of Elegance.  
By day, it is quiet as a sleeping dragon.  
By night it spews forth a majestic stream while  
Light carries its song on a dream.*



*"They call this place the Bellagio," I say  
To a couple standing nearby, eyes open wide,  
The fountains dancing from side to side.  
But, unheard I am as they remain - choked;  
Transfixed on the sight rising and falling before us.  
Returning to the misty display - a place where dreams  
Rise and fall, elegance thrives and life is but  
An abstract dream - I cry out:  
"Las Vegas, what a town!"*

Yes, Las Vegas is such a wonderful town - I find that I don't want to leave the glitz and glitter of this ye old gambling town. I like it here There's just something about this amazing place that grabs you from the word go. Perhaps its that spark of electricity you feel day and night, the excitement of the people, lights and sounds, or perhaps it's the elegance of hotels such as Mandalay Bay, the Venetian or (my favorite) the Bellagio that seem unmatched on either side of the Mississippi.

It could be all that, but perhaps the most important reason of all is because Las Vegas is home to two resident Cirque du Soleil shows - surely the best reason to visit!



Over the past few days my journey has continued unabated. I recapped a little about the attractions in Vegas and my experience with them earlier in the week. Now you've caught up with me with my friends Cedric and Jess, who have flown in just for the weekend. While this marks the beginning of the end of my time here, theirs has just kicked off. We've seen *Mystère* (my second time this week), been to the top of the Eiffel Tower at Paris, and have toured the various casinos on the Strip. And in a little under an hour from now, we will experience Cirque du Soleil «O» at the Bellagio theater.

Until that time comes though, we're waiting here in room ninety-six on the eleventh floor of our hotel, the beautiful and elegant Bellagio, with our bellies comfortably full and in good spirits. I must say our meal at Olives was quite

wonderful, a credit to Chef Todd English who brought his acclaimed restaurant to Las Vegas from Boston. Found tucked between the Giorgio Armani and Hermès boutiques on Via Bellagio, this casual Mediterranean cafe is a wonderful place to meet, relax and enjoy a fabulous meal. And it's lakefront so if you're lucky you might be afforded a great view of the fountains. While we weren't quite as lucky to dine via lakeside, we were in a prime location to venture outside to take them in never the less.

As soon as ascended to lake level and walked through the revolving doors, the water began to gush from the extended fountain heads and dance to the masterful song *Con te Partirò* or "With You I'll Leave" (better known as "Time to Say Goodbye"). As the voices of Andrea Bocelli (a tenor from the Tuscany region of Italy) and Sarah Brightman (a soprano best known for her originating role of Christine Daaé in Andrew Lloyd Webber's "The Phantom of the Opera") resonated throughout the lagoon and its surrounding village, my heart sang. I didn't know all the words, but I sang anyway; improvising when needed. It didn't matter if some of the words were wrong, what mattered was that I was here, in Las Vegas, staying at the best and most beautiful hotels on the Strip, with my friends, experiencing the fountains performing to my favorite song. You just can't beat that in the whole wide world!



The fountains are undeniably my most favorite part of the Bellagio, but they are by no means the only interesting feature here. And staying on site helps highlight those features, drawing them in sharp relief. They say there are few places in the world so exceptional they don't require superlatives; such places are best described with the simplest of words. Well, Bellagio is such a place. But before I begin waxing poetic about «O», let me continue with my adventure here in Las Vegas.

Let's see... hmm... oh yes!

### **I feel the need for SPEED:**



On the far north side of the Strip is where you'll find the Sahara, one of the last remaining bastion of the old "Rat Pack" era. This hotel, which sits on 55 acres of land with slightly over 1700 guestrooms and a casino covering more than 85,000 square feet, was built in 1952 and has seen its share of history. Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr, Joey Bishop, Judy Garland, Shirley Bassey, Bobby Darrin and many, many others have performed here. Even the 1960's version of Ocean's Eleven was filmed here. Be that as it may, I really didn't drop by to see the casino itself or revel in its history - I came for SPEED.

"SPEED: The Ride" launches riders along the Las Vegas Strip, propelling them through breathtaking loops at speeds of up to 70

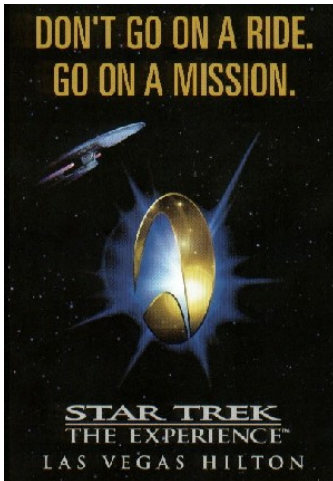
miles-per-hour. It takes just two seconds for the coaster to reach its top speed, as it zips through the Sahara's 192-foot-tall marquee before curving around the porte-cochere and up a steep incline - stopping 224 feet above the ground. The payoff? The only return route is backwards! SPEED gets its namesake through linear induction - the coaster rides a wave of electromagnetic energy to accelerate. Now that sounded like something to ride!

By the time I pulled up to the counter at SPEED I was beginning to have second thoughts. Eventually I decided to brave the storm and give it a whirl, I mean, after the trouble I had with the "Manhattan Express" at NY, NY I'd hoped this would redeem any value roller-coasters would have in Las Vegas. For the most part, it did indeed. It wasn't as rough as the "Manhattan Express" and it certainly was fast! If you're up for an exciting ride that's not too long and not on the top of the tallest building in Las Vegas, try Speed - you'll like it; honest!





### *To Boldly Go...:*



The Las Vegas Hilton is home to the \$70 million partnership between Paramount Parks and the hotel: the Star Trek Experience. After SPEED I decided to stop in and experience this attraction first-hand. One of the first things you'll see upon entering this zone is a huge model of the Enterprise-D and Enterprise-A suspended from the ceiling. Peppered about the lobby are various information summaries about each of the series, presented in the infamous LCARS format from the Next Generation. Further up the line is the "Museum of the Future", cases filled with memorabilia, authentic costumes and props of all kinds. Here you'll find Phasers from all series and films, props like a tele-screen, various communicators, a Vulcan lute, Sisko's clock, scripts, uniforms and even NOMAD himself.



The ride portion begins as about 18-22 riders are taken into a rather small, confining waiting room and advised (rather dryly and uninspiring) that what you're about to experience is nothing overly exciting, just your typical amusement ride with a sprinkle or two of Star Trek history thrown in for fun. Monitors above your head begin their safety spiel, briefing us on the encounter ahead when... there appears to be some trouble with the equipment. The next thing you know the lights blink out!

With a flash of light, a rush of air and a peculiar but familiar sound, we find ourselves in the middle of a Starfleet transporter pad, facing a uniformed technician at their post. (Wow, we've materialized aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise, NCC-1701-D - I couldn't believe it; what a neat effect!) Dazed and confused, we're met by a Starfleet Commander who advises us that we are in "what you'd call the future, the year 2371" and leads us through the double doors, down a typical corridor and proceeds to... the Bridge!



On the Bridge various crew members are rushing about as we're ushered to the rear between Worf's Tactical and the Engineering/Science stations (oh, how cool! I was standing right in front of the Engineering station and it was duplicated exactly.) Moments later Commander Riker appears on the main view screen and explains what has occurred - a nefarious rogue group of Klingons, led by Korath, has used a previously unknown rift in time to

abduct Picard's ancestor and forever erase him from the timeline. Starfleet intelligence dispatched the Enterprise to intercept and rescue the group. Since Captain Picard disappeared the moment the group (read: us) was beamed aboard, "One of you may be our Captain's ancestor," Riker surmises. Therefore, Riker directs us to board a shuttlecraft and return home to restore the timeline.

As we all filter into the turbolift, the Klingons pick that moment to attack sending the lift plummeting to disaster. The safeties engage and we're saved, ushered down a long corridor and into the Shuttle Bay. There we meet Engineer Geordi LaForge (albeit, on screen) and guided into the shuttle craft's main cabin. And this is where things get a little bit bumpy.

Our shuttle takes off with Geordi "at the helm" and immediately enters the mêlée of battle. Our orders: sneak through the delicate moonlets of the ringed planet below, drop to the surface, then find and destroy the



cloaking generator. Within moments of hitting the blackness of space, we jump into warp and make our approach - dog-fighting every inch of the way. Finding success, we escape back through the temporal rift moments later into present-day Las Vegas. Over the strip and around its famous marquee signs we zip glad to be home. But we are not safe - a Klingon Bird of Prey has followed us in and has engaged us with its disruptors!

"It's over Humans!" Korath spat. "But take heart, today is a good day to die!"

It looks as if all is lost when... "If you say so, Korath," a familiar voice booms - it's Commander Riker with the Enterprise! Hooray! The Klingon ship explodes most effectively over Las Vegas Boulevard and we salute as the Enterprise flies by triumphantly. But the explosion has damaged the shuttle and now we're in for a crash landing - right through the Hilton's marquee sign! Completely out of control and blind as a bat, we smash right through to the hotel's basement. When the smoke cleared off, we found ourselves right next to the shuttle-simulator we thought we were taking as part of the ride (ingenious). We get one last farewell from the Enterprise crew, this time from Picard himself, fully restored:

"While only one of you is my ancestor, each of you holds that same opportunity for the future. Guard it well." And then he was gone. The door of the shuttlecraft pops open to reveal a very non-descript basement and a hotel janitor, sweeping away at the mess on the floor. "Hey, what are you guys doing down here!" he yelled. "This is a restricted area! Go on, get outta here!"

And we were led away...

(While waiting for the elevator to take you back up to the Promenade, watch the TV screens nearby for a breaking local newscast from Nellis Air Force Base alerting viewers to "UFO sightings" - they're talking about the battle between us, the Enterprise and the Klingon ship on the Strip. The Air Force's explanation: "Sunspots". Ha!)

On the topside is a complete recreation of the Promenade from Star Trek Deep Space Nine, whereby you can pony up to the bar at Quark's Bar & Restaurant, shop a huge selection of Star Trek merchandise and even mingle with many of the universe's "interplanetary visitors", such as the Klingons, Vulcans, Andorians, Bajorans, Ferengi, Borg and others. I highly recommend a stop over at Quarks for a bite to eat. The menu is very well stocked, with all food and drink in Trek-inspired nomenclature. It's a riot!



Appetizers, such as "Moogie's Famous Ferengi Flat Bread" and Fried Pipius Claw (boneless chicken wings) to "The Holy Rings of Betazed" (onion rings), start you off. Sandwiches include the "Photon Torpedo" (an Italian sub), "Grilled Chicken Khan" (chicken breast), and a "HamBORger" (self explanatory). Entrees include the infamous "Flaming Ribs of Targ" (a Klingon Favorite) and "Cardassian Fish and Chips". And then for Dessert check out the "Oo-mox" (chocolate fondue), "One Moon Circles" (flaming bananas foster), "Cardassian Crème Brule" and the "Risian Pleasure Sundae". Thirsty? How about a "Warp Core Breach" (an alcoholic beverage that comes in a huge goldfish-sized bowl!), or some "Romulan Ale", "Raktajino", a "Wormhole", "Dabo Delight" or, perhaps "Deanna Troi's Chocolate Obsession"?

Eating at Quarks is an adventure for all Trek fans that must be experienced firsthand, but be on the look out for traveling Klingon merchants. If you're spotted, you're done for! At least they didn't take my "Steak Picard" sandwich and fries when they came to accost me. I was hungry!

### **New York, NY:**



The New York, New York is an impressive place. Built to represent a portion of the New York City skyline, it has 12-themed hotel towers reaching 47-stories high for a total of 2,024 rooms. Amongst the more famous buildings of the Big Apple, you'll find: The Empire State Building, The Century Building, the Seagram's Building, the 55 Water Tower, The Lever House Soap Company Building, the Municipal

Building, the AT&T Building, the Chrysler Building, the CBS Building, the New Yorker Hotel, the Liberty Plaza and the Ziggurat Building are replicated here. Other property features include a 300-foot long by 50-foot high replica of the Brooklyn Bridge, a pool representing New York Harbor with a 150-foot tall replica of the Statue of Liberty on guard, Grand Central Terminal façade and others. And weaving through the buildings is the resort's built-in roller-coaster - The Manhattan Express - one of the reasons I came to NY-NY.

"The Manhattan Express" is an impressive beast, reaching a maximum height of 203-feet and a max speed of 67-MPH. Its first drop of 75 feet will warm you up for the second, more chilling drop: a 144-foot descent at a 55-degree angle! Continuing along Tropicana Boulevard, the train ascends to 152-feet, banks left, and then climbs onto the casino roof. Here a dizzying succession of high-banked turns, camel back hills, a vertical loop, a 540-degree spiral, and finally, the sensational heart-line twist and dive await you. As the train nears the end of its 4,777-foot track, the coaster disappears through the casino roof and pulls back into station.

The ride is so fast the casino façade blows by so quickly you're not sure which way you're pointed! One second you're dropping 75-feet and the next you're on the roof of the casino! In the next second you're traveling upside down or in a loop or... something! Wow!

New York-New York says it's "The Greatest City in Las Vegas" and it's definitely something to experience.



### *Here Kitty, Kitty, Kitty...*



The Lion Habitat at the MGM Grand: City of Entertainment casino-hotel is quite possibly one of the most visited and admired attractions on Las Vegas Boulevard -- these playful lions draw quite a crowd! Come watch adolescent lions and lionesses bound, leap and romp within their 5,345 square-foot, \$9 Million (USD) playground. Don't worry though you're safe behind the glass. And for \$25.00, why not take away a little keepsake of your

adventure: a photograph of you with one of their cute lion cubs! Some of these little cuties are direct descendants of "Leo the Lion," made famous for his roaring portrayal in the classic MGM Pictures studio logo. Come... take part in the MGM heritage at the Lion Habitat at the MGM Grand and take one of these cute fuzzy kitties home with you! *Didyaknow?* All of the MGM Grand's lions live in custom accommodations on an 8½ acre ranch located about 12-miles from the casino-hotel. They arrive by special transport each day after being bathed, dried and groomed.

*Here Human, Human, Human...*

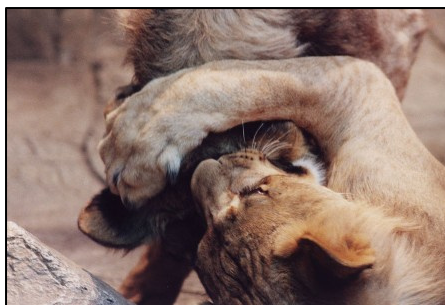
By the time I arrived at the Lion Habitat, a line was already beginning to form for the cub experience. I had only planned to spend about an hour here and then move on, but Murphy's Law kicked in again and it soon became apparent I'd spend more than an hour just in line! I waited... and waited... and waited. Then, before I knew it, just as the anticipation was getting harder to control, my turn arrived. I was lead through the cashier into another, smaller queue. Here they briefed me on what I should do once I got in the same room with the cub: First, look at the camera and smile - you're there for a picture so it would obviously turn out better if you smiled! Second, don't make any sudden

movements - you might startle the cub and it may attack you! Third, don't touch the cub on its head, only its back - you might come away missing a finger otherwise! And fourth, gently rub the fur on its rump during the process - this won't detract from the picture taking process and will help calm the cub.

NEXT!

As soon as I entered the same physical space as the lion cub, the pace of time was altered. I was immediately placed before a backdrop featuring Kilimanjaro and was advised to go ahead and pet the lion. The moment my hand touched the soft but coarse hair of the lion cub's rump a million and one things ran through my head -- I knew many people who would kill for such an experience -- to even place a hand on a lion cub was a religious experience to these folks, and here I was living it! With the flash of the cameraman's lens the entire process was over and just like that, I had an experience of a lifetime.

I later learned that the cub's name I petted was Shawnee (who's name is printed on the picture) and just like all the lion cubs here, she was a direct descendant of the original MGM lion - whom I also have a picture with (at least, one of his descendants). The whole thing was great and definitely worth the money. If you are ever in Vegas, do stop by the MGM Grand and have your picture taken with a lion cub. You'll be glad you did - I know I am!





Once I had concluded my exploration (and exploitation) of the MGM Grand and NewYork-NewYork, I set my sights on other prey for the day: two of the three Mandalay Bay Resort properties: Mandalay Bay and Luxor.

### **The Shark Reef:**



"Not your typical aquarium," is how Mandalay Bay bills its Shark Reef attraction. "A total sensory experience designated to transport visitors to an undersea ocean of fantastic sights, sounds and encounters." Take a journey through an ancient temple that has slowly been claimed by the sea and its monsters to a sunken galleon ship where sharks lurk in the water just outside your glass-paneled windows. Along the way you'll discover many different

species of life - almost 100 different kinds! Amongst the 2,000 animals there are 11 different species of Sharks (including Black Tip Reef, Bonnet-head, Nurse, and Sand Tiger), and several species of Tropical and Fresh Water Fish (angelfish, puffer fish, tang fish, lionfish and fox face fish). Not to mention Reptiles (golden crocodiles, sea turtles and water monitors), Eels, Moon Jellyfish and Rays! All are kept in a 105,000 square-foot facility (90,560 square feet going to the Reef itself) with each major exhibit holding an enormous volume of water: Shark Reef - 1,300,000 gallons, Tropical Reef - 130,000 gallons, Sunken Temple - 40,000 gallons and the Temple Ruins - 30,000 gallons.



With all that water, there's no doubt that the Shark Reef at Mandalay Bay is a one of a kind exhibition and well worth the \$13.95 price of admission.



Like typical aquariums you'll find a viewing tunnel to walk through, various smaller ponds, pools, and enclosures to explore with some of the most unique animals around, including but not limited to the rare Golden Crocodile, a Komodo Dragon and a Monitor Lizard. Crikey! But one of the most interesting aspects of this exhibit lies within the Sunken Galleon ship itself. Here you are immersed in full maritime theme right down to the planks on the ground (Arrr, shiver me timbers!). Where there should be windows are panes of glass. And behind these panes are free-swimming sharks! Oh, and I invite you to seek out one of the clear floor-panels found throughout the ship. It took a few minutes to gather the nerve to step on one; I did, looked down, felt my stomach drop and stepped off, but what a rush!



### **The Great Pyramid of Luxor:**



After the Mandalay Bay excursion, I hopped the automated tram back between the two resorts and prepared to take on the Luxor, one of the more interestingly themed resorts on the Strip. Why? It's a 30-story pyramid! Charcoal black, the Luxor revels within its Egyptian motif - an obelisk thrusts skyward outside on the shores of the Boulevard beckoning travelers near and far to come sample the life of the Ancient Egyptians; traverse the avenue of

ram-headed sphinxes reminiscent of those standing guard at Karnak; and enter through the large stoned paws of the famous Great Sphinx of Giza, pigmented masterfully as it would have appeared during the dynastic years (and it's actually taller than the original!)

The Luxor also contains two separate ziggurat towers besides its signature pyramid structure, sporting 4,408 rooms and 120,000 square feet of casino space, but it really is the pyramid that draws. If you're having problems finding the Luxor, just look for the bright beam of light in the night sky. The tip of the pyramid contains one of the world's brightest beams of light - so bright that you can see its luminescence from the far reaches of outer space, or so they say. Generated using 39 seven-kilowatt Xenon gas lamps (rather than florescent or other Noble gas variety) the beam produces a total light output rated at 41.5 billion Candela (its actual density) or 30.2 billion Lumens (the luminous flux).





How much does all that cost? Besides the \$1,200 cost per lamp (which will last just 2,000 hours), the Luxor is charged \$51.00 an hour by Nevada Energy.

While the outside is certainly worthy of exploration, I came to the Luxor to see its two attractions - inside: The IMAX motion simulator ride "In Search of the Obelisk" and "King Tut's Museum", a 15-minute audio self-guided tour. "You will discover many untold secrets when venturing into 'the Pharaoh's Pavilion'," were the Luxor's attractions reside. The pavilion is a rather large suspended platform

(approximately one level up from the casino floor) that opens up to become an atrium within the pyramid structure.



### **In Search of the Obelisk:**



"In Search of the Obelisk" takes riders on a journey of discovery and adventure below the hotel's foundations to see the findings of an advanced archeological dig. Back in April 1992, during Luxor's construction, ruins of a spectacular previously-unknown civilization were discovered. As honored guests, we're invited to see this wonderful new discovery first-hand. We begin our journey by boarding a small, maintenance elevator. On the way down we're told about an amazing artifact - the crystal obelisk - and about malevolent Dr.

Osirus, who will stop at nothing to obtain its power. But soon the cable mysteriously snaps, sending us plummeting into the depths of the excavation site. A series of twists, turns, and romps ensues - we're racing against Dr. Osirus and trying to get out!

The ride experience wasn't quite what I had thought it would be - and that turned out to be a plus. I was convinced that "In Search for the Obelisk" would be similar to the IMAX ride I took down at Caesars Palace, themed something to the effect of soaring over the Egyptian Empire looking for a long-lost but very important stone artifact covered in hieroglyphics. And while it would have been nice to see Ancient Egypt (especially since this is one of my favorite periods) on the big screen, the adventure undertaken was fun and exciting - well worth it. Although, I can't say the same for the folks who shared the elevator with me - they weren't into it at all.

### **Tomb and Museum of King Tutankamun:**

Twenty-two days after discovering the previously overlooked steps that lead to Tutankhamun's tomb on November 4, 1922, archeologist Howard Carter made a "tiny breach in the top left-hand corner" of the door and peered into the tomb's antechamber. When his partner (aristocrat and financier) Lord Carnarvon asked if Carter saw anything by the flicker of his candlelight, Carter replied "Yes, wonderful things!"



That legend lives on here at the Tomb and Museum of King Tutankamun – an authentic reproduction of the cache Lord Carter found that day in the Valley of the Kings, November 26, 1922. The measurements of each of the rooms here are exact to those in Egypt. The treasures therein were reproduced by artisans using the same gold leaf and linens, precious pigments, tools, and the same 3,000-year-old methods. To ensure exactness, each piece is meticulously positioned according to the records maintained by the Carter expedition. The exhibit houses hundreds of reproductions, including the world-famous guardian statues (Shabtis), King Tut's Sarcophagus, and an array of statues, vases, beds, baskets, and pottery.





The entire experience lasts approximately 15 minutes. A small video begins the adventure - introducing you to the legend and helps distinguish between fact and fiction. Then, the tomb viewing begins - it was a blast! It is my dream some day to actually visit Egypt, to see the antiquities, and view with my own eyes these wondrous treasures of humankind. But, until then, the reproduction here will suffice. Did you know that Tutankhamun

was 8 or 9 years old when he became King, and died at 18 or 19? His reign lasted only 10 years from 1333 BC to 1323 BC. His wife, Ankhesenamun (14 at marriage) had a famous daughter: Nefertiti. The mummy was protected by 9 outer cases. There were 4 shrines, each nested within the next, a wooden frame, a granite sarcophagus, and three huge coffins. The innermost being made of gold. Most tombs of his dynasty (18th) would contain one or two Shabti, Tutankhamun was provided with 413 of them: 365 daily workers, 36 weekly overseers (the Egyptian week had 10 days), and 12 monthly overseers. Fascinating!

\* \* \*



Back here at the Bellagio, it's all about things that are good for the soul - gardens, flowers, art and fashion. The lobby is, in a word, breathtaking. Above the 18-foot ceiling is an alcove filled with the most magnificent glass sculpture I've ever seen, a chandelier called "Fiori di Como" by renowned glass sculptor Dave Chihuly. The sculpture is composed of over 2,000 individually blown glass pieces, covers approximately

2,000 square feet of the ceiling and took two years to complete. There's just something about the piece - its statement, its being - that mesmerizes me every time I see it. I love it!

The Bellagio also houses the Botanical Garden, a conservatory where you can let nature's colors massage your soul. Here you'll find many different trees and flowers roll with reds, blues, whites and yellows to create a magnificent display of hues. The 50-foot glass enclosure allows sunlight to bathe the fauna during the day, but isn't just functional - it's also quite ornamental. The ceiling framework and beams are the sculpted green metal of oxidized copper, called verde, set in floral patterns. The glass too adds a touch of elegance.





Well, I've prattled on long enough about my experiences here in Vegas; it's time to go now. We've got our tickets in hand and we're quite anxious to see the show. So, without further adieu, "O".



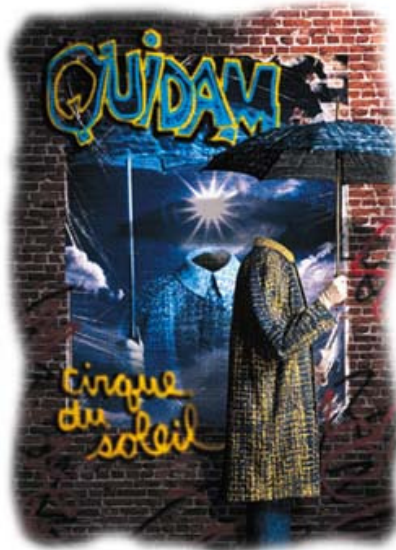
FEBRUARY 2002

## « The Headless Man »

Quidam in Miami

*"You know, Mark, that was me calling your name out there."*

*"Oh yeah?" Mr. Ward said as he bent down to sign my newly acquired Quidam 2002 North American Tour programme. "Usually everyone just calls me John, because it's my character's name, but when I heard my own name..."*



When some Cirque fans gather, all hell can break loose: they pine over the performers, scream enthusiastically no matter what is happening on stage, and clap excitedly whenever called upon. They are the spectator that every performer loves to see in their midst - they help energize the crowd and in turn help invigorate their performance. So when Cirque du Soleil received two of these rabid fans in not one, but two of their shows in the span of two days, watch out!

On Thursday, February 21<sup>st</sup>, I received a visitor to my home after many weeks of anticipation. It was none other than fellow Fascination! (my Cirque du Soleil newsletter) staff writer and good friend Paul Roberts from the Buckeye State, Ohio. Our decision to gather at this place and

time was not necessarily driven because it would be the first time we would meet face-to-face, it was driven more so by two of Cirque du Soleil's wonderful shows that, for the first time, would be in close proximity to each other: La Nouba in Orlando and Quidam in Miami.

Anticipation swept over us as the hours slowly dripped by (dripped, being a pun, as it rained and rained and rained all day), but once our show time finally came round on Friday the 22<sup>nd</sup>, we lit up with glee (rain or not) to live it up, as it were, at La Nouba. And to kick off the weekend's festivities with flair, the two of us were blessed to have front row center seats (Section 103, Row A, Seats 5 & 6), and thus the first night of our "Cirque-y Weekend" began.

\* \* \*



La Nouba was as much a treat as ever - one of the best performances seen to date - but before we lost ourselves in this exuberant party, all eyes (and ears!) were on the two newest singers. This was the first time either of us had seen the show since Dessy Di Lauro and O'Neill Langolis left to seek other opportunities. Naturally, there was a lot of trepidation on our parts regarding the new singers.

While Dessy and O'Neill are hard acts to follow, Odessa Thornhill and Isabeau Proulx-Lemire have taken up the gauntlet left by their predecessors and made the show their own. The male singer (Isabeau) was as awesome as O'Neill with a wide range of vocals. The female singer (Odessa) filled Dessy's shoes brilliantly; through her range, while adequate, seemed pressed at times. All in all, the new singers passed with flying colors.

Even though we saw La Nouba that night, the entire weekend really centered round seeing Quidam in Miami. Paul and I had been anticipating this day for weeks -- no months -- and in less than 12 hours the lights would dim, the music would come up and Karl, John and Zoë would run amok on stage. If all went to plan, it would be the first time either of us saw Quidam live. Sure, we'd watched the recording with fascination, but with the troupe in Europe, we never thought we'd be privileged enough to actually get to see the show.

Our journey to Miami from Orlando that Saturday was a four hour tour. (Sing with me: "A Four Hour Tour... a Four Hour Tour..."). It rained the whole way down but that didn't dampen our spirits. Those were kept afloat by the sounds of Cirque du Soleil - music compilations from all the shows, then *Mystère* live. In fact, they lifted even more once we saw the new Blue and Yellow swirled big top sitting by the bayside. An image beautifully accompanied with the final celebratory chords of *Mystère*'s "Finale".



We quickly pulled into a parking space not far away from the big top set up at Bicentennial Park. Since we had plenty of time before the show began, the two of us walked across the busy street (Biscayne Boulevard) to a place called Bayside - an outdoor shopping and dining area. We found ourselves at a Hard Rock Café for a little bite to eat and by show time, we bore the howling winds that picked up and high-tailed it over to the big top. There Paul and I purchased hundreds in Cirque merchandise (okay, so I'm exaggerating); like new Quidam programmes, the new Quidam CD with 2 extra tracks, and a few other Quidam knickknacks, thingamabobs and other whatchamacallits.

Within a half-hour they allowed us to enter the big top. As we were about to enter through Door Number 1 (as it were), I stopped and turned to Paul. "Relish this moment my friend," said I, "We are about to see Quidam!" The two of us probably looked strange paused outside the big-

top doorway, but we didn't care. After reflecting on the journey undertook so far, we stepped in. "Oh Yeah!" Paul exclaimed as we neared the top of the stairs that would eventually lead us down to our seats. The tracks from Quidam's ceiling were clearly visible and once we peeked over the bodies of people ahead of us, the stage came into view.



Good lord, it looked just like it was supposed to! Mom and Dad's chair were there. The door that would admit Quidam, John and Fritz into this realm were present. There was even that weird looking radio gleaming in the intense light provided by the stagehands above. Everything was as it should be, it was too cool!

Wait, where's John? For a while, he didn't show up but when he did, the crowd roared. Just as for most of the European Tour, the character known as "John" is played by Mark Ward (formerly of *Mystère* (1993-1998)). His radiant energy filled the big top like no other (except, perhaps, John Gilkey himself!). And, like John Gilkey's "John", he was dressed in a purple

suit and armed with comedic genius. He played with the audience, stealing their popcorn at times, and even having a few of the Generic people of Quidam come take an audience member away. During the pre-show, Mark walked by our choice seats many times, and it took all I could not to get his attention.

But then...

"Hey Mark!" I yelped as the follicly challenged character dressed in purple passed by my seat for the umpteenth time. He proceeded to pass me and for a moment I thought he hadn't heard me, but then he came to a screeching halt. Ah-ha! I had his attention. He turned then, upon hearing his real name, and gave me this confused looking smile and a raise of an eyebrow - kind of like Spock in *Star Trek* when he's surprised by something fascinating and unexpected. Little did I know that particular meeting wouldn't be our last of the evening.

After a few minutes of torture (to those not in the know), he returned on stage where he began to fiddle with the radio left there. As in history past, it played such tunes as Kumbalawé from *Saltimbanco*, the title track from *Alegría* (which "John" heaved over) and "Eclipse" an explosive track from *Nouvelle Expérience*. Finally fed up with the selection, he turned and began to welcome us to the big top. The usual restraints were given: No Smoking, No Flash photography, No Filming of Any kind, and the like.

And then, the big top became silent. A buzz filled the air.

"Ladies and Gentlemen... Quidam!"

While the show went off without a hitch, I would, however, like to share some highlights and observations of Quidam as presented in Miami:

- Zoë, unfortunately not played by Audrey Brisson-Jutras (as we well knew it wouldn't be... but it couldn't hurt to dream), was masterfully played by a new singer: Gabrielle Cloutier. Dressed in a classy Red Dress, she danced, hopped and did everything to capture her parents' attention.
- It was nice to see Karl Bauman back as "Karl", reclaiming his namesake character. The character had been known as Fritz and Target throughout the European Tour, as new actors and actresses played the part.
- John was... John. Doing his thing. All the pieces seen on the DVD were there: The Ring Balancing, the Hoola Hoop, the Dart and the Coat Rack. Mark Ward masterfully played the character. It didn't matter whether he was John Gilkey or not! The only difference from Mark's "John" and John's "John" came in the Coat Rack Dance - Mark doesn't juggle!
- Les Macloma, the show's clowns, were inspirational! Only appearing one time on the DVD, I wasn't sure how these bizarre clowns were going to fit into the theme, but I have to say I enjoyed every appearance! Their last one, however, had to be the funniest of them all: playing musical notes on balloons!
- Olga Pikhienko did not perform. Her performance was replaced by the Juggler, the secondary act performed by a lone man (the father) using red colored soccer balls.
- Isabelle Chassé! Yes, she performed and her performance was simply amazing. Those ghostly characters that accompany her from the rafters gave me chills.



Neither Paul nor I wanted this amazing show to come to a close, but two and a half hours later, the Generics revealed themselves and the show came to an end. The crowd gave a standing ovation, as usual, and made their way out slowly. Paul and I remained in our seats though. We wanted to hold on to the experience of Quidam for as long as possible. After a few long minutes, the big-top cleared out all for a group next to us.

These people caught the ushers' attention.

"I'm sorry ladies and gentlemen; I'm going to have to ask you to leave the big top."

I could see then that a few stagehands had hopped up on stage and were preparing to put the set to sleep for the night. "Oh we're with Chris," one of the ladies in the group said to the usher. And the usher left.

Unbeknownst to us, Chris Lashua, who performed his amazing single German Wheel Act, was standing right next to us! We didn't even see him walk by! It was strange to see him there, actually, because he didn't have his signature stringy blond hair! It was cut short and dark! (Darn wigs, they confound me!)

Not wanting to hang around there, we decided to see if we couldn't get closer to the stage. Sure enough we made it down without anyone noticing us (I think they thought we were with the Chris Lashua party too). After a while, he took them on a backstage tour. Paul and I followed (meeting up with a friend of his, and automation specialist) for our own backstage tour.

This would be the first time either of us would step behind the curtain, as it were, so we weren't quite sure what we'd run across. What we found completely through us for a loop.

The clowns were wandering about, as if still in character; the Banquine artists were flipping in the air in practice, a few artists were removing their makeup for the evening, and others were reviewing their performance on a closed-captioned TV, via VCR recording of the entire evening's show.

Since most of the performers were still on site, and many in various stages of undress, we hung off to the side for a bit. But once the chaotic aftermath of "end of show" had ended, we began to get more comfortable - and people noticed we were there. Besides running into the before mentioned clowns and Banquine artists, Marie-Laure Mesnage from Vis Versa/Statue approached and began talking to us. At first Paul and I were a bit timid (how to react?) but once the introductions were out of the way, we got to chat about her experiences with "Journey of Man" ("It was cold out there!" she said) and a variety of her experiences with Quidam.

And she attracted Isabelle Chassé, one of the persons Paul most wanted to meet.

It's funny to think about meeting someone - what you'd say, do, or how you'd act - and then wonder if you'd go through with what you thought about. I say this because on the way down to Miami, Paul and I had this discussion: what he could say or do to impress Isabelle should he meet her backstage, and almost as an afterthought I said to him: "you could do the little dance she does at the end of Nouvelle Expérience!" I even demonstrated it to him as best I could while sitting in the passenger seat of the car. It also helped that I had that song on hand as part of the compilation CD of Cirque music I put together. (How else are you to fill four hours of driving boredom?) But when she came up to us backstage I couldn't help wonder if she wouldn't run away, screaming her head off if we really did that.

Thankfully we didn't find out.

This was probably a good thing considering she looked rather timorous toward us.



Not long after Pascal led us back through the rabbit hole, as it were, and closed the curtain on our backstage experience. As we were about to turn away, I placed my hand down on the Quidam stage. The event wasn't filled with any words or fanfare... it was simply a gesture to bring closure to the evening. La Nouba was my first Cirque du Soleil show but Quidam was the first Cirque show I had music for. I envisioned the show from the music (sometimes correctly, sometimes not) but it was always Quidam over all other shows that I had most wanted to see. Finally it had come to be.

The stage was rather cold, I remarked to myself. It brought me out of the daze I was in since the show had ended. After a few more seconds of just holding my hand there, I removed it and turned to leave when standing there next to us was Mark Ward! Neither of us had heard him come up and before long we got to chatting about the show, his turn in *Mystère* and the filming of *Quidam* (with him stuck in the *Quidam* suit). We asked for his autograph and he graciously accepted.



"You know, Mark, that was me calling your name out there."

"Oh yeah?" Mr. Ward said, as he bent down to sign my newly acquired *Quidam* 2002 NAT programme. "Usually everyone just calls me John, because it's my character's name. But when I heard my own name I was surprised. I tried to ignore it but it just surprised me."

I was amazed he even remembered.

We shook hands, talked a bit more, and then parted ways. Paul and I left the confines of the big top in high spirits. The four-hour drive back we had planned for the evening (now being 11:15am) seemed easy. Thanks to all Cirque employees that made La Nouba and *Quidam* such an enjoyable experience, the Cirque-y Weekend came to a close not with whimper, but with a BANG!



AUGUST+ 2003

## « Acoustic Alegria »

### Seattle In-store Encounter

Every few weeks on my whirlwind journey of Cirque du Soleil shows from their most recent to the eldest (Richasi's Le Grand Tour), I was off to another market, another state, and even spanning large oceans to other continents. By the time the twelve-month long expedition had come to a close, I was in desperate need of a break. The stresses of traveling (physical, mental and financial) had finally caught up with me. So, while I reveled in the adventure and most certainly would do it again in a heartbeat, I wanted a chance to rest up a bit, catch my breath as it were.

But then one day I received a phone call from Keith Johnson, friend and fellow Cirque du Soleil fan, who said: "You know, Alegria is going to be here in Seattle in late August. I was thinking about gathering a few local friends to go see the show as a group and we'd love to have you along." Before he could finish asking whether or not I wanted to come back out for a visit so quickly after last year's stopover (Seattle was a destination on the Grand Tour), I had already said yes, of course!



\* \* \*

All morning my friend seemed on edge. Constantly checking his watch, mumbling and mulling over numbers in his head, and pacing back and forth seemed to be a favorite pastime of his this particular morning. The only clue to his madness was a time. Something was going to happen later in the morning, but just what I couldn't know. Nor could I know where. It was a secret being held from me and I would be in error if I didn't admit that it annoyed me. I mean to say, jet lag coupled with a late night arrival and a tentative night's rest didn't equal a happy traveler. Be that as it may, when we pulled out of his driveway in route to who knew where, I was a little apprehensive - I liked to know where I was going, and why.

Imagine my surprise then when we pulled into the parking lot of the local Barnes & Noble, a bookseller. I became even more puzzled when I was told we'd be waiting here for a little bit but nothing of the why for; what was the hullabaloo about? Honestly. Why the need to adhere to a specific schedule? Why the rush to get here? I mean, if he was looking for a book we could have come anytime! But then something happened to change my tune. In fact, it was another tune - one I was quite familiar with but couldn't quite comprehend what on Earth it was doing in the middle of a book store - that caught my attention. What was it? The notes to "Milonga", the opening musical number to the Cirque show I was in town to see!



I rushed over to peer over the second floor balcony and spotted the source of the music: why it was the musicians themselves! As I watched with child-like fascination, the band marched their way across the lobby of the store in perfect unison, end running around patrons and staff with ease, and stopping every so often to shout out "ALEGRIA!", the show's namesake. Thinking I might miss them, I pulled myself up from the stool I was sitting

on and began to make my way over to the escalator, but that proved unnecessary - they were already on their way up!

The chain of musicians stepped upon the moving steps and began their ascent to the second floor all the while continuing to play as if they did so all the time. Leading this pack was vocalist Eve Montpetit (as the White Singer), followed by Suzie Gagnon (playing Accordion), Bruno Dumont (with a teeny-tiny Saxophone), Charles Dennard, Jr. (playing a guitar), Frederic Charest (with a small snare drum and cymbal attached to his waist), band leader David Pelletier (playing a rather large acoustic guitar), and last but not least, Ron Feather (with a small struck idiophone triangle), settling into a position around us in the gardening help section.



Aha! That's why that area was devoid of obstacles and a podium set up there!



I immediately rushed over so I could get a good seat and managed to eek out a spot just to the right of the singer and the rest of the band - it turned out to be a great vantage point! As soon as everyone got situated (and a microphone was found for poor Ms. Montpetit,) our guitar player (Mr. Dennard) switched off to a Melodica, a miniature keyboard played by mouth, and then the band launched into "Vai Vedrai", the unmistakable tune accompanying the Duo Trapeze act. Unfortunately the quality of the microphone (and its one lone speaker) didn't do Eve's voice justice, which took away the ethereal quality of hearing her sing under the Grand Chapiteau. The rest of the band performed admirably, however. They too played without the benefit of headphones, microphones or other amplification but surprisingly, it wasn't bad! And I must say it was amazing to hear

a true acoustic Alegría performance! After "Vai Vedrai", the crew followed up with "Querer", another of Alegría's more vocal tracks.

Then the musicians set down their instruments and settled behind a makeshift table, awaiting the general public. Keith, Lucy, Cal (her dad) and I made our way over to meet and greet these fantastic artists, who were just as excited to see us as we were them. We traversed the line, shaking hands and chatting up the show, until we reached Eve Montpetit, who was at the head of the table. Here a handshake wouldn't do - but a hug and a photo would though! Naturally all good things must come to an end, as they say, and with an hour of their arrival, it was time for the Alegría band to depart. They donned their instruments once again and picked up where they left off, marching their way down the escalator and across the main floor. Once again the familiar tune of Milonga filling the air.





Now that was cool!

Yeah, okay, I was no longer mad.

### **/// RIDE THE DUCKS!**

After the encounter with the Alegría musicians, we packed up our troubles and continued about our next task: a tour of Seattle. One of the things I did not get a chance to do the last time I was in town (which was consequently the first time I had been anywhere in the Pacific Northwest), was see the city. Keith wished to remedy that for my next visit and in doing so set up for me one of the most unique tours I have had the privilege of taking: a ride on a Duck, an amphibious military landing craft that is part bus, part boat. I highly recommend it - it was the best tour ever!

The DUKW (or as they're referred to: "Ducks") was an amphibious landing craft developed by the United States Army during World War II. It was designed to deliver cargo from ships at sea directly to the shore. The DUKW (D-built in 1942, U-amphibious 2½ ton truck, K-front wheel drive, W-rear wheel drive) could climb a 60% grade and broach an 18-inch high obstacle. It had a range of 220 miles on land and 50 miles in water. It could carry a cargo load of 5,350 lbs., and hold 25 fully equipped troops. DUKWs were designed to maneuver with great agility. They could fight their way through choppy oceans, huge breakers, and exit the water onto soft sand without losing traction.



And we would test its capabilities traipsing all around Seattle.

The tour began at the foot of the infamous Space Needle, the landmark tower that has been synonymous with Seattle and its beautiful skyline since 1962. The Space Needle was built for the World's Fair that year, referred to as the Century 21 Exposition. The 9,550 ton tower stands 605 feet high, bulges 138 feet wide at its widest point, and commands the skyline. There's no mistaking its signature form. Did you know that at the time of its construction it was the tallest building west of the Mississippi river? It also can withstand winds of up to 200 mph and earthquakes of up to magnitude 9.5!

Visitors can ascend atop the needle to an observation deck situated 520 feet above the ground, which offers a very rewarding view indeed. Not only can you see the entire Downtown skyline (close up), but also Mount Rainier, Elliott Bay, Safeco Field (where the Seattle Mariners play), Quest Field (where the Seattle Seahawks play), and the Olympic and Cascade mountains. It's a commanding view that you should not miss! The trip up only takes 43 seconds, but what you'll see will last a lifetime.

Once we got moving our Captain began cluing many of us in on the history of the Seattle area.

Seattle, nestled within the north-western corner of the contiguous United States, is located on an isthmus (think Panama, a small landmass that connects two larger ones) between Puget Sound and Lake Washington, and is the country's fifteenth largest metropolitan area by population. There had been a settlement of some kind on this land for at least the past 4,000 years, but the first Europeans didn't reach the area until the mid 1800s. Those first Europeans arrived as part of what is now known as the Denny Party, and together they helped create two settlements: "New York-Alki" and "Duwamps". Later, the main settlement ("Duwamps") became Seattle, named after the local Indian chief, and grew. I don't know about you, but the name change was a good idea. Quack Quack!



Besides a rich Indian heritage, Seattle is also best known for two other industries: grunge music (Nirvana, Alice in Chains, Pearl Jam and Soundgarden, amongst many others found their start here), and extreme coffee consumption (Tulley's, Seattle's Best and Starbucks all call the city home). Although I would like to believe that rock legend Jimi Hendrix, who was born in Seattle, has some say in its history. He is, after all, the Hendrix. And like many other cities, Seattle has a few nick-names to call its own. Today it's known as the "Emerald City", in reference to the Pacific Northwest's lush evergreen trees, but has gone by many monikers in its day, such as "Gateway to Alaska", "Rain City" (because it rains a lot!), "Jet City" (due to the influence of Boeing), and "Queen City" (its previous name, which it held from 1869 until 1982).

Quack, Quack!

Next we pulled through the waterfront and began paralleling Elliott Bay, all the while blowing on our quackers to the amusement of tourists and locals alike. Down here the old port authority and various piers exist showcasing Seattle's maritime past. You'll also find Waterfront Park down here, from Pier 57 to Pier 59, where the Seattle Aquarium stands and one of the more unique stores I've ever had the privilege of shopping in: Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe. Founded in 1899 (but renamed "Ye Olde..." in 1909), the Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe takes its name from the

Charles Dickens novel of the same name and has an eclectic array of items on display from souvenirs to mummies and totem poles and Indian art. Over the years it's had a number of famous visitors according to sources (besides me, of course...), such as: Theodore Roosevelt, J. Edgar Hoover, Charlie Chaplin, Red Skelton, John Wayne, Katherine Hepburn and Robert Ripley (who brought the totem poles and other such crafts - believe it or not!). The shoppe is listed as one of the "Seven Wonders of Seattle" and the only such item on the list. The others include the Harbor, Pike Place Market, the Ballard Locks, Boeing factory, Hotel Deca, and the Seattle Art Museum.

Speaking of Pike Place Market - that was the next drive by!



Did you know that Pike Place is one of the oldest continually operated public farmers markets in the United States? It's been a haven for farmers, craftspeople and merchants alike since August 17, 1907. Here you'll find an array of goods from the fresh catch of the morning, to vegetables of all shapes, sizes and flavors, flowers and other flora in a wide range of scents and colors, odds and ends stalls, booths selling homemade arts and crafts, and even restaurants suiting

various tastes. Pike Place Market is also home to the first Starbucks Coffee Co. (the largest coffeehouse company in the world) store, which was founded here in 1971. Although the first location has changed 2000 Western Ave to 1912 Pike Place, there's still no denying the thrill of grabbing a cup there, especially if you're a fan like I am!

Next up was a little trek through the Seattle Gas Works Park, a 19.1 acre greenspace on the site of the former Seattle Gas Light Company's gasification plant (gasification refers to the conversion of carbon-based materials, such as coal, into carbon monoxide and hydrogen gas to create a synthesis fuel). Although the plant ceased operation in 1956, it still stands today. The surrounding space was remade into a beautiful park overlooking the Seattle skyline from Lake Union. And speaking of Lake Union, by then it was time for a little SPLASH! Bus turned into Boat and we got a chance to see the park from the waterside (not to mention the skyline). Too cool!

On the way back to home base we passed by the Fremont Troll (a megalithic sculpture located under the north end of the Aurora Bridge, which takes its cue from the Scandinavian story "Three Billy Goats Gruff"), and through historic Pioneer Square - the very spot where Seattle was founded. You'll know you're in Pioneer Square when you spot the wrought-iron Victorian Pergola, a wonderful construction of iron and glass.





We came full circle about 90 minutes later, pulling back into port under the shadow of the Space Needle and disembarked. Alegría came later, of course, and it was as good as ever, but it couldn't compete with the in-store experience or riding the ducks around town. It was such a fun ride!

Quack, Quack!

\* \* \*





# Live to Cirque



NOVEMBER 2003

## «Cirque at the Masters»

a La Nouba Q&A



10:45pm

It was well into the evening by the time I had returned home from work, and little did I know that something special was waiting for me within my email inbox. It was a Wednesday evening in late October as I recall, and I wasn't too anxious to check my email that night. I'm not sure why, but it had been a tiring day on the job and all I really wanted to do was relax for a bit without the fuss of

answering incoming mail or navigating a bunch of spam messages. But I checked it anyway. And there it was; the reply I had been waiting for...

On October 23, 2003, Cirque du Soleil La Nouba and Cirque Club released a statement to its members -- an invitation to a Question & Answer session with artists at the Cirque du Soleil Theater at Downtown Disney's West Side in Orlando, Florida. The first 500 respondents to this special invite would be able to attend the event taking place on Saturday, November 8th, during the weekend long Festival of the Masters art celebration at Downtown Disney. The notice came during the day; I was at work and completely unawares.

Imagine the shock when I received the message, and realized it was hours after it had been made public. Certainly there'd be no way for me to attend this special session now, as hundreds of thousands of people are members of Cirque Club and no doubt at least 500 of them (or more) responded. But I sent in a reservation request anyway. My hopes rested on the nice people at Cirque Club and my quaint reply: "Here's hoping I'm one of the 500 respondents".

A week passed and there was still no reply. I had given up hope that I had somehow squeaked in; that I was the 500th respondent. At 10:45pm on Wednesday October 29th, I was not in the best of spirits. But something was about to happen that could change all that.

I received a reply from Cirque Club.

My eyes darted over the contents of the email quickly. What did they have to say -- were they full? My eyes fell over the first line: "Hi there Ricky!" That was a promising start... most people just call me Richasi, which is just fine by me, but I was shocked to get a personal response. My eyes dashed below the salutation and for a moment I was ready for the worst. "Actually, we're already full," the message read. Yeah, I was prepared for that. No problem, I thought, there'd be other times. "But, under the circumstances," the message continued, "we are willing to make an exception just for you!"

What? Did I read that correctly?

Yes, thanks to the lovely ringmasters at Cirque Club, I and two guests -- Paul Keila, a friend of mine from Tampa, Florida who has seen La Nouba, but hasn't has his horizons expanded by other Cirque performances yet; and Cedric Pansky, originally from Denver, Colorado but now living in Orlando, Florida and is largely responsible for introducing me to Cirque du Soleil) -- were squeezed into a slot and before I knew it we were on our way to a wonderful afternoon with Cirque du Soleil artists!

Since we are based in Orlando we didn't have to travel far to take part in this experience. A 20-minute trip in the car and we were standing in front of the massive Cirque du Soleil castle. But, let's dispense with the personal narrative and get on with the reporting.

Festival of the Masters is Disney's acclaimed annual showcase of art, culture and cuisine and has been running in Downtown Disney for the past 28 years. "Some 150 award-winning visual artists will transform Downtown Disney into a vast outdoor gallery with an entertaining mix of fine arts, live entertainment, delicious food and fun for the whole family," says the Disney press release on the event, and Cirque du Soleil was one of those artists.

For their part, Cirque presented special acts on the Friday and Saturday afternoons of the festival -- Diabolos, Cycles, German Wheel and Trampoline -- outside of the theater under the big Cirque du Soleil logo on a makeshift performance space of carefully laid-out and meticulously cleaned carpeting. Cirque also offered face-painting opportunities with their make-up artists and a small peek at props and costumes from their resident show La Nouba.

Fascination!'s involvement in the affair was only the Question & Answer period scheduled for the CirqueClub members, but imagine my surprise when I walked up to the building and found actual performances staged for the public eye! (I hadn't known about these beforehand.)





The first one was the German Wheel twins, Bruce and Stacey Bilodeau, both long-time alumni of Cirque du Soleil. The pair was displaying the intricacies of the German Wheel discipline by performing various tricks -- like setting up the wheel, jumping in and out, standing on top, spinning the wheel, and various other snippets of their live performance. All the while the pair was speaking to a relatively large-sized audience getting laughs from

their jokes and applause for their antics. I found Bruce and Stacey to be wonderful spokesmen for Cirque's Festival of the Masters outing, as they were gracious (thanks for the picture guys!) and fun to watch!

The second performance was the Diabolos, performed by four wonderfully talented and cute girls from China. This performance was more structured than Bruce and Stacey's German Wheel thanks in part to the girls' coach, which dictated about every move they made. The girls flipped, tossed and handled their Diabolo's with exquisite timing and precision, only having lost the diabolo once or twice due to the wind. But when the wind died down, and "Jardin Chinois" playing in the background, the girls gave the audience an extra special treat... they performed their entire routine from start to finish. What a way to finish!





Inside, Cirque du Soleil provided to the select few a third performance: the Question & Answer period. This was the event I was waiting for -- the chance to step inside the La Nouba Theater without having to pay for the privilege; to see the theater lit without its ambient lighting; to sit with 500 other Cirque du Soleil fans and watch as the questions flew. I was also anxious to know who would join us, as even the guests were kept secret from the group.

Stepping into the theater without the show's ambient lighting makes for a world of difference. Steel structures come out in full glory where only darkness was before. Catwalks are fully visible where only slight glimpses could be seen. And doors and hallways illuminated where I had not expected them to be. Through all the lost illusion

though, seeing the theater this way was exciting and my eyes were everywhere -- to the ceiling, the stage, the set -- everywhere. They couldn't drink in the sights fast enough but saw plenty never-the-less. (Including a new high-wire artist being trained.)

More to the point were the artists that volunteered (or were selected) to take part in this special Q&A. They were Benoit Glazer, Band Leader, Trumpet and Keyboard player from Canada; Stacey Bilodeau, German Wheel artist from the United States; and Ginger Ruiz, Tissue artist from the USA. The three were accompanied by a La Nouba press agent and watchdog. She was present only to make sure the artists didn't answer a very sensitive question.



Now, one might expect that a room full of Cirque du Soleil fans would generate some very interesting questions. Perhaps if this had been the Cirque du Soleil Yahoo Group, that would have been the case. As it was, many of the questions asked of the artists were general: What do you do for Cirque, do you like your job (the answer was always "why, of course we do!"), what is your background, where did you study, and the like. I almost cheered at one patron who asked how much the performers made in salary, but our watchdog headed off that question.

As for yours truly, did he ask any questions?

No, I did not.



And you know, I'm not entirely sure why. I mean, it was the perfect venue to ask some really pressing questions, like how Cirque plans to answer charges of discrimination and why ticket prices always seemed to be on the rise. But, in the end, all I ended up confirming was that Benoit Jutras was composing more music for Cirque du Soleil projects, and that information was volunteered.

In the end, even if the questions weren't the most thought out or in-depth I can safely say that Paul, Cedric and I did have a good time. I mean, how often do you get to interact with Cirque du Soleil artists or see performances for free?

I want to send my thanks, yet again, to the ring mistresses of Cirque Club who made the VIP session possible. Without you I would have been standing outside!





APRIL 2004

## «In the Garden of Delights»

Caged inside the Human Zoo

*Live to Cirque* is not just an aphorism or a philosophy; it is a viewpoint, an expression of experience, of becoming involved with Cirque du Soleil in some form or fashion at a place of your choosing and enjoying the encounter as it unfolds, whether specific to a show or as ambiguous as the destination itself. Sometimes the destination is one chosen well in advance, perhaps as part of a vacation or other recreation. And sometimes the adventure comes to you in a fleeting moment, like an invitation to a party, a special occasion or experience. And occasionally the two events coincide, coming together at the right moment, the right time, and converging on the right place. This was the case with these moments in Las Vegas.

I've said it before and I'll say it again: Las Vegas is a wonderful playground. Where else can you see three completely different Cirque du Soleil shows while at the same time experience Venice, Tuscany, the rainforest, a pirate's cove, Egypt, Arabia and Paris? What better place is there to celebrate an off-year birthday, to pack up your troubles and head off to see your most favorite Cirque du Soleil show of all time? I couldn't think of anything better than Las Vegas. Could you? And to sweeten the deal, how about a VIP seat for Zumanity, the more erotic side Cirque du Soleil? Why not!

\* \* \*

### /// OH MY, T.I.

The first observation of Las Vegas as I stepped forth from the airplane was that things sure hadn't changed much. Everything looked and appeared exactly the same, including that old man sitting on the stool playing slots just outside the gate. I'm pulling your leg of course, but I swore it was the same man! Maybe he's a wax figure; who can tell?



Thankfully it didn't take too long for me to get my rental, a brand new Ford Taurus. It's beige, 4-door, and drives like a charm. I signed the paperwork after a brief once-over and waved goodbye to the dealership.

I immediately booked it for Treasure Island.



I pulled into a parking spot at TI moments later and made my way inside, smirking at the fact that every time I came to Vegas I invariably follow this pattern -- park at Treasure Island, explore the TI, Mirage, Caesars and the Venetian; then park down at Bellagio and explore that resort, Paris, and Aladdin; and finally, park down at NY-NY and explore there, the MGM Grand, Mandalay Bay, Luxor and Excalibur. It's really an

efficient way to explore all the Strip hotels I've found, and breaks up the monotony so that you don't do too much in the same day. Even so, falling into it subconsciously was worth a personal laugh or two.

Picking up my pre-arranged ticket to *Mystère* was the first order of business, and I was a little apprehensive about doing so. When the ticket was ordered weeks ago through the online box office system I had a bit of trouble that ultimately led to double charges for tickets and confusion surrounding what seat I would end up with. Instead of an easy click-and-buy online purchase, everything had to be done via phone with the staff at Treasure Island accounting -- including, but not limited to, unlocking the seat I tried to purchase first (that failed), canceling the second seat they charged me for, and reassigning the unlocked seat to me. The worry was for naught, however, for my purchase came up immediately for the seat I had chosen: Section 103, Row A, Seat 11. For the uninitiated this is a center section, front row seat on the right-side isle. I knew from experience that this was an excellent seat to be had, which is why I requested it in the first place.



With the ticket perfectly stowed in my wallet, I bounded off to the front of the resort with a smile on my face, ready to glimpse at the changes to the Pirate Battle that had been reported about the previous year. Gone were the days of the swashbuckling Treasure Island and in were the erotic wenches, who replaced the menacing but playful pirates and the British officers who chased them.



My jaw dropped two feet, however, when I took my first steps upon the boardwalk and found that not only were the pirate ships nowhere to be found (replaced with pastel variations of vessels I cannot even describe) but also the entire resort had been completely repainted some god-awful rustic gold color. And I began to think they've made a huge mistake. I can't even fathom why they'd make these changes, but this is Las Vegas... things change constantly.

A fact that I found out all too well when I attempted to eat at Rick's across the way in the Venetian (the WB Restaurant had a recreation of Rick's Café Americain from Casablanca, but the restaurant had been replaced since the last time I was in Vegas, 2002).

Thankfully Cirque du Soleil was just as I remembered it. Of *Mystère*, they say words don't do it justice and they are absolutely correct. *Mystère* is without a doubt my favorite Cirque du Soleil show and I was very, very anxious and pleased to be part of it on my 27th birthday. I took my seat down in the front row and glanced back, taking everything in -- the sights, sounds, smells and chaos of the theater. Brian Le Petit (Brian Dewhurst) was in the theater causing his particular brand of bedlam already: leading people onstage, tearing up their tickets, spilling popcorn, buffing bald guy's heads and other mayhem. Soon enough the lights dimmed and the muttering of Moha Samedi (Nicky Dewhurst) could be heard throughout the theater. A moment later he appeared on stage complete with his red puppet, and pronounced the coming of *Mystère*!

The show itself flawlessly went through its paces, which I was thankful to see was in the correct order. Previously, in fan circles, it was reported that the show's acts had been mixed up more recently, instead of following its normal pattern, but that had not been the case at all. The only change of the night was that Bebe Francois was not performing; the role was played by another -- a female baby -- who was quite cute in the roll and made the show just as enjoyable, without its signature baby character. Another notable difference was the change in percussionist from Pierre Dube to Aaron Guidry. While small, Aaron surprised me with the amount of energy expended during the solo taiko act during the finale. His performance turned out to be a wonderful cap to a great performance!







I left Mystère dazed, confused and happy; a smile widely upon my face. And through the people milling about I contemplated a drive down to the Bellagio to drink in its elegance before heading back to home. I did so, but the traffic was once again snared, taking more than 30 minutes to travel from Treasure Island to Bellagio via car. But while sitting in traffic I managed to hear the Volcano at the Mirage explode and the fountains at Bellagio play to "All that Jazz" from Chicago.

By the time I arrived at the Bellagio I was already tiring from the very, very long and involved day, but managed to see the lobby, the "O" store, and everything else the resort had to offer including the fountains playing to "Luck Be a Lady" from the Via Bellagio side.

When it got to be about 10:30pm, and my body decided to start shutting down (it was 2:30pm my time, remember), I left the Bellagio and made my way home. But I shall never forget the fountains swaying and singing to "Time to Say Goodbye" (my favorite) as I drove out. And that's what I did to the Bellagio that night, said Goodbye.



### **/// THE BELLAGIO BROWN-OUT**

To say the following morning got off to a rather subdued start would be an understatement. I lounged around most of it watching golf on the tele, writing a journal on my laptop and doing a variety of other non-essential things. Normally I would already have been out as soon as I could in transit for the Strip, but the plan for the day was to be a little different.

Let me explain.

Being that this day was Easter, my hosts (aunt and uncle) planned to attend an Easter party/picnic over at one of their friend's houses in the mid-afternoon and invited me to come along. I agreed since I knew the folks and had played board/card games with them the last time I was in town, so it wasn't as if I'd be surrounded by strangers all day. And sure enough, by about 4:30pm, I left the party and made my way down to the Strip intending to park at Bellagio and explore the resort and the surrounding area in more detail; however, I had one hell of a time just getting there.



For some reason, traffic was snarled at the entrance to the Bellagio's parking garages and the staff was not allowing anyone inside. Therefore I had to loop back around, get on the interstate and exit at Spring Mountain Road, park at Treasure Island and walk down. What greeted me upon arrival though was not something I ever expected to see -- a sign that read both performances of "O" were canceled and the entire Via Bellagio shopping area roped off. I suppose the first clue that something was awry should have been the rotating doors that line the entrance to the Bellagio -- they weren't working. In fact they'd been stopped and opened to allow passage. Next should have been the lack of power, which permeated the entire Via Bellagio area and into the casino, as far as one could see.

What happened here?

There was various chatter amongst the patrons and the staff... some were concerned and some were curious. As for I, well, I admit to being a wee bit more curious than the rest -- I smelled a story and knew I was sitting in the middle of something that could potentially be important. For both performances of "O" to be canceled for technical difficulties was unprecedented, and while I did not as yet know the reasons why, I knew I had to get the news out to the Cirque fans as soon as possible. So I ponied up to the rope and began to listen in. Unfortunately I wasn't getting the answers I wanted; people weren't asking about Cirque du Soleil, nor were they asking what was wrong -- other than to the effect as to why they couldn't shop that day. Thus I had to step up and take action and ask my own questions... as nonchalantly as I could, of course.

*"Rough day today, eh?"*

*"Oh yes," said a man dressed in a Bellagio suit. "It's been one of those days."*

*"I guess so," said I. "Do you know how long this is going to last?"*

*"We should have power back later in the evening," said the man.*

*"Will the shows go on if you get the power on in time?"*

*"Not tonight," he said and then turned to help another guest.*

I asked further questions from a lady standing by a few minutes later and she told me practically the same thing; however, I was able to get a bit more information from her than the stone faced gentleman I spoke to earlier. Apparently the entire Bellagio was cut off from life-giving power and had been so since the wee hours of the morning -- about 3:00am. No one on staff knew for sure what had happened; rumors of an accident on the interstate to a complete system's meltdown had been circulating, but no one was speculating further. They were obviously coached on talking to the media -- not to say much at all -- but everyone was upbeat enough to think that later in the evening the lights would be blazing, the fountains would be dancing, and the gamblers would be playing.

That wouldn't turn out to be.



As I walked along an eerily quiet sidewalk around the Bellagio lake I began to wonder exactly what was going on inside the resort, therefore, I took it upon myself to walk around to the lobby end, to see if, by chance, I could at least get inside there and the conservatory since that's where I wanted to be in the first place. No dice, however, as the lobby was completely blocked off. I stood there peering inside for some kind

of... something... what I didn't know. People were everywhere, though calm, as they checked out of the Bellagio, probably on their way to other MGM/Mirage resorts. They were if all the limo's arriving on the scene had anything to do with it. It was ordered chaos at the Bellagio and I certainly wouldn't be getting in this day.

Eventually I turned back that afternoon no worse for wear, hopped online and prepared a little statement for readers of Fascination!, my monthly Cirque du Soleil newsletter. I'm no super-sleuth reporter, and by then the news had reached quasi-national levels, but it would still be a good idea to get word out from a fan that was actually there.

*Both evening shows of "O" were canceled on 4/11/04 due to technical difficulties.*

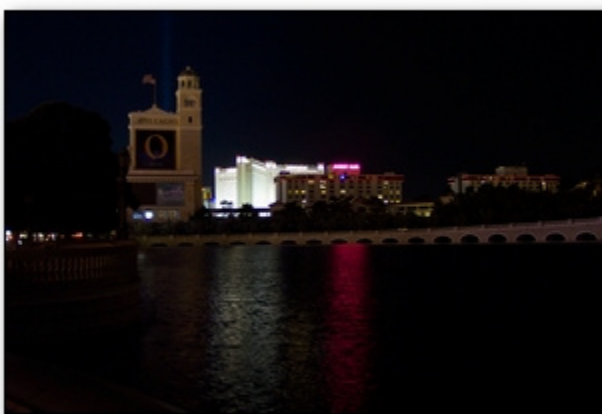
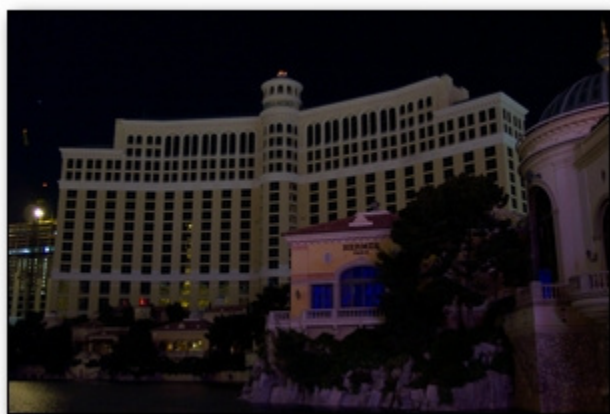
*It's really quite surreal out here in Vegas. The sights, the sounds, the lights! Imagine my surprise then when I walked up to the Bellagio last night to find a sign that says both shows were canceled due to a technical difficulty only to find out the entire Bellagio is without power.*

*It's really different to see blackness when one expects lights!*

*From what I understand the Bellagio lost power about 2:00am the morning of April 11th, and it remained off all day and night and is currently still out as of the morning of April 12th. They're not expected to have power until tonight sometime. I don't think "O" is going to perform tonight either, but we'll have to see when/if the power comes back on.*

*What a mess.*

Would you know that the Bellagio lacked power the entire time I was in Vegas? Full power had not been restored to the resort by the time I left on Wednesday, the 14th. To say I was disappointed was an understatement because I had so looked forward to watching the Fountains display their majesty, stroll along the corridors of the Bellagio's interior, admiring the Fiora di Como sculpture, or even see if I could get a last-minute ticket for "O". But all those plans were shot down the moment the lights went out at Bellagio. I guess it really was an omen saying goodbye to the Bellagio the previous night. It's unfortunate that I would not get a chance to step foot in the resort the entire rest of my trip.



### **/// ANOTHER SIDE OF CIRQUE DU SOLEIL**

**Massage** (m&-'säj): manipulation of tissues (as by rubbing, kneading, or tapping) with the hand or an instrument for therapeutic purposes.

**Aqua** ('ä-kw&): water.

When you combine the two you get one heavenly massage. In preparation of my experience at Zumanity, I decided to loosen up a little and chose the Aqua Massage booth over at "The Realm", a shopping bazaar at Excalibur, just round the corner from the amazingly tasty Krispy Kreme Doughnut shoppe, to do so. Here thirty-six computer controlled water jets simulate a personal "Finger Tip" massage through adjustable water pressure, temperature, and pulsating frequency to relieve pain and tension in only a fifteen minute session. You remain fully clothed and dry in the cocoon, a waterproof acrylic canopy, which allows a full surface massage on three sides of your body.



An inverted V-shaped spray bar with those wonderful water jets travels back and forth at your discretion, massaging the full length of your body, or, if you like, it may be stopped to concentrate on a specific area of need (such as feet, say). All you do is lay there and have your troubles melted away.

Ahh, Las Vegas. Can it get any better?



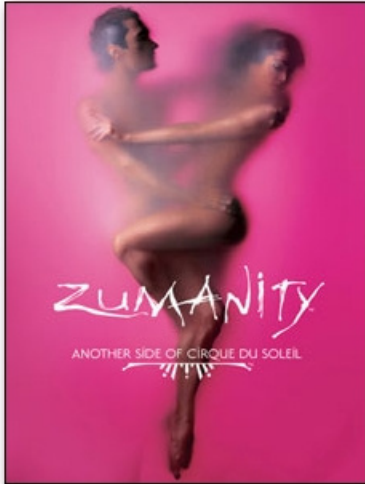
Although the machines at first glance appear to be Magnetic Resonance Imaging pods, rest assured they're not. Don't avoid them if you see one - cast off your inhibitions and give it a try! I can't tell you how thoroughly enjoyable that massage was, partly because I melted right into the foam structure of the couch and partly because it left me so dazed and confused (read: happy, very, very happy) that it took a few minutes for my brain to restart. Yep, that was me

wandering aimlessly around Excalibur without a care in the world! Now thoroughly uninhibited (but a little more aware), I wandered over to NY-NY, conveniently just a bridge-walk away, for Zumanity, Cirque du Soleil's third resident show in the city. But while most patrons would be lining up for their sofas, love seats, chairs or stools, I would get to experience the show in a more unique way: not from inside the theater, as most spectators do, but from a special VIP seat high above the stage in the show's control booth.

How exciting is that?!

There was but one thing I had to do in order to partake in this special experience: stand underneath the "Sausage Kingdom" sign in close proximity to the theater's entrance about a half-hour before show time, whereby an usher (or other theatrical staff member) would come by to collect and escort me to the desired viewing location. If I was not waiting under said sign by the appointed time, or if my name could not be found on their list (i.e., I came on the wrong day or at the wrong time) I would be left on the sidelines, simple as that. The Zumanity Theater is discretely tucked away in the corner of the North Lobby of the casino, nestled between Gallagher's and a number of street-borne café's littering the "Village Street Eateries" (modeled after New York City's Greenwich Village) section of the main casino floor, and was not hard to find. And, believe it or not, neither was the infamous sign.





As I had pre-arranged this particular experience with an internal friend of the show, I knew my name was on said list; what I didn't know though, as I pulled up to the sign, was whether or not I would get noticed standing so far away from the theater's doors. Really - the Sausage Kingdom sign? Who is going to see me over there and know I was waiting for Zumanity? So I stood, and stood, and stood, watching patrons walk through the doors and fill the foyer, taking pleasure in the delights of the lobby while I sweated nervously outside, enjoying... the smell of sausage. After a number of passing minutes, and a flurry of negative monologues, my auspicious thoughts were to be founded: no one was coming for me. I acted. And if it hadn't been for some quick thinking on my part to

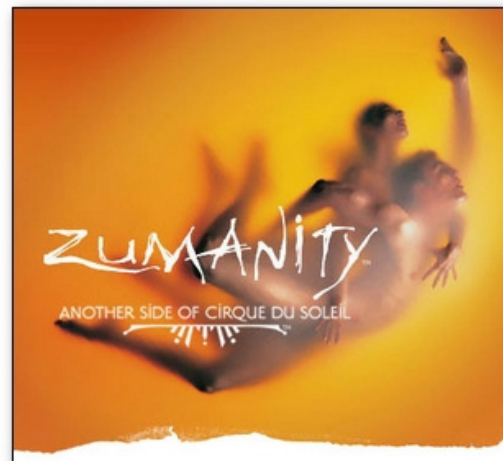
flag down a Zumanity theater staffer, I would probably still be standing there today, waiting!

From the moment Zumanity was announced I was intrigued and consciously optimistic about the project, but at the same time concerned. What would posses Cirque du Soleil to add T&A to their famous formula, I wondered? Were they tired of the tried and true? Were the creative thinkers in Montreal running out of ideas? Could they no longer afford to hire the best of the best of the best because they had done so many times over before? No, of course not, I knew. As a creative company, Cirque du Soleil was simply expanding its horizons, charting new waters, and exploring new territories within its creative sphere of influence. It meant that for the first time Cirque du Soleil would elevate sexuality and sensuality to new heights and highlight their performers' more so than at any time in their past. And to do so they re-branded their efforts as ANOTHER SIDE OF CIRQUE DU SOLEIL.

Okay, I'll buy that.

So, what about the experience?

Zumanity [zü'man-eh-tee] is described as "an intense visit to a world where human inhibitions are both unveiled and discarded, where style and intense sensual passion share an uncommon stage." Cirque has offered this definition of the word: "n. Neologism dating from 2003, contraction of the words 'zoo' and 'humanity.' 1. A human zoo. 2. A new form of eroticism, which blends dance movement, acrobatics and beautiful bodies with the sensual caress of the human voice and the pulse of exotic rhythms. 3. An exploration that awakens the most primal urges in human beings."





My first glimpse into the erotic world of this human zoo was fleeting at best. Since it was close to show time, I was able to catch but a mere peek at Zumanity's sensuously plush lobby. This proved to be both thrilling and disappointing all at once - no time to linger in this red-velvet garden, to slip my hands around its massive shafts, to tickle and be teased by its warm, enveloping atmosphere, or probe into one of a dozen peepholes peppered throughout the curvature of its inner sanctum. I was simply and unceremoniously thrust into a non descript elevator, ripped away from the video displays, soft velvet walls and intimate lighting that would have only helped provoke the mood. Instead I found myself on my way up to booth level. It certainly was not the best way to be titillated, but who was I to argue?

Moments later I was plunged into the dark, dank world of the automation technicians. Oh, okay, so it wasn't dank, but it was dark!

I was lead to a small row of four standard theater chairs occupying a space on the left-side of the booth. One of these would be my seat for the performance. In order to get there I had to traverse the entire length of the booth, which was not nearly as big or as roomy as I thought - I stepped over a number of cables running throughout and shimmied behind a spot light or two just to get to my seat. Two technicians of unknown skill were already inside, prepping their equipment for the night's performance, and nodded as I looked at each, but only briefly. Surrounding them were a number of computers and associated gear no doubt used to monitor and manage the stage equipment, house and track lights, and run the stage automation (the turntable lift and automated set pieces, such as the bandstand). Naturally the techs had full view of the entire stage and whole show from this high-up location, but I doubted they got to enjoy the view much.



As I skipped and skidded to my seat, I noticed I would not be alone for this performance: one other VIP patron was in house waiting patiently for the show to begin. He sat at the opposite end of the tiny row, sipping on a beer, and looking around to see what Zumanity was all about. After we were both given a quick run-down of the lighthouse rules (be as quiet as you can, don't clap, do not get up and walk

around the booth, and do not disturb the tech specialists), I took my seat then, wondering: if we're separated by a pane of glass, how do we hear the show? Before I could even complete the thought my eyes fell upon a pitifully smallish speaker in front of me. Hmmm... Slightly discouraged about the quality of sound, the glass didn't detract from the fantastic view of the entire theater, an environment "engineered to be a warm, intimate, organically welcoming space by using alluring colors, plush velour materials and soft, yielding contours." My eyes instantly took in as much as they could from their high-up position.



From my seat I swept across the entire theater in one smooth motion, spotting the love seats and couches that hugged the curvilinear thrust of the stage, the sea of traditional theater seats adorned in lush reds and soft golds, and, of course, the cabaret-style barstools that were peppered about. The stage itself was devoid of any clutter save for a baby grand piano, which comfortably sat in its center, and draped behind it, a red velvet curtain hung from the twisted

metallic proscenium, hiding the rest of Zumanity from our prying eyes. Two winding metal staircases, which freely allowed access to and from the bandstand hidden in the proscenium, framed the curtain with ease and I could see the musician's instruments at rest in preparation for show time. The only ones able to actually enjoy the view from this location were me and my unknown friend, who I doubted noticed that, from this vantage point, one could see the pattern infused into the carpet wasn't just any old crisscross, but artistic images depicting women in various states of undress. Something one could easily miss from ground level.

Just then a few characters emerged from behind the curtain to snake their way into the crevices of human flesh now filling the theater. Dressed in what appeared to be French maid-type outfits, the Botero sisters (generously proportioned identical twins from Brazil) made their way throughout the crowd proffering large, juicy strawberries to serve their guests. But they aren't the only ones. The entire theater came alive with various creatures of the night in all forms of sexuality.

The unfortunate thing was that I could not hear any of it.

It wasn't until Madame took the stage (famed New York City drag queen Joey Arias) that our two little speakers turned on and we could hear what was going on in the theater. Madame invited us to cast off our inhibitions, to keep our minds open and enjoy each other to the fullest. Once Lonnie Gordon sung the "Rules of the House" (you know, no smoking, no flash photography, etc.), the show began with a flourish of rousing visuals and rumbling music, as we are indulge in a fashionable fanfare of fauna and a host of interesting acts:





Extravaganza (one by one the cast make their entrance, parading down the catwalk in ever extravagant costumes), next Wind & Wassa (a storm sweeps over the stage as Marcela de la Vega Luna and Wassa Coulibaly summon the spirits in a fevered flamenco and intoxicating tribal dance), Water Bowl (While Madame invites us to quench our thirst, two sweet and

pure contortionists taste love for the very first time, striking an array of sensual poses as they glide and frolic in the water), Hoops (Julia Kolosova gyrates and swivels a hoop up and down her lithe frame), The Rose Boy (Alex Castro struts his stuff for the ladies next, stripping down to a rather large cod piece while teasing the ladies with red roses)...

Dislocation (Limber Lothario Muknthar bends, twists and contorts his body into nature-defying positions. God, he made me squirm!), 2Men (a passionate story of love and anger unfolds through turbulent choreography; they repel each other again and until the magnetic energy between them becomes more than they can bear, and they share a fierce kiss), Dance on TV (the stage ignites with Elena's feminine wiles, performing a sultry dance to rekindle the flame between she and her lover), Body2Body (an aggressive but intimate body-balancing duet; Sara and Stephan entwine in powerful breathtaking acrobatic-inspired maneuvers), Aerial Straps (bound by her straps, Laetitia Ray takes us through an exercise of self-inflicted pleasure and pain, using the leather straps to tease and torture herself, as she slips from one erotic aerial figure to the next)...



Tissus (a romantic and mesmerizing aerial dance between dwarf Alan Jones Silva and the glamorous goddess Olga Vershinina), Midnight Bath (as imaginations run free, the cast emerges from every orifice of the theater, drawing members of the audience into their hedonistic play, assuming a smorgasbord of sexual positions where they touch, stroke, moan and embrace each other's flesh in a luscious sexual experiment) and The Pacemakers (Madamme invites an elderly couple to slow-dance on stage, but in a surprise climax to the show, the pair launch into an impressive acrobatic dance routine).



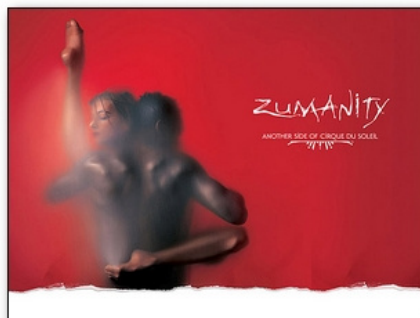
Two hours after we settled into our seats, my cohort and I slipped out through the back door and descended a staircase back down to the lobby. I popped out from an unlabeled (and somewhat hidden) doorway moments later to be admitted into the foyer and lead out of the Zumanity Theater. Just like that my time with Cirque du Soleil on this trip came to a close and once again I could lay claim to have seen all of Cirque's currently-running shows.

How about that!

\* \* \*

Experiencing the show from the light-booth was both an enjoyable endeavor and disappointing venture. Certainly no complaints about the opportunity itself (to which I must thank my unnamed friend immensely), rather, the manor in which I encountered the show for the very first time was somewhat unfortunate. A high-up seat turned out to be a poor substitute for being down on the main floor, nestled in the middle of the action, where you at least feel part of the production and its audience rather than just watching it from afar. I felt so disconnected from the show throughout its run-time that I came away from Zumanity completely unsatisfied by it and totally unmoved. A happening comparable to watching it all unfold on television. So, it's not something I recommend taking up unless you've seen the show before.

Now... how do I get that view for «O» or Mystère?!





MAY 2004

## « We're Off and Running »

The Inaugural CirqueCon

# CirqueCon 2004 VANCOUVER

*The First Unofficial Gathering of Cirque du Soleil Passionates*



It's Saturday, May 22, 2004, and it's breakfast time down in Douglas House, a beautiful old Victorian style Bed and Breakfast on Cambie Street near the heart of Downtown Vancouver. We're just on the other side of the Cambie Bridge and the old Expo center on West 13th Avenue. I currently occupy room number two, a small yet cozy single room with a Queen sized bed, my own sink, a television and a couple of chairs on the

second floor of the house. It's raining a bit now, but that doesn't seem to dampen the spirits around here. Chatter fills the air as many of our group has awakened to the sounds and smells of mealtime.

Right across from me at the table is Simon Chavez, a twelve year old here with his dad Todd (from Idaho). He's had his head stuffed in his Game Boy Advance console ever since he arrived. Keith Johnson (from Seattle, Washington) is currently tormenting young Simon about his unrelenting Game Boy playing, which Simon is cleverly not having anything of. Joining Keith is his wife LouAnna, her aunt Barb Houde, cousin Shelly Blakeslee (from Missoula, Montana), and his father-in-law Calvin Davis (from Spokane, Washington). Oh, and here comes Jeff Tolotti (from Virginia) and Danielle Wall (from Ontario, California) who are staying in nearby Cambie Lodge, another wonderful Bed and Breakfast selected for our gathering.

They represent but a small fraction of the folks I've met thus far, and have yet to meet, as this gathering goes on.

What gathering?

Why, **CirqueCon 2004** of course!

30 fans of Cirque du Soleil came together in Vancouver from across North and Central America to celebrate not only our friendship, but to see *Quidam*. *Quidam*, which comes from Latin for "a nameless passerby," is Cirque du Soleil's ninth production, which premiered in Montreal on April 23, 1996. Since then it has been heralded as one of Cirque du Soleil's quintessential productions, showing us that we are all Quidams in one form or another.



"It could be anyone, anybody," the show's programme allows. "Someone coming, going, living in our anonymous society. A member of the crowd, one of the silent majority. One who cries out, sings and dreams within us all." In the world of Cirque du Soleil's *Quidam*, the one who cries out is Zoë, a young girl who fumes because she believes she's seen everything there is to see, experienced all there is to experience. For her, the world has lost all meaning. Her anger, sharp and unforgiving, shatters her little world and soon she finds herself in the universe of *Quidam*. Within this universe she finds she is not alone; Zoë is joined by a joyful companion (Target) and a more mysterious character (John) that will attempt to seduce her with the marvelous, the unsettling, and the terrifying.

It's the marvelous that draws us, the Cirque "Passionates", to Vancouver for this inaugural CirqueCon. It's been organized chaos since we arrived, with our plans changing up to the very last minute. But we're quite excited to be here and with Cirque's good blessings. Cirque du Soleil has some wonderful experiences waiting for us today, but last night was one of the best evenings I've had with people I've never met before in my life.



## /// BIENVENUE A VANCOUVER

Last Night (the 21st), around 5:30pm, we welcomed our guests and friends in style with a Cocktail/Show & Tell hour, which turned out to be great fun. There were many of Cirque's older programmes and press kits to look through. Keith brought his Wallpaper books and there were a variety of other rare Cirque goodies to show off. The food (including meats, cheeses, and of course Applets and Cotlets) was catered by Keith's wife, LouAnna and was simply delicious! I met many of the Con's participants at the Cocktail Hour; including but not limited to: Roderick Mariano (from Virginia), Albert Tsai, Shanna Shih, Taylor Jeffs and Steven Rodriguez (California), Dave Lee (Georgia), Gary & Jill Chapman (Oregon), and Rafael & Angelica Serrano (from Tijuana, Mexico!) We drank "Cirque du Rosé" wine, regaled our friendships, and even handed out a few gifts -- our own home-produced CirqueCon programme, a two-CD set of rare Cirque music and badges with everyone's name on them! It was a taste of things to come...



To be honest, Keith and I almost missed the Cocktail Hour ourselves! Why? Thank the Canadian border agents. Honestly, I think the border agents wanted to give a couple of unsuspecting American guys a hard time. Imagine the two of us pulling up to the Canadian/USA border through the truck crossing on Pacific Highway in Blaine with passports in hand and a timetable to keep.

At first things seemed to be going well, however, the border agents seemed confused about the 40 programs and 80 CD's we had sitting out in the open in the backseat.

"You're giving these away?" the agent asked. "You're not making any money? They aren't commercial?"

Overloading the intelligence of the border-crossing officer, we had to park and take a form into the customs building

for review and explain the entire situation to someone slightly more evolved.

Great.

We were detained nearly 45-minutes, as they schlepped us from one building to the next with rudeness prevalent, recanting our story to 3-4 more people along the way. The last woman we spoke with (after getting our paper stamped and cleared by the commercial office) was very anxious and intent to find some kind of infraction to charge us with. She tore out the entire contents of Keith's trunk (which was packed very full). She came back into the building with the 6-pack of Cirque du Rosé wine we had for the Cocktail Hour.

I watched as she strutted her way from the car into the building via a side door, a smug look about her. "Okay my little Cirque fans," she hailed. "What's this? You said you had only two bottles of wine and this is six." Problem is; she didn't bother to look at the bottles. While it's true there were six in the pack, four were Cirque du Rosé wine, while the other two were sparkling water/cider type drinks and non-alcoholic. Once she realized that she threw the case down upon the counter and bid us a hasty farewell.

"Okay, well, BYE!"

After collecting our IDs from the agent, we grabbed the wine, repacked the car and returned to the roadway, clear for takeoff. Unfortunately that wouldn't be our only problem getting to Vancouver. We ran into traffic just before the George Massey tunnel -- it was backed up to one lane; therefore we took an alternate route over the Alex Frasier Bridge (on Canadian Route 91). It put us well out of our way (by about 10 miles or so) but it was the only other option open to us. But we made it to the party, and I think it was a great success.



Later, as the Cocktail party started to settle down (and as more of Jeff's party went off to that evening's performance of Quidam) it was decided amongst Keith's group to head on down to a restaurant entitled Brothers, in Gastown -- an area where the city of Vancouver began. It's said Gastown was established in the same year that Canada became a nation (1867) and is named after "gold prospector, riverboat captain and saloon keeper John 'Gassy Jack' Deighton." Its old, historic and an interesting place. If I had to compare Gastown to a place I've before visited, I would have to say it is (at least in spirit) similar to the Jacques Cartier Square in the Old Port of Montreal. As for today, there's so much planned that I find I'm already super excited!

12:00pm -- Meeting with Cirque Merchandising  
01:30pm -- Backstage Tour of Quidam  
04:30pm -- Spaghetti Factory Group Dinner in Gastown  
08:00pm -- Quidam, Group Show  
10:45pm -- Q&A with Artists  
11:30pm -- Possible Drink with BJ

Well... my French toast has finally arrived so it's time to put down the pencil and eat. Keith's party will be headed out to Stanley Park this morning and I'm in on that. So, I guess I better tuck in!

### **/// SPECTACLES ABOUND**

It's 6:30pm on Saturday, May 22nd and what a day it's been up to now. I started our drizzling morning down in Stanley Park, a large green center in Vancouver, with Keith, Lucy and the rest of his party, who wanted to take a horse and carriage ride around the park. I was certainly up for that; it actually turned out to be quite nice even in the rain. Getting a chance to see the skyline was great, as well as the totem poles Vancouver is so well known for. And let's not forget the stories told by our valet, such as "The Bridge that Beer Built" (referring to one of the nearby bridges that had been built to cross the river for a beer company) and "The Loose Moose" (a tavern).

The horses Moses & Jim (a Clydesdale and a Belgian breed) led the charge through an hour or more ride through Lord Stanley's Park (the same Lord Stanley who owns that nice shiny silver cup; Hockey fans will know what I mean.) The ride was very relaxing, however, even though it was a nice distraction from the city, we ended up running into trouble on the way to our next gig -- the merchandise meeting, which was changed at the last

moment to a conference room at the Georgian Court Hotel instead of being on-site as originally planned.







One of the surprises Cirque du Soleil had in store for us was a focus group meeting with Geneviève Bastien, Project Manager of Licensing at Cirque. She flew all the way from Montreal to ask our opinions on new and exciting licensing avenues Cirque may be interested in exploring. It became one of the most fascinating aspects of our gathering because, as I see it, most fans don't get a chance to speak with Cirque on this level, and we were

privileged enough to speak with Geneviève on the types of merchandise we wanted to see! For example, we spoke about authentic show collectibles, home decor, "cirque like" adult clothing, behind the scenes books, clothing/items for pre-schoolers, etc. We spent about an hour discussing individual topics from action figures to video game licensing; it was such an interesting experience! And, of course, one of the most requested items was more live audio recordings of Cirque du Soleil's productions.

At 1:30pm, we were all met with red clown noses and black Barron hats (from Saltimbanco) at the big top for our extensive behind-the-scenes tour of the site, our second big surprise from Cirque du Soleil. The media was on hand and for a while it truly felt like a circus. Jeff Tolotti, Keith Johnson and I (Ricky Russo) -- the organizers of CirqueCon 2004 in Vancouver -- became lost in this sea of mass confusion, as we had microphones thrust upon us, our pictures taken at will and questions asked randomly.



For a few moments it was overwhelming, but once the tour began I forgot all of that, and prepared to be astounded. And what an amazing tour of the site we had too; to places I would not have thought possible...

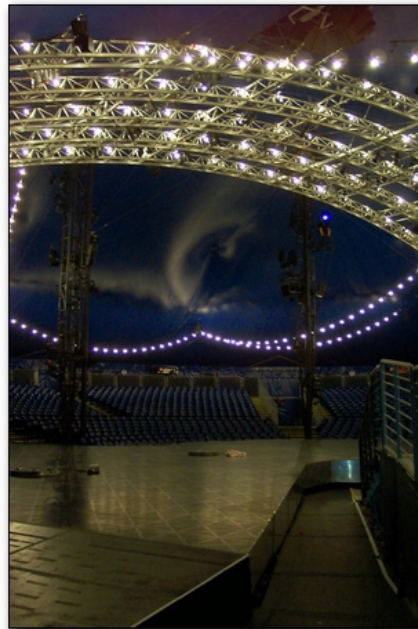
- The kitchen, where we saw Mark Ward ("John"), André (the new male singer), and various other cast and crew in different stages of show preparedness taking in some nourishment.
- The Technical Trailer, where the crew keep the various technical aspects of Quidam in top form. The trailer is aptly named too - the "Phoenix". The old one, as the story goes, burned down in Europe and the current one rose from its ashes.



- Behind the Stage, where show props like the German Wheel, various ropes, skateboards, the house door and the big red balloon are parked in what they call the "garage." We were even given a chance to peek under the stage and see exactly how the artists see to get to and from their marks -- snake lighting! Inside was buzzing with activity; the technicians were testing the lighting cues and the téléphérique, the long track structure atop the big top.



- And, the Artistic Tent, where the performers loosen up, dress and apply their make-up. You'll find the artists here during the show when they're not on cue. The artistic tent is the second largest structure besides the main venue and doubles as a training facility and massage parlor. A few of the artists were even practicing as we went through!



We had barely recovered from our Behind the Scenes tour, when Cirque announced their third surprise -- ***Tapis Rouge***. *Tapis Rouge*, which literally means "red carpet" in French, is Cirque du Soleil's VIP experience, reserved exclusively for patrons who wish to experience Cirque du Soleil to the fullest. As Cirque Passionates, the *Tapis Rouge* was the ultimate social gathering. For over an hour we were able to mingle with Vancouver's elite, talk with the Canadian press and enjoy Cirque du Soleil's gracious hospitality.

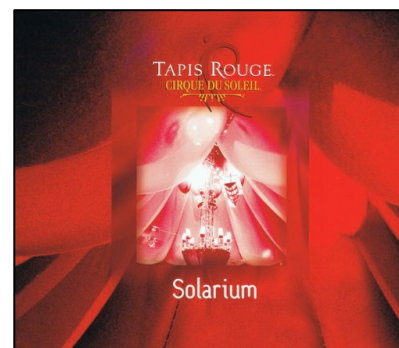


Inside this special yellow-and-blue striped tent was an array of delicious foods, exceptional wines & champagnes, and a wonderful atmosphere. Video projections of *Quidam*, *Dralion* and other Cirque du Soleil productions were strewn upon a remarkable circular screen suspended from the ceiling in the middle of the *Tapis Rouge* Chapiteau and were accompanied by pulsing music from the *Solarium* CD.



*Tapis Rouge* was simply awesome.

The media was still buzzing around and I was being pulled in several directions at once, which was a very disconcerting experience. CirqueMom and CirqueDad, the parents of Catherine Downey (one of the current Zoë's) and BJ, the show's drummer, came by to say hello as well. Fans had chatted with BJ online twice from Japan and it was a real treat to finally meet the man behind all those words! And let us not forget about those reporters, who pulled me aside to talk about my website (Richasi's *Le Grand Chapiteau*), the newsletter (*The Fascination! Newsletter*), and, of course, about CirqueCon. All too soon though our *Tapis Rouge* experience was over and another CirqueCon special event came to a close.





But as they say, the party isn't over until it's over... and we continued our celebration at the Old Spaghetti Factory down in Gastown. Imagine 30 Cirque fans from across North America slurping pasta together! This is where I've just come. It was definitely a treat to dine with all those people. André Bellanger joined us as well as some independent reporter for Radio Canada, who was shoving a mic in everyone's face throughout the meal.



And so, with a little more than an hour to spare, I find myself on my bed at the B&B, awaiting the curtain call for tonight's show! Thus far, I must say, even with the last minute problems and changes in schedule, things have turned out better than I expected. Cirque has really gone all out for us, and for that I tip my hat -- a baron's hat -- at them, which they also gave to us as a gift. Tonight, after the show, we have a Q&A with some of the artists and a possible (though it's very tentative yet) hangout session with BJ (Quidam's drummer) after that. So, there's still some great Cirque events to come!

### **/// I'M EVERYMAN. I'M ANYMAN**

*Your world is yours not mine Quidam.  
Your dreams are yours.  
You may have touched the stars but they weren't moved.*

What can one say about Cirque du Soleil's Quidam that has not been said before? It's artistic, cinematic, emotional, striking, alluring.... it's beautiful. And it gives one hope. Quidam was simply amazing tonight; the best performance of the production I have ever seen live. There were some technical issues, as no production is entirely perfect, but how can one top being under the big top with 30-plus Cirque du Soleil fans there especially for this night? You can't. You simply can't. Stupendous!



It's late now on Saturday evening -- actually I think it might be Sunday morning -- so please excuse me if I ramble. It's been one heck of a day and I am still reeling from all that has happened. It's unfortunate with the close of tonight's show that our time in Vancouver has just about come to a close. Some of us will be hanging about tomorrow afternoon but the majority will return to their lives by morning. Some even have an extended stay,

but as for I, my time here is short. I will be leaving in the afternoon with Keith and his party, returning to Seattle before I too must return to my normal, everyday life down in Orlando, Florida.

What a ride it's been though.

The night ended with a wonderful Q&A session with Quidam's artists after the evening's breathtaking performance. The entire group was on hand, as was the media, for this very special event. Eight artists from various disciplines and backgrounds came out to chat with us, and for that we're very grateful.

In attendance was Shayne Courtright (German Wheel), BJ (Drummer), Jonathan Cole ("Boum Boum"), Mark Ward ("John"), Christine Cadeau (Jump Rope), the two new clowns (Ohki and Toto), and Catherine Downey ("Zoë"/Singer). We were allowed to take pictures, get autographs and basically ask whatever we wished. It was quite an experience to talk with so many performers at once... some of whom were still in makeup and costume!



Talking with these fine performers was a real treat.

While we were only allotted about 30-minutes to speak with them, in that time we were able to learn some interesting pieces about their backgrounds and their views on Cirque du Soleil. For example, one of the questions asked was what the show meant to its performers and the message it tries to send. Johnathan Cole (Boum Boum) piped up and answered that everyone should have his or her own interpretation of the production. It's supposed to invoke emotion but the meaning behind it all is a personal reflection. Mark Ward also chimed in: "It does have a story line -- a thin story line -- but we don't want to force feed you a storyline. We use images and let you come away with what you think.



That's why you see the white suits; you don't really know who they are. It's not until we unveil ourselves that you see who the people are." It's a play on emotions, you see. "Basically, if you walked away questioning anything," he said in conclusion, "we did our job." And question we did.



Another interesting question was brought forth by Keith Johnson, who asked: "One thing I don't think Cirque fans realize is how much time and experience it takes to get to Cirque du Soleil. A number of people on the web say, 'my first job is going to be with CDS,' but what I'm interested in is how long have you been doing what you're doing in one form or another before you did it on a Cirque du Soleil stage?"

Oki, the Clown: "I auditioned for Cirque in 1997 and in 1999. It's a long process. It took me 7 years and potentially 10 different jobs that [Cirque] called [about]. The casting process is huge, there's a lot of people there." And he's been a clown for 10 years.

Christine: "I was interested in the part, 5 years before I actually got it. I auditioned [for two years]. I've been skipping (rope) since I was 7-years old; did smaller shows and fairs and then corporate and business [events]. I never thought skipping would bring me somewhere." She was hired by Cirque du Soleil when she was 25-years old and had 13-years of basic experience before she got to Cirque.

Jonathan: "I was originally a gymnast so I started off when I was 6. I had about 20-years experience before I even started to audition for Cirque. Because of my gymnastics background, because of the physical abilities that I could do, they hired me. So when I went into the studio I had no idea what I was training on. They introduced me to a circus apparatus and I had a 3-month process of just trying out individual ones to see which ones they liked. They found that I was good in the air, so they taught me different things airily, but I ended up staying in the studio for two years. I did research and development and created a flying tissu number like Dralion's. We ended up doing special events [with the tissu number.] Next I moved on to «O», which I did the Batteau, the Trapeze number. I got injured, left, and went on to do [various] things outside of Cirque du Soleil, like bungees, Chinese poles, tumbling, dance and theater. A year later they hired me back again to do Quidam and so I've been here for two and a half years."

Mark Ward: "I started performing when I was 11 and supported a dance company in Mexico. In Junior and High-School [I studied] gymnastics, singing, dancing, and then I went to New York and danced ballet in Harlem. Then I went to Chicago; I was very tired. In 1993 I was called by the choreographer of Cirque du Soleil. I had no idea who they were. They called me at 7:00am [and] I wasn't happy; I hung up on them. They called back two hours later and two weeks [after that] I went [to work] with Cirque du Soleil. I was 27 and now I've been with them 11 years."

You know, there comes a moment in *Quidam* when Zoë realizes that her time in this fantastical world she's found herself in has expired, and she must return to her more mundane, everyday existence. She's reluctant to leave, of course, attempting to hold on to that last bit of whimsy, the last fragment of folly. And like Zoë, our time within the universe of Cirque du Soleil was quickly coming to an end, and we too had to return to our mundane, everyday existences. What we take with us, though, is a renewed sense of wonder and appreciation for the artists and crew that make up *Quidam*. For they truly hold up the credo... Invoke, Provoke, Evoke.



For myself, and everyone involved in CirqueCon 2004, I must extend our heartfelt thanks to André Belanger for all the hard work he put into making this night an event to remember, to Geneviève Bastien for allowing a group of passionate air out our thoughts on Cirque du Soleil licensing opportunities, and of course to Cirque du Soleil for their gracious hospitality. Without them we wouldn't be so passionate.

### **/// BONUS PICTURES**

While Cirque du Soleil was the main draw for visiting Vancouver, British Columbia, I also had the opportunity to visit, and see, other sights within the city. While not completely and directly Cirque du Soleil related, I thought you might enjoy seeing how I spent the rest of the time while in Vancouver - down in Chinatown!





# Have You Heard of the Cirque "Passionates"?

ALAIN PETIT  
International Headquarters

They don't work at Cirque's International Headquarters, out on tour, or for a resident show. They're not characters in one of our shows either. But they do exist! In May of this year, 31 of them met up in Vancouver to see *Quidam* together.

The Marketing Service's Internet team got wind of this peculiar gathering through regular communications with some of the Passionates. These diehard Cirque fans share their passion on the Web. In addition to congregating in a Yahoo chat group, they publish an online newsletter with close to 800 subscribers called *Fascination*, which provides in-depth, up-to-the-minute information on Cirque.

"We wondered who exactly these fans were," explains André Bélanger, Internet Marketing Manager. "It was the perfect opportunity to take stock of their contribution to our success." So who are they? Most of them are over 35 and American—though there are some Mexicans too. The Passionates earn slightly above-average income, and they all "have a life," says André. Forget your notions of rock-star groupies and Trekkies! These people are huge Cirque fans, and they've seen several of our shows and developed an excellent critical eye for them. They love our productions so much that they'll actually defend them and promote them to anyone who's willing to listen. Though they're a bit more intense, they strongly reflect our target market. In marketing speak they're called "e-fluencers," people with considered opinions who influence many others.

The Vancouver gathering was not planned by our Marketing people. It was three Passionates, including the editor of the *Fascination* newsletter, who coordinated the event by Internet. At the show, they were all invited backstage by the Cirque Marketing team to meet the artists for 30 minutes and ask them questions up close and personal. "The fans who attended never expected such a warm welcome by Cirque staff," adds André. "They were going to Vancouver anyway. They were pleased and surprised that we took such good care of them!"

Is there another such gathering in the works? André Bélanger would like that. "We hope that as many Passionates as possible meet in Montreal to see *Cirque 2005*. We could see up to 500 people willing to travel to take part in this type of event! Why not? They're some of our best ambassadors! \*



Surprises abounded on both ends at the meeting between these Cirque megafans and the *Quidam* artists. The proof lies in a question for Mark Ward, who plays John: "For almost two months, you played the *Quidam* character rather than John. Why were you pushed to switch characters like that?"

"Well, no one pushed me to play the other character," Mark replied. "I requested it. But how the heck did you know that?"

Mark's surprise equalled the Cirque Passionates' knowledge: both were immense!



JUNE 2004

## « Faire La Nouba »

La Nouba's 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary



*Once upon a time...  
A door opened and two worlds collided.  
Dreams clashed with reality. The mundane mixed with the marvelous. It was  
no longer possible to tell where one world began and the other ended.  
This new place was called La Nouba.*

On December 23, 1998, just a few short weeks after the Las Vegas premiere of «O» (Cirque du Soleil's second resident show), the lights dimmed, and the audience hushed and a shock of electric excitement filled the air in the La Nouba Theater for the very first time. It was the culmination of a lot of hard work, blood, sweat and tears, and a vigorous production schedule that saw the birth of three shows in the span of seven months. On June 2, 2004, Cirque du Soleil together with the Walt Disney Company celebrated La Nouba's 5th Anniversary in a bona fide festive manor, and yours truly was invited along to join in the fun. Imagine my surprise when I returned home from CirqueCon 2004 in Vancouver to find an invitation from a Publicist and PR representative with La Nouba, waiting patiently in my email's inbox.

Naturally I didn't miss the opportunity to party it up with the folks at La Nouba. It was an evening filled with thrills, laughter and fun, and I would like to share my party experience with you while at the same time providing an overview of the show, its performance space and everything else in between.

*faire la nouba!*

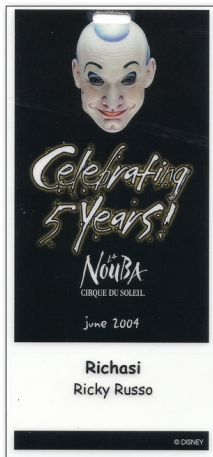
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## /// BEGIN A TALE...

*"La Nouba, presented by Cirque du Soleil exclusively at the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Florida, is celebrating five amazing years! We would be very honored if you could join us! You are invited to join us for the 9pm performance of La Nouba on June 2, 2004, followed by a celebration with the cast and crew! Thank you for your continued support of Cirque du Soleil. We look forward to seeing you at La Nouba!"*

I left for Downtown Disney on the 2nd full of excitement, unsure of exactly what to expect upon my arrival. The air crackled with electric excitement; I was anticipating the experience so much so that my palms were damp with sweat. What would it be like? Would something special be announced during the show? What would happen afterward? Would I really get to meet the cast? What kind of party will it be? All these questions and more surfaced in my mind as I walked from Downtown Disney's parking lot to the area of La Nouba's beautiful free-standing theater.



Upon arrival I immediately located the media check-in table located along the backside of the theater, and made my way over. For all my talk, when I walked up to the press agents, I was at a loss for words. Concerned was more like it, because I really didn't know under what pretence they had me placed on their list. I wasn't official "media" in the true sense of the word (unlike many of the other folks there) so I was a little curious, and spoke with trepidation. I needn't have worried; my credentials were already on hand in an envelope marked with my name. The credentials consisted of a basic colored lanyard with an elongated ID Tag featuring a black background with a headshot of one of the Les Cons at the top and "Celebrating 5 years! La Nouba June 2004" underneath in varying font sizes and varieties. Below that the space for my name and as soon as my eyes brushed over what they printed I couldn't help but smile: "Richasi" was on top in bold and below that my real name: "Ricky Russo." Too cool!

An itinerary sheet accompanied the credentials, which detailed the evening's events as follows:

5:30pm	Show Seating Time
6:00pm to 7:30pm	Special La Nouba Performance
8:00pm to 10:00pm	Dinner at BET Soundstage Club, Pleasure Island
10:00pm to 1:00am	Post Production Party, Bongo's Cuban Café, 2 <sup>nd</sup> Floor.

This was but a fraction of what the press and other honored guests were able to experience throughout the day, as I found out. It was unfortunate I wasn't able to come earlier, but I was extremely happy and honored just to be considered, mind you.

Here's what I missed:

11:00am	<i>Celebration Moment, Cirque du Soleil Theater Exterior</i>
12:00pm to 1:30pm	<i>Behind-the-Scenes lunch with the Cast</i>
1:30pm to 4:00pm	<i>La Nouba Media Experiences</i>

It was really that last one I was the most interested in. I wondered: what exactly the media was allowed to do? Were they given backstage tours? (Most definitely.) Were they allowed on stage? (Possibly.) Did they get to try their hand in some acts? (Surely not... right?)

Wrong!

While I must take this with a grain of salt, I learned about all the special "goodies" the press were able to take part in during that Special Media Experience time I missed by talking to a newspaper writer out of the Tampa Bay area. Not only were members of the press able to take backstage tours and climb up into the rafters and see the scaffolding, but also received the opportunity to tumble on the FastTrack!

He regaled me with tales of some of the media personnel who were overanxious to try, and some who were just too frightened to attempt it. As for me, if I had been there, I think you know what I would do. I would be all over that FastTrack in a heartbeat! Though I have no formal training (ok, I have absolutely no training at all), I think just being given the opportunity to tumble would have been more than enough. What an experience, no?

Before long it was time to enter the theater -- the pre-show was about to begin, so I took my seat in Section 204, Row HH, Seat 10. The view from this seat was spot on, dead center, right behind the soundman by only a few rows. I couldn't have asked for a better seat on such a short notice...

### **/// SIT BACK, RELAX, AND ENJOY...**

*"Ladies and Gentlemen - welcome to Cirque du Soleil. During this performance smoke effects will be used, but these are harmless to your health. The use of video equipment, and especially flash cameras, is strictly prohibited because of the danger it presents to our acrobats. In case of an emergency, please stay calm and proceed to the nearest exit - here, here, here, and here. The ushers will direct you. And now, sit back, relax and enjoy... La Nouba!"*

The lights dim down and the audience becomes still now; a shock of electric excitement filled the air as any previous vociferations come to a sharp end. And then the unforgettable sound of a lone trumpet fills the theater, as the Festival of Characters enter, one by one, and introduce themselves to us. The Trumpeter, himself a prince in this fairy tale, brings with him a wonderful medley of personae and a signature melody that warms the heart. We're introduced to L'Oiseau, the colorful green bird; Les Danseurs, a man and woman in love; the

Flying Man, who will soar into our hearts on a band of red silk; the Balancer, colorfully dressed from head to toe, complete with a cat's tail; an Acrobat in Red, forever tumbling, he stoke the party; Le Promeneur, shuffling about with an ever present smile; and the Titan, a menacing, threatening man. They vanish as quickly as they come, and once again the theater falls lifeless, and dark.

The quiet is disturbed, not by the harrowed scream of a demented creature or of a maiden in distress, but of the chime of a doorbell. Ding dong. Ding dong. The door creaks open, a column of light shines through, outlining the form of a lady, a rather round and lifeless creature, whose job it is to clean and sweep the floors around her. She is the cleaning lady, representing the everyday man or woman, no doubt. But as she goes about her duties, oblivious of the world she has entered, the creatures of this fantastical realm are beginning to stir. The Green Bird tiptoes behind her; sensing a movement, she turns but there's nothing to be found. But then... startles at a man riding a bicycle upside down across her field of vision. And before her eyes (and ours) more and more weird and wonderful apparitions begin to materialize: two sleepwalking fools canter by; a small train pulls in to station, and the cries of a hungry, estranged wolf mix with the howls and sirens of warning to announce the coming clash of dream and nightmare.

Unable to hold back any longer, the insane world of La Nouba pours forth and spills upon the stage before us. Startled, we all peer at the newcomers as they stream steadily from the opened door. Caught up now as she is in their world, we march forward to their militaristic tune. Fantasy and reality are merging before our eyes and we are lost to make heads or tails of either.



*La Nouba is an unforgettable journey through this universe - at once threatening and exhilarating, frightening and familiar. La Nouba is the story of all stories, the site of all mysteries, where dreams and nightmares sleep side by side. La Nouba is memory, individual and universal. It beckons to us, challenges us to uncover passions we thought we'd lost long ago. Here, anything is possible. La Nouba contains two types of families or*

*groups and throughout the ride the magic and fantasy of the colorful Cirques (circus people) clash with the monochromatic world of the Urbains (urbanites). But as in fables, it is not so much this contrast as the interplay between these two groups which sparks our curiosity and feeds our imagination. From this encounter is born fear and ecstasy. From this encounter is born La Nouba.*

All too soon the production came to a close, but it would be an ending not soon forgotten. For during the final stanza and last curtain call hundreds of multi-colored balloons fell from the heavens, released by the "Fabulous Figures" that dance their whimsical dance about the tops of the theater; everyone in the audience was covered! Balloons were floating, hands were clapping, and whistles were blowing and through it all I stood, misty-eyed, reveling in it all, as the phrase "La Nouba 5<sup>th</sup> Anniversary" was projected on the asylum wall.

It was truly a birthday bash.

But the show was just one act of a three-ring circus that night.

## **/// KUNGALOOSH! KUNGALOOSH!**

One after another the audience members jumped from their seats, hands clasping together in appreciation of yet another mind-boggling performance of Cirque du Soleil's La Nouba at the Cirque Theater in Downtown Disney West Side. A deafening roar flooded the house as the artists of the night's performance filled the stage; an admiration of their mastery. Up in their roost the musicians rocked on as if their very life depended on it; their song filling the theater with a sense of festivity. And in this moment hundreds of balloons fell from the rafters, raining a celebratory cry upon us all. It was June 2nd, 2004; La Nouba was celebrating its 5th Anniversary and the inmates of the asylum were ecstatic.

I was one of the last to leave the theater as most of the ensemble with credentials was told to stay behind. We would personally be escorted to the next item on the itinerary, but I felt a little lost. Many people began chatting around me to obvious acquaintances or friends, leaving me to my lonesome. Some even began to leave on their own and I wasn't sure where to be or what to do. I probably looked dense sitting in my seat, or standing gazing idly at the La Nouba 5th Anniversary projection on the set, but I didn't care. I had just observed one of the best performances of La Nouba I could remember and I was still misty-eyed and overwhelmed.

Eventually it was my turn to check out of the asylum. As I rounded the theater and once again came to a stop outside the Boutique, I pulled out the agenda and looked it over, thinking about what was coming next - the Dinner and Post Production party.

Living in Orlando I've visited Disney World quite often and have seen parties ushered across the parks with a uniformed cast member's red baton waving in the air, with a curiosity to know their destination. I never thought I would be one of those people until I rounded the theater's boutique. At that very moment more than one uniformed Disney representatives with red batons greeted us and led us through the gates of Pleasure Island to the BET Soundstage Club, where we would be wined and dined like kings and queens for the next two hours.

As I entered the club I was immediately struck by its stark decor. Sleek, stylish and contemporary, the BET Soundstage is multi-leveled (you enter from the top floor) and consists of two moderately sized rooms, a full bar and a performance stage. Since this was my first time at the club I wasn't sure what I would find, however I expected more of a hip-hop theme rather than the Jazz, Rhythm & Blues and Soul that the club is more styled for.

Both rooms were cleared and set up with an alternating display of sit down tables for those who wanted to eat, and standing tables for minglers to set their drinks upon. As I came round to one of the standing tables I was instantly offered a glass of red wine, which I took straight away.



And why not? I was as much a guest here as the rest of the lot, and before long, the entire media ensemble filled the club. Not everyone came mind you, but a good share did and whoever decided to come was looking for a feast.

And they were not to be disappointed.

Chefs were on hand to serve some of the most scrumptious and mouth watering dishes I've ever had: the most tender roast beef and juicy vegetables, succulent seasoned chicken with potatoes au-gratin, and delicious shrimp pasta with bread... to name but a few selections. And let's not forget the deserts, which were a chocoholic's dream! Chocolate "Mouse" Martini's, wonderful fudge brownies, triple chocolate chip cookies and even tiramisu. There were of course other types of deserts, but those concoctions seemed to have slipped my chocolate-overloaded mind.

The meal was accented with more wine, good company, and a documentary about La Nouba's five years. Since I didn't know anyone at the dinner I stayed to myself and watched the video presentation, which was displayed on multiple flat-panel screens around the club. The video was pretty standard fodder -- shots of performers in and out of makeup, running through their routines, interview snippets from cast and crew, music from the show, and various other materials -- but it kept me from going insane, really.

About an hour into the dinner I met a group of IT professionals from Disney, who asked me repeatedly if I worked for the company. I said no but understood their inquiry since I had worn a Disney polo shirt to the event. But it was nice to mingle with these folks since I, too am an IT professional, and boy did they have stories to tell. I also met Bob Mervine, staff-writer for the Orlando Business Journal, who was gracious and interested to hear my Cirque du Soleil fan-exploits. He and I, along with the nice young lady who had accompanied him, began to discuss Cirque at length. We were soon joined by a man whom I will only say was a Disney employee with a corporate credit card. He had other ideas for fun that night.



That fun would be had in the next club over -- the Adventurer's Club.

For those uninitiated, the Adventurer's Club presents a unique interactive experience in a setting reminiscent of the fictional 1930s adventurer club. Old time pictures of African safari's, jungle exploration in Asia or mountain scaling in India litter the wall with other paraphernalia of the avid adventurers.

"You are a visitor to the Adventurers Club on New Year's Eve 1937," the storyline goes, "when the Club holds an open house for the purpose of recruiting new members. You will be invited to become initiated as a Club member and participate in the various activities that are held that evening..." It's been said that one should think of the Adventurer's Club as a theater that is presenting a play, only you're the star of said play.

My adventure began down in the Main Salon, where a full bar is accessible. The entertainment here is more "off the cuff", improv, and raw than in other clubs. You never know exactly what's going to happen when you enter this establishment, which is something I certainly found out as the evening progressed. Originally the three people I met at the dinner wanted to come over for a drink, so I followed because I didn't want to be left alone (I normally don't drink), but who would have thought I'd end up on the floor professing my desires for "'ol Babylonia", a mask, hanging on the wall?

Right... where's my drink now? Rum and Coke, coming up!

The first few minutes of my foray into the Adventurer's Club were rather subdued. I was actually at ease since I'd been to this particular club one other time so I knew exactly what kind of trouble one could get into here. But I kept things light, played along with the cast and had a good time chatting with my newfound friends. Before long, however, the Maid character found herself lodged between the nude legs of a full statue of Zeus, positioned in the center of the Main Salon.



"Oh, look," said the Maid. "I seem to be in a bit of a spot."

Oh my yes, she was. You never know exactly what any of the characters will say or do at any given moment in time. I made the mistake of catching the Maid's eye and bantering back and forth with her, as she commented on her predicament. How could I stay silent with her head between Zeus' legs? She was a prime target for my warped sense reality and dry sense of humor. A few moments later, however, the wall above me began to come alive and with it a nasally voice filled the room.

"Oooh! Oooh! Oooh ancient Babylonia," the cast chanted.

This sealed my fate. I was now about to be initiated.

The Maid snatched me from my bar stool and pulled me in line with Babylonia, a hanging mask fixed to the wall. When its eyes and mouth started to move I got nervous and thought, "Oh lord... What exactly is going to happen here?" A moment later another gentlemen brandishing a bottle of Corona was swept up beside me and it was apparent that he too was going to be part of the fun and games. Whether he liked it or not, I might add (and he did not).

Now, picture little 'ol shy me standing in front of a group of onlookers as I look up at Babylonia on the wall, wondering what on earth possessed me to come to the Adventurer's Club? I knew whatever they had in store for me wasn't going to be pretty. I'm sure they'd make me make a fool out of myself. Darnit, why did I have to tease the Maid? And at the thought of this my ears started burning.

"Oh, my subjects," said Babylonia with great effort. "Greet me! Greet me like you would a passionate lover! Greet me with great affection!"

I did the only thing I could think of to do...

I got down on my knees and bowed, humbly.

Babylonia was ecstatic! One point for me.



Babylonia put the two of us through our paces. First, she made us show off our manly bodies, not by stripping naked right there in the Salon but by assuming the pose of Zeus' statue: arms stretched out, legs slightly askance and muscles bulging (second point to me, though, no muscles to bulge). Secondly, I was forced to use my wisdom of words and profess my undying love to Babylonia, telling her how I'd ravish her, hold her and keep

her safe. And thirdly, with scores of people watching us unabated, Babylonia made us dance for her. Oh, not a slow-dance to be sure; how about swinging hips and pelvic thrusts?

Talk about embarrassment; I was crimson. But it was fun! I returned to the bar after a roaring round of applause from the onlookers and sat amongst my new friends. Did I need that drink now? Oh yes... Kungaloosh! Kungaloosh!

The partying and drinking continued over at Bongo's Cuban Cafe, where we waited for the cast and crew of La Nouba to show up after their second performance. Here I was completely out of my element, wandering around with my newfound friends until we lost each other. Soon, the likes of the Bilodeau brothers (German Wheel), Yuri Maiorov (Aerial Ballet in Silk), Carlos Moreira (Aerial Cradle/Character), Krystian Sawicki (Le Titan), and many, many other members of the cast and crew came to live it up; to party!

And live it up they did!

The party was still going when I turned to leave, around midnight. I was tired and overwhelmed but extremely happy. I had an amazing night that would not have been possible except by the generosity of Cirque du Soleil and those behind the scenes at La Nouba. And for that I want to say thank you for allowing me to participate in La Nouba's 5th Anniversary celebration. It was a blast! Live it up! *faire la nouba*!



JULY 2004

## « The Ephra Epiphany »

### Orchestrating a Cosmic Disturbance

**Epiphany** -- (1): a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something (2): an intuitive grasp of reality through something (as an event) usually simple and striking (3): an illuminating discovery.

Have you ever had a certain moment in your day make perfect sense? When you realize that everything is as it should be; that everything is working on some big cosmic scale?

Take, for instance, my drive home this afternoon during a rash of thunderstorms. The rain was fierce, lightning dancing across the skies, and thunder crashing all around. I'm barely able to see outside my windshield, let alone the car in front of me; my windshield-wipers are straining with each pass, attempting to clear the gluttony of drops that have fallen from the skies in a hailstorm.

And amidst all the fire and brimstone, I had it. In that moment of clarity and recognition, everything seemed to click; the universe was, as it should. Some would call it a coincidence... others an epiphany, where meaning is found in the most mundane of things. For while a storm waged outside of my car, inside brewed another.

"Ephra," from Cirque du Soleil's «O» thumped and crashed through some of the most intense pieces of weather I've yet experienced on these roads, all in perfect mix. It was as if I was orchestrating the soundtrack for this afternoon's storm. For those of you who do not know Cirque du Soleil, or have yet to experience the thrill of «O», "Ephra" musically accompany a Cadre act, where performers attempt to hold on during a brilliant rain-storm (and yes, it really does rain).

The moment was a perfect compliment for not only the storm waging internally, but also to that external.

It was something to experience.

